

# feminist anthropology: the legacy of Elsie Clews Parsons

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Sixty-six years ago, in 1923, Elsie Clews Parsons became President of the American Ethnological Society for a two-year term. During the 1910s, in her late thirties and early forties, she had distinguished herself as a social psychologist and feminist, writing several important books during the period Nancy Cott has associated with the birth of modern feminism (Cott 1987). Parsons was one of the remarkable women of her times in a decade remembered for feminist activists like Margaret Sanger, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Rose Schneiderman, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Crystal Eastman, and Mary Jenny Howe.

By the age of 49, when Parsons assumed the AES presidency, she had become part of Boasian anthropology at Columbia University, immersing herself in ethnological research among the Pueblos and funding the work of countless Southwestern researchers, including many women. Before her death in 1941, Parsons published over 95 articles on the Southwest, culminating in her two-volume grand synthesis, *Pueblo Indian Religion* (Parsons 1939). In the 1960s and 1970s the AES honored Parsons by awarding a prize each year to the best graduate student essay submitted in a national competition. When the prize was discontinued, the last medal was given to the president and handed down from president to president as a symbol of office. Thus the AES meetings in Santa Fe, a few miles from Espanola and Clara True's ranch where Parsons stayed during her first trip to the Southwest in 1910, seems an appropriate time to commemorate the work of Elsie Clews Parsons. In this essay I particularly want to explore the connection between Parsons' feminist writing and the reemergence of feminism in anthropology in the 1970s and 1980s. When Michelle Rosaldo and I edited *Woman, Culture, and Society* in the early 1970s, we knew little about Elsie Clews Parsons. Instead, we turned to Margaret Mead for the quote that begins our book. Had we read Parsons' books, we might have written a different introduction.

My own interest in Parsons I owe to Barbara Babcock and Nancy Parezo, who invited me to participate in a conference on "Daughters of the Desert"—a retrospective on women anthropologists who conducted research on Native American cultures in the Southwest—held at the University of Arizona in 1986. Parsons' contributions were explored in a paper by Louis Hieb (1986) and have been detailed in the conference catalogue by Babcock and Parezo (1988). Other papers documented Parsons' key financial support for the research of Esther Goldfrank, Ruth Bunzel, and Ruth Benedict, and Parsons' role as a mentor to Gladys Reichard was covered very minimally in my own contribution (LampHERE 1986). As I prepared this paper, I became indebted to Barbara Babcock's more recent and insightful research on Parsons' life and scholarship (Babcock 1988).

In this paper I wish to compare Parsons' scholarship of the teens and 1920s to the feminist anthropology that has emerged during the 1970s and 1980s. I see important similarities in the focus on cultural universals in both Parsons' early works and in some of the feminist anthro-

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pology of the 1970s. This universalizing tendency was followed by a transition to more detailed ethnographic research for Parsons in the 1920s and for feminists in the 1980s. On the other hand, there are crucial differences. The lack of "feminism" in Parsons' ethnological work in the 1920s and 1930s contrasts with its continued presence in the writings of women anthropologists today. This relates, I argue, to complex differences in the state of anthropological theory in the late Boasian period compared to the present and to contrasts in the social and political context of feminism of the 1920s and 1980s.

## the making of a feminist

Before exploring this comparison further, a few details of Parsons' life are in order. Elsie Clews grew up in a wealthy New York family. Her father, Henry Clews, was a Wall Street broker and her mother was a distant relative of President James Madison. The family summered at a mansion ("The Rocks") in Newport and Elsie's mother put aside \$10,000 each year for "mistakes in clothes" (Hare 1985:27). Elsie managed to talk her father into letting her attend the newly opened Barnard College, where she graduated in 1896. She went on to earn an M.A. and Ph.D. at Barnard, studying under Franklin H. Giddings, an evolutionary sociologist. She taught briefly at Barnard before marrying Herbert Parsons in 1900 at the age of 24. Parsons' feminism grew out of her independent spirit and was a rejection of the confining life of a wealthy Victorian debutante and socialite. She had scandalized her mother, for example, by going for an unchaperoned swim with a young man on a secluded Newport beach when she was a teenager (Hare 1985:33–34).

Herbert Parsons tolerated his wife's independence and feminism, even though it threatened to disrupt his political career as a reform Republican congressman, a post he held between 1905 and 1911. Her book *The Family*, which created headlines when it was published in New York in 1906, was an outline of her lectures at Barnard. It raised a furor because it took an evolutionary view of marriage and family patterns, using ethnological data, and advocated trial marriage. Parsons sent a copy to Theodore Roosevelt, Herbert's patron in the Republican party, hoping to reassure the President that the book was really "very dry reading." He seemed pleased to receive a copy and in a teasing manner promised to read the famous book and discuss it over lunch (Hare 1985:14).

During the first ten years of her marriage, Parsons bore six children, four of whom lived to adulthood. Her wealth allowed her to raise her children with a full staff of housekeepers and child nurses and gave her the freedom to travel. She spent several years in Washington, but returned to New York in 1911 after her husband finished his third term as a congressman. Between 1913 and 1916 she wrote five feminist books: several interconnected studies that focused on the constraints for women of marriage, the family, religion, and social etiquette. In several she emphasized the need for individual freedom and choice.

