

A Reflection on the Gendered Implications of What Kinship Is

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Abstract

This article proposes a reflection on kinship starting from a recent debate between Marshall Sahlins and Warren Shapiro hosted by the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, between 2011 and 2012. The heated controversy about the “new kinship studies”, regarding sense, meaning, and ultimately the nature of human relatedness, finds the two anthropologists on divergent stances: on one hand kinship as mutuality of being, a locus for multiple ways to conceive and live relatedness, on the other kinship as biological and inescapable invariant of human relations. The article aims at highlighting how some key issues related to relations of power remain undertheorised in the “beyond constructivist” and “essentialist” views deployed in the Sahlins-Shapiro contention and underlines the ways that kinship issues engage with broad political stances. Finally, I introduce a reflection on gender as a possibly crucial, and yet eluded, dimension in the debate.

Keywords: Kinship, Gender, Sahlins, Nature, Mutuality

It might follow that if everything is constructed, then nothing is inevitable, since the relationship between social convention and the intrinsic nature of things is exposed as arbitrary. But anthropology has more to say than this.

(Marilyn Strathern, *The gender of the gift*, 1988)

The study of kinship, the historical root of social anthropology, was one of the first fields to be questioned, well before the critical turn swept over the discipline. Often considered either too complex to approach or too commonplace to analyze, kinship as an object of study has been reshaped into new forms, intertwined with other topics such as personhood, the body, belonging, identity, consumerism, nation, race, gender and sexuality. Nonetheless, studies on kinship never ceased to shed critical light on the multiple ways we conceive of and experience relatedness and investigate the nature of social relationships and how they are conceptualized.

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With this article¹, I reflect on this issue beginning from a debate between Marshall Sahlins and Warren Shapiro that took place in 2011 and 2012, focused on the sense, meaning and, ultimately, the nature of kinship. Specifically, I focus on the two articles by Sahlins that appeared in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (2011a and 2011b)² and his comment (2012) on Shapiro's (2012) critical reply.

My goal here is not to present an analysis of Sahlins' complex and shrewd arguments, which other scholars have recently done so brilliantly in *HAU*³. Instead, I wish to reflect on the issue of kinship and on its crucial role in the interpretation of ethnographic contexts. The relevance of kinship as a theoretical issue in anthropology, as highlighted by Sahlins' work, is due to the fact that speaking of the meaning of kinship means speaking of what is intended by human nature. Debating on the given-constructed dialectics lets emerge the scholars' broad critical worldviews. The little attention that Sahlins gives to power relations in his argument asks for a consideration of the unbalances on which kinship and relatedness are constituted. I wish to offer a reflection on gender as a possibly crucial, and yet eluded, dimension in this debate.

Kinship as mutuality of being

Sahlins' recent works (2008, 2013) take a stance on two core – if not constitutive – areas of anthropological thought: human nature and kinship; specifically, what we can and should mean by kinship. In his two seminal articles (2011a, 2011b) Sahlins offers a bold overview of the state of the art of kinship studies that goes beyond social constructivism and sets the stage for further discussion.

His main idea, revealed in the very first pages (Sahlins 2011a), is that kinship is equivalent to the “mutuality of being”, and that this expression can capture the exceptional multiplicity of the ways human beings experience and describe kinship relationships. Kinship as mutuality is defined as a state “intrinsic to one another's existence” that makes “mutual persons” in a state of relationship/connection characterized by intersubjective belonging or relatedness. One of the controversial elements of Sahlins' argument is David Schneider's critique of kinship. As is widely known, Schneider sharply deconstructs the genealogical grid to define kinship as a “non-subject”, similar to totemism and matriarchy; in so doing, he questions the genealogical

1 I wish to thank the anonymous referees for their helpful and constructive comments.

2 These two essays constitute the core of the book published the following year (Sahlins 2013).

3 A book symposium in *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, (2013, 3, 2) was dedicated to comments and responses to Sahlins' book (2013).

model at the base of kinship studies, calling it a Western “folk theory” and arguing, through specific cases, that it is inadequate in relation to the majority of ethnographic contexts (Schneider 1968, 1972, 1984). Schneider therefore suggests that kinship be discarded as an anthropological subject because it does not correspond to any “distinct cultural system”. However, as Sahlins reminds us, the study of kinship has led to a number of enlightening anthropological essays focused on the most diverse of contexts, from Melanesia to Europe. The new kinship studies paradoxically use Schneider’s critical approach to place the subject of kinship back at the heart of the anthropological debate, providing a renewed theoretical drive to the discipline since the beginning of the 1990s⁴. In this respect Schneider, despite his aims, actually helped to reignite kinship studies: his questioning of its naturalistic premises breathed new life into the field at a moment when it had reached an *impasse* (Carsten 2004).

