

## **British structural-functionalist anthropology, feminism, and partial connections**

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*Abstract.* Marilyn Strathern's arguments against the possibility of feminist research bringing about a paradigm shift in social anthropology have led to a number of responses. Regarding one argument she presents, her own writings suggest a response: the argument that feminist research cannot bring about such a shift, because it is only concerned with part of society. A foray into the history of British social anthropology is of value for appreciating this argument and the response.

*Draft version:* Version 1 (May 9<sup>th</sup> 2022).

In this paper, I wish to present a solution to a problem in the relations between feminism and social anthropology, or at least what some would regard as a problem (see Uberoi 1995: 197). Before coming to the problem, I shall delve into the history of British social anthropology, because doing so is of value for appreciating the problem.

**Primitive societies: definition and reason for study.** What is social anthropology? An old-fashioned answer is that social anthropology is the study of primitive societies. But what is a primitive society? Is it a society without a history? But don't all the societies anthropologists study have a history, often a history of being affected by imperialism? E. Evans-Pritchard defines the term in a way that avoids this objection:

It suffices to say at this stage that when anthropologists use it they do so in reference to those societies which are small in scale with regard to numbers, territory, and range of social contacts, and which have by comparison with

more advanced societies a simple technology and economy and little specialization of social function. (1951: 8)

Nevertheless, a question remains: why study primitive societies? Here is a reason that Evans-Pritchard gives, an often overlooked one – at any rate, I have never encountered it presented by anyone else, such as in various introductory texts:

...anthropologists were interested in them because it was held that they displayed institutions in their simplest forms, and that it is sound method to proceed from examination of the more simple to examination of the more complex, in which what has been learnt from a study of the more simple would be an aid. (1951: 8)

**Problems of scale.** Nowadays anthropologists conduct research in a variety of societies. The definition of anthropology as the study of primitive societies no longer appears suitable. But what about the reason Evans-Pritchard presents for focusing on simple societies and then moving to others? What do they have to say against that reason? Although the reason is often overlooked, an important figure in pioneering an anthropology focused on other societies does say something against it, namely Marilyn Strathern. She writes:

The more closely you look, the more detailed things are bound to become. Increase in one dimension (focus) increases the other (detail of data). For example, comparative questions that appear interesting at a distance, on closer inspection may well fragment into a host of subsidiary (and probably more interesting) questions... (1991: xiii)

There are at least two ways of understanding Strathern here. According to one way, she is endorsing a metaphysical thesis:

*(No reduction thesis)* In the social sciences, the amount of relevant information never reduces by switching to studying phenomena that are at a smaller scale.

Her text invites this interpretation. But for various purposes, it seems that she can instead adopt a more pragmatic thesis:

*(No practical reduction thesis)* In the social sciences, human beings studying a smaller-scale social phenomenon are not going to run out of relevant information to record.

The amount of information may be reducing by switching to studying phenomena that are at a smaller scale, but it is not reducing to an extent that makes any practical difference for us. Indeed, anthropological texts on some small scale societies can run for volumes, and only seem to stop because of human exhaustion. The argument Evans-Pritchard presents for starting with some societies is either false, because these societies are not actually simpler, simplicity being understood in terms of the amount of relevant information being less, or there is no practical reduction in complexity – I take Strathern to be committed to one of these positions.

**A different problem and a solution.** Strathern is well-known for her arguments for a No answer regarding whether feminist research can bring about the kind of revolution known as a paradigm shift in social anthropology – the replacement of a dominant set of assumptions with another set. Her conclusion is a problem if one aims for such a revolution. Here is a quotation from her identifying an obstacle:

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)

A response that the material above on scale suggests is “There cannot be such a thing as an adequate understanding of the whole: there is too much data for that. So it would be mistaken for some anthropologists to say, ‘My framework deals with the whole of society whereas yours merely deals with a part. If it has anything worth saying, it needs to be absorbed into my holistic framework.’”

I am not sure if anyone was previously aware of the response identified. The response seems vulnerable to the worry that feminist anthropological frameworks are too limited even if total understanding is an unrealizable ideal.<sup>1</sup> There are features of a society which we can’t allow an anthropologist to ignore, whether this ideal is realizable or not (Achebe 2001: 1792) – to omit them would be like describing Manchester without referring to the football clubs, for example – but we can’t assume that feminist research always provides compelling reasons for attending to such things. (Somehow it probably does though.)

## References

- Achebe, C. 2001 (originally 1975). *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness*. In V.B. Leitch (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1951. *Social Anthropology*. London: Cohen & West.

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<sup>1</sup> Even if there were no such worry, the obstacle identified is removed by appealing to metaphysical or epistemological considerations against achieving total understanding, which were not introduced for feminist reasons even if they help feminism. A revolution would most probably be achieved by combined forces.

Strathern, M. 1987. An Awkward Relationship: the Case of Feminism and Anthropology. *Signs* 12: 276-292.

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