At the same time, she began to abandon her brand of sociological feminism for ethnology. As Peter Hare, her grandnephew, says in his biography, "She moved slowly from a generalizing style to rigorous empirical methods" (Hare 1985:135). During these years she came under the influence of Franz Boas and his graduate students, Alfred Kroeber, Robert Lowie, and Pliny Goddard. Goddard wrote to Parsons characterizing the dual nature of her life in this transitional period when she was attracted to anthropology, yet still writing feminist books. "Your winter activities are propaganda and your summer ones research," he commented (Hare 1985:135). By 1916 (at 42) she talked about giving up generalizing. In an oft-quoted passage to Lowie, she wrote, "You [Lowie], Kroeber and Hocart make the life of a psychologist not worth living. I see plainly I shall have to keep to the straight and narrow path of kinship nomenclature and folktale collecting." By the 1920s, when Parsons was President of the AES, her publications were almost completely ethnological.

A closer examination of these two crucial decades in Parsons' life—between 1910 and 1930—reveals the social and intellectual forces that first shaped Parsons' feminism and that then propelled her into an anthropological setting that left little room for such concerns in an era of political quiescence and a more private feminism.

### Parsons' early writings and feminism

The first two decades of the 20th century were years of social ferment and protest when socialist, feminist, and other radical ideas were common in New York City, especially among the middle-class and upper-class avant-garde in Greenwich Village. In contrasting the Greenwich Village feminists with earlier suffragists Nancy Cott noted that these college educated, bourgeois women rejected the image of service and motherhood associated with the woman movement of the 19th century. They were women who welcomed irreverent and radical behavior in art, politics, and the labor movement. "They considered themselves socialists or progressives leaning toward socialism and had, unlike most of the American population, a tolerance for 'isms.' They embedded their critique of gender hierarchy in a critique of the social system," (Cott 1987:35). They wanted to break with dichotomized categories of "Man" and "Woman," and equate womanhood with humanity. As Charlotte Perkins Gilman described the Feminist: "Here she comes, running, out of prison and off her pedestal; chains off, crown off, halo off, just a live woman" (Cott 1987:37).

After her return from Washington in 1911, Parsons became part of this new feminism, but her relationships were broader and included three intellectual circles in New York City. The first circle, which I have already mentioned, was that of Boas and his male graduate students. Parsons met Boas as early as 1907 and she was the first woman he interested in anthropology. In 1913 Boas helped Parsons arrange a trip to the Yucatan (Rosenberg 1982:166), but they had a relatively formal relationship in this period. She seemed closer to Goddard and Kroeber. Kroeber later wrote that he admired her "rigorous honesty and courage of mind" (Kroeber 1943:255). Robert Lowie recalled that her door was open to the younger graduate students whom she fed and sent off to enjoy her box at the opera (Rosenberg 1982:168, originally in Murphy 1972).

Parsons made her first trips to the Southwest between 1910 and 1913. These increased as she became more attracted to anthropology with its "insistence on a rigorously empirical approach" and "a consciousness of problem and method" (Kroeber 1943:253). In 1915 she observed a Navajo Enemy Way ceremony and went on to visit Zuni (Parsons 1919a:465–467). She made additional trips to Zuni and Laguna over the next four years, including a month-long field trip with Boas. These short excursions provided the material for her ethnographic articles on Zuni and Laguna published between 1916 and 1919 (Parsons 1916a, 1916b, 1916c; 1919b, 1919c).

The second circle was that of the Greenwich Village radicals. In Mabel Dodge's salon she met Walter Lippman, with whom she helped found *The New Republic* (Rosenberg 1982:168). She also came to know Max Eastman and wrote several articles for the monthly *The Masses*, a well-regarded "underground" journal of the time edited by Max Eastman. Its anti-war views provoked censorship by the post office in 1917 and a conspiracy trial of the editors in 1918. *The Masses* was dominated by such male "heavies" as Max Eastman, Floyd Dell (a sexual radical who wrote *Love in the Machine Age*), and John Reed (whose later commitment to the Russian Revolution was chronicled in the movie *Reds*). It was filled with anti-war cartoons, accounts of strikes, avant-garde drawings, and poetry. Nevertheless, there was an important feminist component of *The Masses*, with many cartoon critiques of male dominance, poems by Amy Lowell, fiction by Mabel Dodge, and articles on birth control, Emma Goldman's trial, and women's role in the garment trade.

A third circle involved participation in Heterodoxy, a club of 65 radical feminists who met for Saturday lunches in Greenwich Village, beginning in 1912. Founded by Marie Jenny Howe, it included heterosexual and lesbian women, activists and professionals. Among its famous members were Crystal Eastman, Stella Coman Ballantine (Emma Goldman's niece), Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Agnes de Mille, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. At their bimonthly lunches members discussed women's rights, political issues of the day, and a host of other topics—from how women were raising their children to revelations about their own upbringing (Schwarz 1982). One of the members used Parsons' classification of family types from her book *The Family* in a published spoof on mating patterns found among the members of Heterodoxy entitled "Marriage Customs and Taboo Among the Early Heterodities" (Woolston 1919).

From 1912 to 1919 Parsons' writing was prolific; this was her most feminist period. She published five books and a number of scholarly articles in the *American Anthropologist*, the *Journal of American Folklore*, and *The American Journal of Sociology*. She also wrote popular pieces for *The Masses*, *The New Republic*, and *Harper's Weekly*. Rosalind Rosenberg in her book *Beyond Separate Spheres* argues that by the teens of this century Parsons had given up the evolutionary approach espoused by her teacher, the sociologist Franklin Giddings, and used in her book *The Family*. Instead she became a "de facto functionalist"—arguing that the principal motives of human behavior are unconscious and that civilized and primitive peoples do not differ in their behavior (Rosenberg 1982:170–171).