Sahlins identifies the weakness of Schneider’s position in the distinction, drawing on Parsons, between a normative system of social actions and a “pure” cultural system of symbols and meanings, “as if the norms and relations of motherhood, cross-cousinship, brotherhood through eating from the same land, and the like were not constituted by and as ‘symbols and meanings’ ” (2011a, p. 7). This split basically reintroduces the distinction between the order of Nature and the order of Law that Schneider had brilliantly identified as constituting the root of the American kinship system and the “folk theory” at the foundation of kinship studies.

Positioning himself within a precise and explicit genealogy extending back from Strathern through Bastide and Durkheim amongst others all the way to Aristotle’s Nicomachean ethics, Sahlins comes to the conclusion that what is to be intended by kinship is “a manifold of intersubjective participations, founded on mutualities of being” (2011a, p. 10). This definition is supported by a number of cases taken from various more or less recent ethnographic works from all over the world, from Madagascar to New Guinea, Amazonia and Siberia; the aim of this ethnographic *excursus*, an exercise that the author himself characterizes as an example of Frazerian-style uncontrolled comparison (2011a, p.2), is not so much a verification of the nature of kinship as the demonstration of an idea (*ibid.*).

In these ethnographical cases, the reproduction of kinship is attributed to any living being or inanimate thing, human or otherworldly, in a spectrum ranging from nurturing and food sharing to memory and affection. Sexual procreation and the “facts of life” are not the focus; rather, attention shifts

4 See, among others, Weston (1991), Bouquet (1993), Edwards et al (1993), Franklin (1997), Carsten (2000, 2004), Edwards (2000), Franklin and McKinnon (2001), Strathern, (1992a, 1992b, 2005), Bamford (2007), Bamford and Leach (2009), Edwards and Salazar (2009).

towards the relevance of social relationships. In Sahlins' formulation, kinship is constituted through processes that range from referring to procreation to pure performance, in which consubstantiality is to be understood in a way that goes beyond the notion of biological substance. This collection of multiple and potentially endless views on, representations of and ways of living and embodying relatedness produces birth as a metaphorical space:

as the distinctive quality of kinship, mutuality of existence helps account for how procreation and performance may be alternate forms of it. The constructed modes of kinship are like those predicated on birth precisely as they involve the transmission of life-capacities among persons (2011a, p. 14).

In this way, Sahlins seeks to overcome the "constructivist" approach in the study of kinship, an approach that tends to reproduce a distinction between biogenetic substance and codes of conduct while at the same time preserving kinship as a field of knowledge.

Conservative kinship

Warren Shapiro has targeted these two publications by Sahlins for a brief abrasive comment (2012). In a couple of pages, Shapiro states his critical stance on new kinship studies and his "extensionist" view showing that native kinship terms reflect genealogical ethno-procreative rules stemming from the facts of procreation: the multiplicity of practices found in different ethnographic contexts still always and in every case have sexual procreation as a model. For instance, he argues that Carsten's finding of kinship through food-sharing in a village in Malaysia is actually a derived form of the kinship generated by procreation; it is similar to the model found in Arnhem, where he conducted his research, in which the mother's sister is a reduced version of the biological mother (Shapiro 2012).

