

Feminist anthropology

ANTH 348/Ideas of Culture

Feminist Anthropology

- Emerged in 1970s in response to “*androcentric*” biases of anthropology and other sciences.
- Stanley Barrett* lists some prominent assumptions or characteristics of feminist anthropology:
 1. **All social relations are gendered.**
 2. **Distinctive epistemology** that rejects separation between subject & object, researcher & researched. Favors collaborative, dialogical research.
 3. **Distinctive ethics** – primary purpose of research to empower women, eliminate oppression.

Anthropology: A Student's Guide to Theory and Method. University of Toronto Press.

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4. **Anti-positivism** – language of science is language of oppression. Image of orderly universe is replaced by incomplete, fragmentary ethnographies to more accurately reflect peoples' lives.
5. Preference for **qualitative methods** – mainstream, quantitative methods are read as male methods. Genuine female methods bring researcher/subject together as equals.
6. The **life history** – means to give voice to people, capture the institutional & historical forces as they impinge upon individuals.

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7. **A female essence.**
8. **Universal sexual asymmetry.**
9. **Anthropology of women vs. feminist anthropology.**

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- Sally Slocum, *Woman the Gatherer: Male Bias in Anthropology* (1975)
- Eleanor Leacock, *Interpreting the Origins of Gender Inequality: Conceptual and Historical Problems* (1983)
- Sherry Ortner. *Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?* (1974)

Feminist Anthropology: Sherry Ortner

- Ph.D. University of Chicago.
- Professor of Anthropology at UCLA.
- Fieldwork in Nepal with Sherpas.
- Structuralist approach to question of gender equality.
- Gender relations are patterned by fact that, as childbearers, women are natural creators while men, because they are unable to bear children, are cultural creators.



Feminist Anthropology: Sally Slocum

- Women's roles in human evolution ignored by focus on hunting rather than gathering.
- Focus has been on hunting & role of communication.
- Women's gathering & child care also would have demanded complex communication, cooperation, & tool making.
- Evidence that foraging, not hunting, was principle economic strategy throughout human evolution.

Feminist Anthropology:

Eleanor Leacock (1922-1987)

- Influenced by Marxist materialism.
- Until 1960s, anthropologists believed that women were inherently subordinate to men in any society in world.
- Inferior status of women explained as reflection of gender differences.
- Leacock asserted that female inferiority is *not* a universal condition, but a product of economic conditions.
- Claimed economic development causes women to lose their independence & become subordinate to men.
- [Feminine Voices in Archaeology](#)
- [Eleanor Burke Leacock: Myths of Male Dominance](#)



Eleanor Leacock

- Asserted that subordination of women stemmed from *change in economic system from communal style to capitalistic one*.
 - Pointed out that women in egalitarian societies have a great degree of independence over their lives and activities.
- Although traditional societies do have different gender roles between men & women, this separation does not mean unequal gender statuses.
- Leacock argued that *anthropologists had confused this gender-based division of labor with female inferiority* because of their own class-based social system.

Eleanor Leacock

- Her historical ethnography among Montagnais in Canada revealed how the change of economic system leads to the subordination of women.
- Since contact with Europeans, Montagnais had traded furs for manufactured goods from Europe.
- This trade introduced capitalism, which undermined basis of egalitarianism in the Montagnais society.
- A century later after European contact, Jesuit missionaries arrived and enforced economic and social reform to Montagnais.
- In addition to a capitalistic economic system, missionaries imposed Catholic family values, based on patriarchy, monogamy, female sexual fidelity and abolition of divorce.
- Historical process in Montagnais society reveals that subordination of women is not an inherent characteristic of human societies but product of economic change.

Communal to capitalistic

- Leacock identified 3 steps in process.
 1. Kin-based societies originally characterized by communal ownership, egalitarian social relations, nonhierarchical gender relations.
 2. As class system evolves and capitalism develops population breaks into two groups: those who have a control over resources or labor and those who do not.

New economic system damages nonhierarchical gender relations by denying unquestioned cooperation, reciprocity and respect for individual autonomy. In this new capitalistic system, men dominate resources & rely on women for unpaid domestic work.
 3. Women are deprived of control over their labor even though women's domestic labor is essential to reproduction of workforce.

Thus, subordination of women is an inevitable outcome of capitalistic economic development.

Ann Stoler

- Ph.D. Columbia 1982
- Professor of Anthropology @ New School for Social Research (NYC).
- In a series of works Stoler examines European (Dutch, French and British) colonialism in Asia including India, Indonesia and Malaysia.
- Claimed that European women in colonies had two contrasting roles regarding their social status.
- They were *oppressed* by European men and also *they oppressed* indigenous people.



Ann Stoler

- European colonialism made profits from economic systems where indigenous women lived in European men's house doing domestic work.
- Use of local women kept wages low and also provided colonialists a way to control local economy and legal rights.
- Until 20th century, colonial administrations were hesitant to let European women live in colonies because they believed it would create a class of poor whites and would damage European prestige.
- Because of this political consideration, many European colonists were single men and they tended to generate mixed-race children with indigenous women living in their houses.
- Since these mixed-race children were illegitimate, they lived in poor circumstances outside of indigenous communities or became orphans.
- Colonial administrations considered these fair-skinned children as a danger that would undermine the basis of European colonialism.

Ann Stoler

- In early 20th century, European women were introduced to colonies to keep European men from generating mixed-race children.
- As wives of European men in colonies, they were responsible for watching their husbands to assure that they would not have contacts with indigenous women.
- European women fulfilled this responsibility by providing a happy family life for their husbands.
- In order to run a European household in the colonies, colonial European women were trained with detailed instructions about cleaning, cooking, childrearing and employer-servant relationships.
- They also made efforts to prevent their children from taking on customs and ideas of local culture.
- Ultimate purpose of these rules was to enforce racial and class distinctions between European colonists and native people.
- To achieve this goal, European women in colonies often created organizations to preserve European lifestyle and thought in colonies.

Ann Stoler

- Stoler's research reveals that *European women in colonies had two contrasting roles: the oppressed and the oppressor.*
- They were subject to strict rules that were aimed at providing a happy family life for men.
- In this sense, they were oppressed by this unbalanced gender relationship.
- At the same time, the same women contributed to European colonialism by actively enforcing racial segregation.
- In this sense, they oppressed indigenous people who otherwise would have had more freedom and self-determination.