In this period Parsons focuses on the theme of social restraint, juxtaposing cross-cultural examples with ones from our own society. There is a generalizing tone to her work, a search for universals and a focus on women's social roles. *The Old Fashioned Woman and Religious Chastity* published in 1913, as well as *Fear and Conventionality* (1914), *Social Freedom* (1915) and *Social Rule* (1916d) all reflect a concern for the universal in women's experience that is curiously parallel to the themes emphasized by those of us who wrote for *Woman, Culture, and Society* in 1974.

*The Old Fashioned Woman* (1913a), to cite the best example, uses ethnographic evidence to demonstrate how women's lives are constrained at every turn (from birth to widowhood) by taboos, confinement, and exclusion from male affairs. Sifting through the available ethnography of the day (for example, Spencer and Gillen on the Aborigines, Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, and George Dorsey on the Wichita), Parsons juxtaposes the experience of women in tribal groups with those in ancient state societies and in our own "modern time." Each page is a hodgepodge of examples. For instance, in the chapter "In Quarantine" about menstrual taboos, she says, "But it is during menstruation that a woman is most generally considered dangerous. . . . The Bushmen think that at a glance from a menstruous woman, a man becomes at once transfixed and turned into a tree which talks. . . . If a Pueblo Indian touches a menstruous woman, or if a Chippeway uses her fire, he is bound to fall ill" (1913a:91–92). And the list goes on and on. So-called civilized societies also harbor such beliefs and often restrict women's behavior. Women are banned from sugar refineries in the North of France (because a menstruous woman would blacken the sugar), and in England, people believe that meat cured by a menstruous woman is tainted (1913a:97).

In a discussion of marriage entitled "Her Market Price," Parsons announces, "Women are an important item in primitive trade." Here she examines various forms of brideprice before turning her attention to prostitution and slavery, further examples of the exchange of women for goods. In the chapter on "The Exclusive Sex" we learn that "Women are quite generally excluded from a share in public affairs. The Nagas have a war stone no woman may look upon and live. In anti-suffrage argument a voting booth seems to be nearly as dangerous a spot for women." Women are often frightened away from men's exclusive activities or they are given "minor parts," thus securing feminine devotion and becoming what Parsons called "The Ladies Gallery" (1913a:192–202, 275, 296–297).

In these and other chapters we see the overarching shadow of male dominance, the confinement and constriction of women, and their lack of value. Example after example is cited (meticulously footnoted), to illustrate the universality of women's condition. European examples (of so-called civilized peoples) are juxtaposed with those from tribal peoples as diverse as the Australian aborigines, the American Indians, and the Samoans. Women's position in archaic states and African kingdoms are all grist for Parsons' commentary on constraint, taboo, and exclusion.

Parsons' contributions to *The Masses* at this time also address themes of social control and constraint. Her article on marriage cites customs among the Tlingit, the Arabs, and the Koreans that mark a change in status, conferring "a new life." A Tlingit woman changes the silver pin in her lip for a wooden one, a Javanese woman burns her dolls, a Spartan bride had to give up going to public games, but in Korea, it is the man, not the bride, who does up his hair. Why all these changes? "Society," Parsons writes, "modern and primitive, stamps marriage with extraneous features, insists on making of it a novelty, because society thereby controls it, or rather, through marriage thus artificialized, it controls sex" (Parsons 1916e:27).

By 1914 Parsons had begun to explore a theory of why women are divided from men, a theory grounded in the universality of social convention and social categories. In *Fear and Conventionality* (1914), she argues that social conventions are a way of erecting barriers because of a universal fear of change, dread of novelty, and dislike of the unusual. "Sex is one of the two greatest sources of difference between its members society has to apprehend. It deals with the disturbing factor in its characteristically simple, unconscious way. It separates men and women as much as possible" (1914:119). Thus "No Vedda may come in contact with any woman of his own age except his wife. . . . Corean boys were taught that it was shameful to set foot at all in the women's part of the house" (1914:119, 120). And in New York, a woman has her escort ride with the cab driver since there is no chaperone to watch over them if they share the same seat.

The potential of breaking through rigid social categories is explored in *Social Freedom*, published in 1915. Sex, along with age, kinship, and caste are the major social classifications setting up rigid divisions, which with a "maturing culture" there is some attempt to struggle against. "Freedom from the domination of personality by sex is the gift *par excellence* of feminism, a gift it brings to men as well as women. . . ." Parsons now felt that sex relationships were beginning to change. Under increased freedom from rigid social categories, "Sex becomes a factor in the enrichment of personality. . . . It is a factor, not an obsession. . . . No longer a source of distress or annoyance, it is not kept separate from life nor repressed into the obscene. It is free to express itself, developing its own tests, standards and ideas. According to these ideals, relations between men and women will be primarily personal relations, secondarily sexual" (1915:36).

Parsons was also a pacifist and opposed U.S. participation in World War I. She opposed her husband Herbert's enlistment and refused to let anyone in a uniform inside her home, including Herbert. She was disillusioned when many of the intellectuals associated with *The New Republic* began to support the war in 1917. Rosalind Rosenberg, arguing that Parsons' hopes for progress and reform were dashed by World War I, says, "At the war's end, Parsons made a final break with public life and her own brand of feminism and escaped into anthropological fieldwork. Her friend Kroeber later suggested that she burned out on reform and that her growing understanding of culture's power over the individual made her even less optimistic about individual action" (Rosenberg 1982:176).