Long engaged in a debate with the new kinship studies, Shapiro had already identified Sahlins as being responsible for the "performative" drift in kinship studies and, together with Schneider, for the anthropological trend of cultural constructivism, or "deconstructionist movement" as he calls it. His theoretical stance is deployed in an article published a few years earlier (2008) where, starting from a sharp criticism of the work of Susan McKinnon (1995a, 1995b, 2000), Shapiro argues strongly for a study of kinship that takes into account universal references such as bilaterality⁵, kinship ter-

5 "Whatever descent or descent-like constructs exist in a community, kinship is nearly everywhere reckoned bilaterally, and, as I have suggested, in ways that are largely compatible with genetic notions" (Shapiro 2008, p. 146).

minologies, genealogy and, finally, procreation as the inescapable constitutive element of kinship. According to Shapiro's argument, recent studies adopting a local vision of kinship, show a peculiar failure to recognize the phenomenon of focality as well as the use of kinship terminology and the meaning granted to definitions of kinship groups⁶. What makes Shapiro's critiques of these relatively new approaches in kinship unusual is their explicitly political quality: according to Shapiro, the representatives of the (many) anthropologists studying kinship from a deconstructivist standpoint are blinded by a militant Marxist ideology shaped by a naïve Engelsian and feminist influence. Significantly, Shapiro's reference point for the deconstructionist movement in social theory is a text by Yanagisako and Delaney that addresses processes of power naturalization from an openly feminist point of view (1995). In practice, Shapiro transforms his criticism of McKinnon into a criticism of the new kinship studies as a whole, accusing this field of assigning a "collectivist" notion of kinship to the populations under study that goes beyond recognizing paternal and maternal contributions to birth and the relevance of the nuclear family. This appears to be a distorted image of the Third and Fourth World, due to a view opposing individualism and collectivism: "an Individual West *versus* Collective Rest" (Shapiro 2008, p. 149). Reverencing developmental psychology, Shapiro claims that "kinship in our species is nothing if not individual, because the bonding that we undergo, especially as children, is socially selective" (*ibid.*, p. 148) and that "close procreative kin are probably everywhere distinguished, the suggestion is that these kin participate in special relationships that are very nearly universal and not, *pace* Marxism, the dispensable product of a particular socioeconomic regime" (*ibid.*, p. 149).

Going back to Shapiro's short comment on Sahlins' articles, his conclusions reflect, not surprisingly in this frame, a sort of political stance: "We workers of the world are unimpressed by the visions of the anointed [...]. We have the truth to win" (2012, p. 193). It is significant that the term *anointed* in this case is drawn from a hyper-liberal pamphlet criticizing left-wing American intellectuals (Sowell 1995).

Sahlins' concise reply to Shapiro, titled "Birth is the metaphor" (2012), is equally caustic: in Sahlins' argument, the quest for "real" parents and "elemental" family relationships reduce an established network of links between people and groups "into the logic of its cognition by an individual subject (as in componential analysis). Society is subsumed in and as the individual's experience of it. Welcome to America..." (Sahlins 2012, p. 673). Here again, Sahlins' lecture about Shapiro's "arch-conservative thesis" (*ibid.*) offers a broad political vision. Sahlins underlines how the "extensionist" vision considers in-

6 On the issue of conception and paternity, Shapiro has published an entire critical volume with an overview of work on the Amazonian context. See Shapiro (2009).

dividuals as abstract concepts (mother, father, child) and mating as something that occurs in a social *vacuum* (“we are not dealing with a lone man and woman copulating on a desert island and thus producing a society”) in which the individual’s only identity is “genital” (ibid., p. 674). Sahlins concludes that, rather than debating whether classificatory kinship relationships are extensions of supposed primary natural relationships, we must recognize that birth itself is the reflection of something else, i.e. social relations:

whereas it is commonly supposed that classificatory kin relations represent ‘meta-phorical extensions’ of the ‘primary’ relations of birth, if anything it is the other way around: birth is the metaphor (Kinship Workers of the World – Only Unite!) (ibid., p. 676).

Without getting into the complex debate surrounding Sahlins’ theory, we might ask: why is the need to tell the truth about kinship defined as “anti-constructivist”? Moreover, how do different visions of the world come into play in these two approaches, Shapiro’s “essentialist” lens and Sahlins’ perspective that might be defined as “beyond constructivism”?

In this article I would like to focus on the clear political inflections found in this debate that returns to one of the classic themes in anthropology: the relationship between nature and culture, albeit in a rather different frame. The explicit references to conservative politics, neoliberalism, marxism and feminism, are peculiarly marked by the relevance of the political dimension in contemporary anthropology. Are there “progressive” views on kinship? And does Sahlins actually adopt the feminist approach that Shapiro accuses the new kinship studies of having?

