

“What is the difference between your response to Marilyn Strathern on feminist anthropology and Patricia Uberoi’s response?”

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Abstract. Patricia Uberoi extracts an argument from Marilyn Strathern: that feminist research cannot bring about a paradigm shift in social anthropology, because any feminist framework can be easily contained. I contrast Uberoi’s interpretation of Strathern with my own, and then draw attention to two possibilities that this containment argument overlooks.

Can feminist research bring about the kind of revolution known as a paradigm shift in the discipline of social anthropology? Marilyn Strathern has argued that it cannot (1987). Some of her arguments are clearer and some less clear. The material I find most difficult to understand concerns her characterization of anthropology as a pluralistic discipline: how this characterization bears on the question. Another commentator on the relations between feminism and anthropology, Patricia Uberoi, refers to this characterization but interprets Strathern quite differently to how I do. Below I present some key differences and then respond to Uberoi’s Strathern.

My interpretation: no paradigms. My response to Strathern’s pluralism material was to extract a simple argument and a complex argument. Here I shall just present the simple argument: feminist research cannot bring about a paradigm shift in social anthropology because there are no paradigms to shift. But what about the plurality of theoretical frameworks in social anthropology, such as a Marxist framework, a

psychoanalytic framework, and a culture-as-text framework? These are not paradigms, she argues.

Now one question you might pose after reading this argument is whether Strathern is arguing that feminist research cannot bring about paradigm shift at the time she was writing, because there were no paradigms to shift, or whether it cannot bring about a paradigm shift ever. I take her conclusion to be that it cannot ever do this. I do so partly because of the nature of the other arguments she makes: they are aimed at this conclusion (see Edward 2020).

Uberoi's interpretation: easily contained. Uberoi's interpretation appears in the context of addressing a puzzle. Patriarchy and matriarchy were important concepts within nineteenth century anthropology, with some evolutionist theories asserting that there was matriarchy before patriarchy. But these concepts faded in importance in the structural-functionalist period, which rejected the project of constructing and justifying evolutionary sequences for societies and found no mother-right societies. With the feminist revolutions of the 1960s and 70s, it is reasonable to expect anthropologists to pay more attention to these concepts, which remain relatively poorly defined. But they don't. Uberoi focuses on patriarchy and asks the question:

Is there a problem with anthropology as a discipline, that it has been particularly unreceptive to the feminist challenge? (1995: 197)

It is in relation to this question that Strathern enters her paper:

A number of reasons have been suggested for this less-than-satisfactory relationship. According Marilyn Strathern, for instance, contemporary

‘post-modern’ anthropology is now so decentered and multifaceted that the addition of a new theme, orientation, or topic of teaching and research can be easily contained: in the plethora of varieties, one more or one less makes no difference and offers no serious challenge to dominant ideas. (1995: 197)

My interpretation and Uberoi’s both refer to pluralism in social anthropology: a multiplicity of frameworks or acceptable frameworks. But there are a number of differences, of which I shall draw attention to three.¹

Are these frameworks paradigms? Uberoi’s interpretation does not present Strathern as denying that these frameworks are paradigms. This characterization is neither denied nor asserted by Uberoi’s Strathern.

Now or ever? Uberoi’s Strathern is focused on the current situation, whereas, as mentioned before, I treat Strathern’s overall aim as to argue for impossibility under all circumstances. But a couple of decades before Strathern wrote, British social anthropology had a reputation for a dominant theoretical framework (see Lewis 1975: 24-25), so it makes sense to wonder if she is saying, “Paradigm shift is not possible in the current pluralistic circumstances.”

Dominant and not dominant. Uberoi’s Strathern describes the situation not just as one of pluralism but also of some frameworks being more dominant than others, whereas I do not refer to such variations. To capture the situation depicted by Uberoi’s Strathern metaphorically: feminist anthropology can join the party but it cannot displace the party’s star or stars, and there is a strong suggestion that its fate is to be an undancing figure in the corner.

¹ I am latching onto a small part of Uberoi’s text. The text overall is essential for the now tearful task of compiling less well-known criticisms of structural-functionalist anthropology, such as how it aspires to value-neutrality but is value-laden and regarding where its excessive emphasis on theoretical elegance leads.

The containable argument: evaluation. I think it is worth looking into the argument on Uberoi's interpretation, regardless of whether it is faithful to Strathern's text. (I consider how faithful it is to the text in the appendix – I cannot reject it.) So below are some responses to Uberoi's Strathern.