## **the twenties—Parsons' presidency of AES and the Boasian legacy**

The twenties was the period in which the "classic ethnography" was formulated, as exemplified by Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* and Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age*

in Samoa. The new style of ethnographic writing transformed observations and dialogue gathered in particular places and at particular times into a text containing a unified voice, that of the ethnographer representing beliefs, practices, and behaviors of a whole culture (Clifford 1983; Clifford and Marcus 1986). However, Parsons' fieldwork differed from that of Malinowski and Mead. In the 1920s Parsons stayed within the Boasian tradition, which represented a more polyphonic description, but she framed that description in terms of culture elements, diffusion, and culture history. Aligned with Boas and Goddard, she became a mentor to Gladys Reichard, who was almost a "daughter to Boas" and who, intellectually, remained a Boasian throughout her life. Parsons was never close to Mead, Benedict, and Sapir, the anthropologists in the Columbia milieu who were theorizing about the relationship between culture and the individual and writing from a more humanistic point of view.

During the 1920s Parsons continued to make short trips to the Southwest, expanding her research outward from Zuni, visiting the Hopi in 1920–1921 and Jemez, Sandia, Isleta, and Taos the following year. In the mid-1920s when she was president of AES she was conducting research on the Tewa, working out of the Spanish village Alcalde and having informants visit her there (Hieb 1986:9–13).

Given Pueblo resistance to researchers, especially those who wanted to know about religion, information was always obtained piecemeal. Anthropologists were never able to present a "seamless whole," nor could they have "pitched their tents among the natives." Like others of the period Parsons relied primarily on information from one family (the host) and from a small circle of paid informants. In more secretive pueblos like Isleta, notes were made during interviews in a hotel room or at a nearby Spanish village. This relatively clandestine research (although Parsons took care never to reveal the names of her informants) gives us (in the 1980s) the sense that anthropologists were almost prying information, often secret, out of the "natives."

Few Southwestern researchers were engaged in writing with the kind of ethnographic authority that claimed that "I was there, so you are there." Instead, a scholarly article was often a blend of different voices—the anthropologist as observer, the native as co-observer answering the anthropologist's questions "on the spot," the notes of previous anthropological observations, and a narrative of a "prototypical" ceremony by a native informant.

Parsons continued to be interested in women, but was committed to collecting ethnographic detail and reporting it in the polyphonic Boasian mode. Thus, the articles on mothers and children published in *Man* between 1919 and 1924 are a conglomeration of beliefs and practices—offerings women make in order to get pregnant, taboos surrounding birth (to avoid deformities in the child), postpartum practices and naming ceremonies. In the essay entitled "Mothers and Children at Laguna," Parsons gives her hostess Wana's account of the naming ceremony used for her two-week-old baby (that had been performed ten days before Parsons' visit). It includes Wana's drawing of the altar and a text of the medicine man's prayer in both Keres and English (Parsons 1919b). The Hopi article tells what Elsie's hostess did to have a boy child, and gives a verbatim account from her Tewa informant (Parsons 1921). In contrast to these articles in which native voices emerge, the articles on Zuni and the Tewa tend to be lists of taboos or sayings that describe a range of behavior, or detailed accounts of the disciplining of children or what a mother says when a child loses a first tooth. There are fewer personal experiences here (either as narrated by informants or observed by Parsons). Instead we are given "snatches" of information gathered from various informants at unstated times and places (Parsons 1919c, 1924c).

However, the articles contrast markedly with Parsons' use of ethnography in *The Old Fashioned Woman* and *Fear and Conventionality*. They do not focus on the separation of the sexes, the exclusion of women, or even the constraints of convention. Gone from these texts are attempts to moralize or generalize about human nature or even make an implicit contrast with our own culture. Convention and custom are recorded but there is little commentary on their constraining nature and the theory accounting for the adherence to tradition. In one essay on

the Zuni masked figures used to terrorize and control children, the theme of constraint and the control of behavior is still present in the selection of the topic, but the body of the paper compares childrearing practices in several pueblos. Parsons' own observations of an *a'Doshlë* "haranguing" a little boy provide a vivid sense that the boy was frightened, but there is no attempt to comment on the ways behavior is constrained by these customs nor is there an implicit subtext that judges Zuni practice or compares it to our own. The importance of individual freedom and the artificiality of social conventions are no longer issues in this "ethnographic" description.

When she was President of AES, Parsons published two "landmark" essays, "Tewa Kin, Clan, and Moiety" (1924a) and "The Religion of the Pueblo Indians" (1924b). They arrange data on the Pueblo cultures from west to east, contrasting the matrilineal orientation of the Hopis with the weak clans at Keres and among the Tewa and the presence of the kachina cult and prayer-feather offerings in the western pueblos—complexes that "diminish steadily" to the east and north (1924a:339; 1924b:140). These essays mark her commitment to Boasian issues about cultural variation and diffusion and had a lasting impact on the field. The contrast between western and eastern pueblo social organization, for example, was more fully developed in the work of Fred Eggan (1950).