Human nature and the unbalance of mutual being

In a short and enjoyable essay from 2002, Sahlins wittily lists out a number of controversial issues in the human sciences and includes in this list the tautological use of notions of power in anthropology, i.e. “the current Foucauldian-Gramscian-Nietzschean obsession” responsible for the “dissolution of specific cultural forms into generic instrumental effects” (2002, p. 20). Here, criticizing the theory according to which power constructs subjectivity, Sahlins compares Foucault to Hobbes in a quite unnatural way (ibid., p. 40-41): according to Sahlins, both Foucault and Hobbes see social life as a war of every individual against every other individual.

Power as an “intellectual black hole” (ibid., p. 20), that is, the trendy use of Foucauldian concepts, is indeed found in some studies both within and outside of anthropology. What I would like to focus on, however, is Sahlins’ main object of dispute, besides postmodern approaches: he insists on the in-

dividualist theory of human nature, arguing that it derives from neoliberal conceptions of the nature of human beings. He makes this argument in a text focused on the way the West has conceptualized human nature (Sahlins 2008) and further discuss it in his theorization on kinship as a mutuality of being. Sahlins refers to a notion of culture that emerges from comparing human behavior to that of chimpanzees, a comparison that finds a clear “shared intentionality” among children as opposed to apes. Sahlins concludes that, paradoxically, if human nature meant egoism and an incapacity to identify with the other, then in reality we should attribute it to chimpanzees. Conversely, in his opinion human nature lies precisely in human beings’ specific capacity to recognize others as themselves and themselves as others (2013, p. 39-40). Sahlins does not specifically criticize the notion of Nature per se, but he does criticize the idea of Nature as an antisocial principle in order to credit the social (cultural) nature of mankind. This intrinsically human quality is thus seen as the symbolic ability to engage in the intersubjectivity of being: in the end, human nature coincides with kinship. Therefore, the principle on which kinship is based represents an alternative vision of human nature with respect to the vision prevailing in the West:

what we are pleased to consider human nature mostly consists of the inclinations of (bourgeois) adult males, largely to the exclusion of women, children and old folks and to the comparative neglect of the one universal principle of human sociality, kinship (2008, p. 44).

The author’s stance is reminiscent of Chomsky’s position in his famous public debate with Foucault on a Netherland TV channel in 1971 (Chomsky, Foucault 2006). In this debate, Chomsky criticizes the French philosopher’s idea that it is not possible or even useful to identify an ultimate human nature: according to Chomsky, there is a Nature that allows us to recognize ourselves as humans and that has its roots in language⁷. If for Chomsky human nature lies in the cognitive structures of language characterized by universality and innateness, for Sahlins it lies in kinship, the principle of human sociality so closely linked to culture, to “life itself”. Sahlins even suggests, through Tylor, that the principle of mutuality is so intrinsic to kinship that the word ‘kinship’ shares a root with the word “kindness” (2008, p. 47).

7 Chomsky stresses the creativity of individual subjects, and children in particular, suggesting a notion of freedom that he places in opposition to Foucault’s idea of subjectivity produced by power. In particular, for Foucault, the “justice” and “basic human needs” that Chomsky sees as originating from human nature are wholly historical ideas rather than scientific truths to be used as the basis for developing theoretical principles for action. As Foucault himself notes, their divergent positions are determined by the political problems involved in the concept of human nature, not the theoretical ones (see Catucci 2005).

Sahlins' definition of kinship is meant to be inclusive and general: in any place and in any way it is described, experienced or performed, kinship has to do with the "mutuality of being". He is obviously aware of the danger of invoking "being", namely that the discussion might slide into "dark philosophical waters" (2011b, p. 227). This may not be the only risk, however. The definition is rather generic: the real risk is that of dissolving kinship into sociality⁸, in which Sahlins paradoxically enough appears to end up proving a point close to Schneider's view, that is, that there is a certain flimsiness to the notion of kinship.