Local shifts. Even if we grant that anthropology is pluralistic,² there is a question about the distribution of these frameworks. Pluralism in a discipline does not entail pluralism within each department. A department might specialize in one framework, training people in that framework, and another department might specialize in another framework. (Indeed, for anthropologists training others and also for many people learning anthropology, a certain amount of department framework specialization is probably preferable.) But then we can grant the argument of Uberoi's Strathern and still allow for the possibility of feminist research taking over a department, in place of an earlier anthropology. The framework they use may be marginal within the discipline worldwide, but locally this take over is an event and it has something of the quality of a paradigm shift. Imagine if a Lacanian feminist anthropology took root in the University of Manchester, replacing the current approach or approaches – this would be an event locally. One can say that feminist anthropology has been contained from the point of the discipline as a whole – Lacanian feminist anthropology is just one amongst various brands – but locally it has not been! The argument Uberoi identifies has not been shown to be false, but for any anti-feminists its reassurances are misleading.

The unincorporatable. The containable argument also overlooks the possibility that some feminist frameworks cannot be incorporated into certain pluralistic arrangements. For

² I am not convinced that anthropology in Britain is that much more pluralistic than the infamously narrow mainstream economics.

example, imagine a pluralism based on opposition to boundaries: anthropologists of group A oppose boundaries between nations, doing research in border zones and rejecting a certain metaphysics of national boundaries; anthropologists of group B oppose boundaries between disciplines; anthropology of group C oppose boundaries between human and non-human. There are disagreements between these groups but also friendly relations. Then a kind of feminist anthropology emerges which says that boundaries are very important for the flourishing of women, focusing not just on rights to bodily boundaries but also on the maintenance of boundaries between traditions and nations. Consequently, it cannot be integrated into this pluralistic alliance. To put the point metaphorically, from the point of view of the alliance, “We don’t invite such people to our parties.”

For another example, imagine a loose alliance of anthropology groups which are all left wing: Marxists addressing why a Marxist revolution did not happen, left-wing anarchists addressing whether societies without government face a war of all against all, and post-structuralists deconstructing authority systems without themselves having a programme of change. Then a kind of feminism emerges which says that women flourish with an authority figure, who uses a firm tone and looks big and tough. Their only modification to a traditionally patriarchal approach is to say that a woman can play this strong man role. Again, “We don’t invite them to our parties.”

The situation that Uberoi’s Strathern has in mind is being just another member of an academic culture, still referred to and included, if not dominant. But the situation I envisage is one of being totally excluded, as one might exclude people whose aim is to end the conditions for academic inquiry. I think Uberoi’s Strathern, and actually Strathern herself, overestimate how much a pluralistic anthropology can absorb.

Appendix: textual faithfulness?

There is textual material which supports attributing my argument to Strathern – “The answer cannot lie in paradigms...” (1987: 286)– and also material a few pages earlier which supports attributing the argument which Uberoi attributes. In my previous responses to Strathern’s paper, I did not attend to that material.³ Here it is:

Yet a milieu of tolerance has also reduced feminist scholarship to just another approach, one way among many into the data. Consequently, a declared interest in putting women back on the map encourages theoretical containment. If feminist scholarship is seen as the study of women or of gender, its subject can be taken as something less than “society.” Feminist anthropology is thus tolerated as a specialty that can be absorbed without challenge to the whole. (1987: 280)

But we must observe that Strathern has two explanations here for why feminist frameworks are easily contained. One is the explanation Uberoi identifies, captured by the first sentence quoted. The other explanation is that anthropologists do not regard a feminist framework as one that covers social analysis in general, rather analysis of a specific part of society. How can it displace Marxism or some other framework that addresses the whole of society when it is just directed to a specific part, women’s lives? Note that, even if there were just one framework of social analysis and a feminist framework was then proposed, this problem can arise, so the reference to a discipline tolerant of pluralism is potentially distracting for detecting and evaluating this other explanation.

³ I took Strathern to be arguing against local paradigm shifts as well, which Uberoi’s Strathern does not rule out (see 2012: 346; 2020: 6).

Here is a brief evaluation: this explanation does not capture an obstacle given interactions with anthropologists who think, “Feminist research cannot be too limited if it is to make a difference. For example, if we want to understand the problems these women are facing, we need to understand some problems affecting similarly situated males as well, e.g. access to schools.” I think a lot of anthropologists today would accept this point. It is quite a strong obstacle Strathern identifies, but I think there is a case for saying that it is not as strong as when she wrote and I think it is too contingent for her overall aims.

References

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