Parsons' last field trip to the Southwest was in 1932 and she began to turn her attention elsewhere, to Mexico, the Caribbean, and Peru. Nevertheless her interest in the Southwest continued through her editing of Stephen's *Hopi Journal* (Parsons 1936) and her most important Southwestern book, *Pueblo Indian Religion*. With the appearance of this two-volume grand synthesis published in 1939, the informants and observations of the earlier articles were supplanted by a homogeneous "ethnographic present" and an overriding concern with the Boasian issues of cultural innovation and borrowing. Each group—the Hopi, the Zuni, the Tewa—becomes an "absolute subject" in James Clifford's terms. In this transformation of observation, narratives by informants, dialogues between ethnographer and native, "data constituted in discursive, dialogical conditions becomes text." "The data thus reformulated need no longer be understood as the communication of specific persons. An informant's explanation or description of custom need not be cast in a form that includes the message 'so and so said this.' A textualized ritual or event is no longer closely linked to the production of that event by specific actors. Instead, these texts become evidences of an englobing context, a 'cultural reality'" (Clifford 1983:132). In *Pueblo Indian Religion* the multiple voices and the person of Parsons as observer disappear, and the historical specificity of differing accounts is even harder to find in the footnotes.

We have come to the end of a long process for Parsons, from a feminism that sought to generalize about women's situation based on a juxtaposition of ethnographic example with Western custom. Then her prose focused on ethnographic particulars and incorporated a *mélange* of observation, informant narration, and the question/answer interrogation of natives. And finally, her publications exemplified a synthetic ethnology—one where variability and culture contact are the theme, but where the dialogue between observer and informant is erased and the framework of Boasian culture history dominates.

This assessment does not deny Parsons' important contributions both financially and intellectually. Without Parsons' support, American anthropology and Southwest research would have been a much more piecemeal endeavor. For example, she paid Esther Goldfrank's and Ruth Bunzel's salaries as Boas' secretaries in the early 1920s. She financed the research of Benedict, Bunzel, Reichard, Leslie White, and many others through the Southwest Society. She kept the *Journal of American Folklore* afloat and funded numerous other publications. Our sense of cultural variability and the influence of the Spanish conquest among the Pueblos owes much to Parsons' research.

However, Parsons never had a position within academe. Her wealth allowed her to travel and do fieldwork and fund the research of others; she remained a patron of anthropology rather

than one who could directly shape its future through the intellectual training of students. Yet Parsons was hardly alone in her peripheral institutional position within anthropology in the 1920s. Gladys Reichard had a full-time position, but at an undergraduate college. Ruth Benedict was denied the position of Chair of the Columbia Anthropology Department and did not become a full professor until the year that she died, and Margaret Mead was peripheralized in the Columbia department, shunted off to her tower office in the American Museum of Natural History. Even in the West where there were a number of women in archaeology and in museum positions, only Florence Hawley Ellis held a full-time position in the 1920s or 1930s in the anthropology department at the University of New Mexico.

Not only did Parsons not bring her feminism to anthropology in an intellectual way, but the marginalization of women in anthropology in the 1920s and 1930s limited their impact on the next generation of anthropologists.

### **the reemergence of feminism in the 1970s**

When feminism reemerged in the 1970s as a political movement it contained a critique of women's domestic roles that was reminiscent of the issues about which Parsons wrote: sexuality, marriage, motherhood, and the exclusion of women from the wider political sphere. Like Parsons in the teens, many of us were participating in several overlapping intellectual circles: (1) consciousness-raising groups that probed the sexual politics of our personal lives and the history of the women's movement in America, (2) anti-war movement activities ranging from marches to study groups and conferences, and (3) intellectual inquiry within the context of traditional departments and professional meetings. Many of these activities and the groups associated with them were centered around universities, but some feminists participated in women's health collectives and political organizations that had a community base.

For those of us who were instructors and assistant professors in universities it seemed important to put together our feminism and our academic interests. We set out to correct the "relative invisibility" of women and their treatment as "passive sexual objects, devoted mothers, and dutiful wives" by constructing courses on women in each of our disciplines. Shelly Rosaldo, Jane Collier, and others taught one such course in anthropology at Stanford in early 1971 and I taught one at Brown in 1973. Simultaneously, women anthropologists were beginning to give scholarly papers on women's roles in areas of their own research. Our book, *Woman, Culture, and Society*, emerged from the Stanford course, papers delivered at the 1971 New York AAA meetings, and our own network of female anthropologists.

Our correspondence between 1971 and 1973 reflects the way the book's framework and tone evolved. Our initial impulse was to (1) correct the male-bias in anthropological writing by analyzing the viewpoint of women, (2) define the position of women in our own and other cultures, and (3) delineate the ways in which women are "actors" even in situations of subordination. The outline of the book we presented to publishers was one that examined women using a variety of "topics": socialization and the family, women in the economy, women in society, politics and kinship, and beliefs, ideology, and "symbolic culture."

It was not until Shelly Rosaldo drafted the introduction that the theme of universal subordination began to shape the collection. Placing Chodorow's and Ortner's articles at the front of the book next to her own article was part of an attempt to give the book a theoretical coherence. Chodorow's article had been initially in the "Socialization and Family" section and Ortner's in the "Beliefs, Ideology and Symbolic Culture" portion at the end of the book. Ortner's piece was moved forward partly because other articles in this section were never completed. In the end we abandoned the idea of organizing the book into topical sections, instead arranging papers that complemented each other together.

Pushing forward with the theme of universal asymmetry and becoming committed to a book that would make a theoretical contribution meant that the three introductory essays made



broad ethnographic comparisons. Their tone echoes the generalizing quality of *The Old Fashioned Woman*, *Fear and Conventionality*, and *Social Rule*. In documenting subordination both Rosaldo and Ortner focused on many issues cited by Parsons—exclusion, the taboos surrounding menstruation and childbirth, and sexual separation. They often juxtaposed an example from our own society against cross-cultural examples.

Several passages written by Rosaldo contain the same emphasis on exclusion and constraint as the passages I quoted earlier from Parsons. For example, in discussing cultural expressions of sexual asymmetry, Rosaldo contrasted the Arapesh and Tchambuli (both studied by Margaret Mead) with the Yoruba and Iroquois. Among the Arapesh, she said, “a wife was felt to be a ‘daughter’ to her husband, and at the time of the dominant male ritual . . . she was required to act like an ignorant child. . . . Yoruba women may control a good part of the food supply, accumulate cash and trade in distant and important markets, yet when approaching their husbands, wives must feign ignorance and obedience, kneeling to serve the men as they sit. . . . Even the Iroquois . . . were not ruled by women; there, powerful women might instate and depose their rulers, but Iroquois chiefs were men” (Rosaldo 1974:19–20).

In Rosaldo’s view, this asymmetry could best be explained by a social structural opposition between a domestic sphere associated with women and a public sphere associated with men. This had consequences in turn for the establishment of male authority and the association of men with achieved status. In making her point about authority Rosaldo drew parallels between Tuareg and American men in the ways in which they distance themselves from women and hence create authority: “Tuareg men have adopted the practice of wearing a veil across the nose and mouth . . . high status men wear their veils more strictly than do slaves or vassals; women have no veils; and to assure his distance, no man is supposed to permit his lover to see his mouth. (In parts of American society, it would seem that men wear their veil of a newspaper in the subways and at breakfast with their wives.)” (Rosaldo 1974:27).

Ortner’s argument for universal asymmetry resorted less often to ethnographic example, but she detailed the case of the Crow to support her three criteria for subordination: *explicit* devaluing of women, *implicit* statements of inferiority such as the attribution of defilement through symbolic devices, and social structural arrangements that excluded women from contact with the highest powers of society. “In sum, the Crow are probably a fairly typical case. Yes, women have certain powers and rights, in this case some that place them in fairly high positions. Yet ultimately the line is drawn: menstruation is a threat to warfare, one of the most valued institutions of the tribe, one that is central to their self-definition; and the most sacred object of the tribe [the Sun Dance doll] is taboo to the direct sight and touch of women” (Ortner 1974:70). Ortner’s explanation for women’s subordination was rooted in the association of men with culture, which is highly valued, while women are universally seen as closer to nature and hence to be devalued.

It is easy to hear echoes of Parsons’ writing in these articles. Not only am I struck by the same generalizing tone and the use of ethnographic example to bolster an argument about human universals, but Rosaldo and Ortner focus on many of the same issues—taboos, constraints, and exclusionary practices—often centering on women’s bodies, their sexuality, and their reproductive roles as mothers.

The first three articles of *Woman, Culture, and Society* generated a great deal of controversy. They did represent a coherent theoretical position, and unlike Parsons’ eclectic examples (with their gesture toward a human propensity for boundaries, conventions, and constraints) our theories differentiated among cultural, sociological, and psychological levels of explanation. For Rosaldo, Ortner, and Chodorow, woman’s role as mother played a central role in their explanations for universal asymmetry. Theoretical dichotomies like domestic/public and nature/culture helped to make analytic sense of women’s roles, a level that was absent from Parsons’ work. Those influenced by materialism turned to economic explanations for social and cultural phenomena, for example, Sacks’ reworking of Engels’ theory (Sacks 1974) and Rapp’s analysis

of the historical creation of domestic and public spheres in France (Reiter [Rapp] 1975). We were the inheritors of the sociological integration of Durkheim, Weber, and Marx—an integration that had not shaped the sociology and anthropology of Parsons' day.

## **feminism of the 1980s**

Feminist anthropology of the 1970s was handicapped, as we all knew, by a lack of data. In writing our initial articles most of us were painfully aware that our own field notes and dissertations did not contain much data on women.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s we began to formulate research projects that centered on women and we trained graduate students who went to the field to examine some aspects of women's experience in a number of new and different cultural contexts. Some of us turned our attention to our own society, while others continued to focus on women in the Pacific, Southeast Asia, Africa, the Middle East, or Latin America. As we became absorbed in new particularist projects it seemed more difficult and less necessary to synthesize and generalize. We were going through much the same process as Parsons did as she turned to the realities of Pueblo social life and ceremonialism. Yet we carried our feminism into these new projects and it informed the writing of the 1980s.

The theme of constraint is still a major issue in the feminist literature of the 1980s, but it is couched in a language about system, whether it be a mode of production, a system of capitalist social relations, or an analysis of marriage relations. Culture is not absent however, and in some research, the attention to cultural meanings and symbols is at least as important as the analysis of systemic relationships. But more importantly recent research has also focused on the theme of resistance. Parsons was interested in explaining why social customs held such sway over peoples; why were individuals (both in civilized New York and in India or Africa) fearful of change and the breaking of convention? She couched her critique of convention in terms of her interest in the individual and social freedom. In the present period we think more in terms of resistance, whether on the part of individual women, members of a social group, or participants in a social movement.

This dialectic between constraint and resistance, between economic and structural forces and women's own construction of their lives can be seen in three areas of research: on reproduction and sexuality, on production and work, and on gender and state formation. Each new body of literature attends to issues of culture, language, and interpretation as well as to an analysis of political economy, class relations, and the role of the state. While there is much current discussion in cultural anthropology of the theoretically divergent approaches represented by interpretation and political economy, within feminist anthropology this dichotomy is too simple-minded. Interpretivists and political economists make important contributions in each of these three broad areas of research, and some of the best recent work combines cultural interpretation with an analysis of the material forces shaping behavior.

## **reproduction and sexuality**

Research is now appearing that explores the cultural construction of reproduction and sexuality, topics nearer to Parsons' concern with marriage, the family, and private life (Ginsburg and Tsing, in press). Much of this work focuses on the "contested domains" in our own society where new definitions of sexuality are being constructed or more traditional definitions are being asserted, attempting to gain ground lost to feminism. Carole Vance's analysis of the rhetoric of the Meese commission (in press), Susan Harding's exploration of Jerry Falwell's attempts to redefine teenage pregnancy through Christian homes for unwed mothers (in press), and Faye Ginsburg's analysis of women's construction of their reproductive experiences in the context

of the pro-life movement (Ginsburg 1987, 1989) all endeavor to understand the power of the right wing and its attempt to determine the dominant discourse around sexuality in the United States.

Recent changes in the role and experience of motherhood in American culture have directed feminist anthropologists to investigate women's response and resistance to new gender definitions and constraints. Rayna Rapp's exploration of the discourse of female genetic counselors shows them constructing a new language to explain genetic processes to working-class and minority women (1985). On the other hand, women as clients often resist medical definitions.

Anna Tsing demonstrates the powerful impact of notions of proper motherhood in shaping the popular and legal response to young mothers who have disposed of a fetus, have not admitted their dependency by calling for help, or have not been properly saddened by the death of their baby (Tsing 1986, in press). Lewin tells of lesbian mothers, also deviants in the construction of motherhood, who struggle to retain custody of their children against a hostile legal establishment (Lewin, in press).

Emily Martin's *The Woman in the Body* (1987) is a comprehensive study of the cultural construction of concepts surrounding reproduction and of women's resistance to medical discourse. Martin's rich interview material with black and white, working-class and middle-class women provides compelling descriptions of women subverting and resisting the cultural construction and enactment of birth. Working-class women, including black women, seem just as likely to resist medical authority as do their middle-class counterparts.<sup>2</sup>

In another area of sexuality, Gayle Rubin, Esther Newton, Elizabeth Kennedy, and Madeline Davis explore the history and meaning of gay and lesbian sexual relations. Kennedy and Davis argue persuasively that the bar culture of the 1950s and the establishment of butch/femme roles were part of a struggle to define a public lesbian space and an important predecessor to the modern gay liberation movement (Davis and Kennedy 1986; Kennedy and Davis n.d.).

## work

The theme of constraint and resistance is also played out in the new literature on women and work. These recent feminist investigations move into an area untouched by Parsons' focus on the family, marriage, and sexuality. As Floyd Dell pointed out in his review of *Social Freedom*, Parsons saw social class as "caste," viewed labor organizing as dividing workers from each other, and had little understanding of "classes and the class struggle." She threw her lot with the "social reformers" whose aim was "increased social opportunity" (Dell 1916:24). Even in the teens, Parsons was no Elizabeth Gurley Flynn—the labor organizer who attended Heterodox luncheons with Parsons and other feminists.

Anthropologists have been part of the expanding women-and-development literature as is evidenced in several collections edited by Eleanor Leacock, Helen Safa, June Nash, and Maria Patricia Fernandez-Kelly (Leacock and Safa 1986; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Nash and Safa 1986). This literature has particularly emphasized "constraint," stressing the continued process of proletarianization, and the vulnerability of Third World women in the informal sector (as vendors, domestics, and casual workers) and of electronics or apparel workers in multinational corporations (see Fernandez-Kelly 1983).

Aihwa Ong's *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline* (1987), in contrast, explores the way women create new forms of subjectivity and resistance. Disruptive attacks of spirit possession actually stopped production until a spirit healer could be summoned to perform exorcist rites. Though such eruptions do not transform the labor process in a lasting way, they show women are calling forth new images of self, contesting the violation of their humanity, and resisting structures of domination.<sup>3</sup>

Research on American women workers has consistently explored resistance. My own research on a New England textile community focuses on the more public acts of women's re-

sistance in the textile strikes of the 1920s and 1930s. My own experience working in an apparel plant in the 1970s also revealed the everyday resistance that is created and reproduced as women of different ethnic backgrounds confront a piece-rate system, management's definitions of appropriate behavior, and the potential divisiveness of language and cultural difference. Women's work culture—both the informal rules concerning the work itself and such celebrations as weddings, baby showers, and retirement parties provide mechanisms for women to cross ethnic boundaries and create relationships in opposition to management (Lamphere 1987).

Patricia Zavella's research on Chicana cannery workers (Zavella 1987) examines women's networks linking the workplace and the family. Karen Sacks' study of black and white hospital workers takes the analysis of women's work culture one step further by showing family values and social relationships serving as a course of resistance (Sacks 1988).

Finally, the most coherent body of theorizing in recent years discusses women and the state, and follows the earlier writings of Eleanor Leacock, Rayna Rapp, and Karen Sacks. The tendency has been to see the rise of the state as "the great divide," emphasizing the ways in which state formation has circumscribed women's activities. The most recent work stresses both the themes of constraint and resistance. In *Kinship to Kingship* (1987), for example, Christine Gailey examines the transformation of Tonga from a society with ranked "estates" to a class-based state, a transformation that coincided with missionary and capitalist penetration. In Tonga the assault on women occurred both in terms of production—the erosion of their role as makers of *ngatu* (decorated tapa cloth)—and reproduction—the control over women's sexuality. Women as sisters also lost dominance over their brothers, and their earlier multiple statuses were reduced to those of childbearer and mother. Irene Silverblatt calls for a more open, historically oriented approach that analyzes the differences among the various paths to state formation. She argues further that we must "hear the voices of the challengers, including female ones, who have not abided state expectations or ideologies" (Silverblatt 1988:441).

This selection of feminist literature of the past decade indicates the rich data base accumulating as we turn our attention to the ethnographic particularities of women's lives. More important, we are creating new theoretical frameworks, ones that may owe their initial impetus to the "great men"—Marx, Durkheim, and Weber—or even to recent eminent males like Clifford Geertz and Eric Wolf. However, by incorporating gender and women into these frameworks we have something new to say about society—whether it be in terms of state formation, the analysis of marriage in stateless societies (Collier 1988), or an interpretation of the cultural construction of reproduction. Moreover, it is increasingly clear that the dichotomy between the political economists and interpretivists is arbitrary and one that oversimplifies the meshing of these approaches that one can see in the new feminist literature and in the pages of the *American Ethnologist*.

## conclusions

The contrast between Parsons' feminism and her ethnology and that of recent feminist anthropologists is partly an intellectual one. Boasian ethnography allowed a *mélange* of observation, interrogation, and the collection of native accounts. Yet the framework into which Parsons put her data was one that gave primacy to the culture element and to processes of diffusion and borrowing. While Mead and Benedict (the younger generation of anthropologists) were differentiating the individual from culture, Parsons remained in the Boasian mold.

The 1960s generation of female anthropologists learned an anthropology that had incorporated sociology—the intellectual heritage of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. Culture, social structure, and psychology were differentiated levels of analysis in Talcott Parsons' synthesis which influenced Geertz, Schneider, and those who taught social theory at Harvard. British anthro-

pology, which emphasized a Durkheimian view of social structure, was more widely read. The impact of Marx was filtered through Leslie White's work, which also shaped the training of graduate students in the 1960s.

Just as Parsons' views had been shaped by progressive reform, feminism, and pacifism, feminist anthropology in the 1970s was also shaped by social movements. Although the number of women in graduate schools increased in Parsons' time, suffrage and feminist progressive reform were peripheral to the academy, especially during the pre-World War I years. Despite feminist debates over the proper education for women, the curriculum was not shaped by feminists nor was there a focus on the need for more research on women. As I have emphasized, women themselves did not have a secure place in coeducational institutions, and they did not get tenured professorships in the elite universities.

In contrast the 1960s brought a re-feminization of anthropology graduate programs and by the early 1970s there were more young female Ph.D.s in the job market. Women were in a better position to take jobs at elite institutions, though knocking down these barriers has been a struggle.

Equally, if not more important, are the differences between the postwar eras of World War I and the Vietnam War for shaping feminist anthropology. The anti-war movement during World War I was broken through suppression of the IWW, the red scare, and immigration restriction. The radicals who contributed to *The Masses* left social reform movements in the 1920s and retired to private life. The Vietnam War had relatively little popular support and spawned a radical student movement which grew at the same time as increasing participation in minority rights movements, feminism, and the attention to gay and lesbian rights. These movements had important support from students and some academics, who in turn pushed to reform the curriculum to include material on these disenfranchised groups.

Despite the rightward movement of the country in the 1980s, universities, much to William Bennett's dismay, have remained havens for diverse scholarship. Even though students have turned to computer sciences, accounting, and engineering in many schools, women's studies and ethnic studies have survived, now with the support of sympathetic minority and female administrators.

These differences both intellectual and political have allowed feminist anthropology to establish a more central position within anthropology in general, as the Gender and Curriculum Project and the founding of a feminist anthropology section within the American Anthropological Association indicate. The outpouring of scholarship on women will continue to bring feminism to the center of anthropology in a way Elsie Clews Parsons—given the intellectual and political constraints of her time—could not. This would reclaim the feminist heritage of Elsie Clews Parsons for anthropology—a fitting task for the next few decades of scholarship and research.

## notes

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<sup>1</sup>Although Benedict took her first anthropology course from Parsons at the New School in 1919, Margaret Caffrey (1989:96) suggests that Parsons' inductive approach to anthropology was much different from the deductive thinking that came much more naturally to Benedict. She was Parsons' research assistant for several years during the 1920s working on a concordance of Southwest mythology, but Caffrey's account of their relationship was that Parsons was a supporter of Benedict but not a close personal friend, nor someone who admired and supported Benedict's work on the Pueblos during the 1920s and 1930s (1989:156, 226–227).

<sup>2</sup>Sandra Morgen (1986, in press) has done important work on the role of the state in shaping women's attempts to redefine and reorganize health care. In her study of a feminist health clinic, she shows how

increasing dependency on state-funded grants to the clinic was important in co-opting the organization and creating internal conflicts. However, these in turn fostered a renewed state of political consciousness and commitment to an alternative organization. Both constraint and resistance are important to her analysis, and her attention to hegemonic institutions and the role of the state brings a new level of sophistication in handling the complexities of women's situation in capitalist societies.

<sup>3</sup>Faye Harrison (1989), Lynn Bolles (1981, 1983), and Deborah D'Amico-Samuels (1986) have also contributed a resistance perspective on women in the Caribbean, focusing on women's strategies in both urban and rural contexts. These scholars have placed women's strategies in the context of international policy, the constraints of development as imposed on Jamaica through the growth of multinational corporations and the power of the World Bank, and the complexities of class stratification as it has developed in the Caribbean.

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