At times this stress on kinship as a space for conformity and agreement (a reciprocity of being, love and care reminiscent of Fortesian amity), also evident in his text on "what kinship is," appears quite problematic: what kind of interdependence does Sahlins mean, here? How can we account for ambivalence and conflict, inequality and unbalances among individuals in the sphere of relatedness? Clearly, Sahlins does not intend to claim that the mutuality of kinship is a space without differences or oppositions: not all parents are *lovable*, but he stresses that these cases represent an exception that confirms the ideal (2011b, p. 235). Moreover, the case of some individuals exercising power over others (Maori chiefs, for example) derives from a privileged connection with an ancestral being and therefore a charge of differential *mana*, a genealogical priority: in this case, power becomes an "unbalance of mutual being" (2011b, p. 229). Apart from this brief mention, he does not directly address power relationships within kinship⁹. In the book "What kinship is and is not," the politics of kinship practice are considered separate from what kinship is (2013a, p. 60); they constitute an external and contextual element (2013b, p. 345) in Sahlins' theorizing on mutuality.

The given, the constructed and women's fertility

To support the principle of mutuality of being, Sahlins casts all the way back to Lévi-Strauss' theory of reciprocity and the practice of exchanging women. In order to underline the importance of alliance, the affines' power

8 In his critique, Maurice Bloch underlines the way "mutuality of being" is part of the very definition of kinship and consequently implies a certain degree of circularity in Sahlins' argument (Bloch 2013).

9 See Carsten (2013) and Brightman (2013) regarding the lack of attention granted to ambivalence and conflict in Sahlins' argument. Carsten specifically cites the work of Jeanette Edwards and Marilyn Strathern (2000) to comment on the "sentimentalized view of sociality as sociability and of kinship ('family') as community that pervades much Euro-American commentary of an *academic* kind" (2000, p. 152; original emphasis), and highlights that "this is a reflection of the positive, generative ideological force of ideas about connection, belonging, and kinship in Euro-American cultures" (Carsten 2013, p. 246).

of life and death and metaphysical influence, Sahlins explicitly quotes the text about Sumerian and Andaman mythologies that concludes the “Elementary Structures of Kinship”:

the former placing the end of primitive happiness at the time when the confusion of languages made words into common property, the latter describing the bliss of the hereafter as a heaven where women will no longer be exchanged, i.e., removing to an equally unattainable past or future the joys, eternally denied to social man, of a world in which one might keep to oneself (Lévi-Strauss 1969, p. 497, quoted in Sahlins 2011b, p. 237).

If giving birth and making war are “often linked as gendered forms of achieving the same finality, reproduction of the society: childbirth directly; warfare by the appropriation and enculturation of fertile power, as may involve sacrifices and cannibalism” (2011b, p. 240, in note), the exchange of women is commonly interpreted as a practice aimed at appropriating female fertility.

While Sahlins seeks to disconnect kinship from any biological root, he treats gender relationships and heterosexuality as if they were resolved issues despite his intention to provide a non-conservative vision of kinship by going beyond the abstract figures of mother, father, child and “genital” identities within a cultural desert (and *pace* Shapiro’s “accusations” of feminism). As Rubin argued in her well-known essay on the “traffic in women”, the exchange of women in structuralist theory is a problematic concept involving sex and gender in which the emergence of the social dimension coincides with the historical defeat of women that occurred with the origin of culture, and that represents the basis itself for the emergence of culture (Rubin 1975, p. 176). Just as with arguments about the nature of kinship, in theorizing exchange, gender relations and (hetero)sexuality are clearly addressed while the cultural production of gender remains hidden. Although Sahlins claims that kinship is not biology, his reference to the exchange of women seems to point to a problem of reproduction and women’s fertility in particular.

In the course of his discussion Sahlins makes an important reference to the work of Viveiros de Castro who is likewise critical of the “somewhat reactionary” and essentialist of both psycho-cognitive and phenomenological positions that reject new kinship studies (2009, p. 258). Nonetheless in discussing critically the constructivist vision, and underlining that in kinship, distinguishing between what is given and what can be built is a dead end, he argues that the given is a constitutively relational element¹⁰. In this respect, Viveiros

10 Regarding this issue, see Roy Wagner’s important contribution (1981), which Viveiros de Castro explicitly addresses.

de Castro seems to suggest that “constructivist views” in kinship arise from a sort of misunderstanding about consanguinity and affinity in which what is given, fixed is always questioned and frequently discarded “in the capacious dustbin of disciplinary history” (ibid., p. 253)¹¹. Constructivist approaches do not consider the possibility that “fixity” itself might account for diverse forms of knowledge and alternative ways of explaining consanguinity and affinity¹² that diverge from the notions commonly used in anthropology. In the “constructivist” model of the so-called new kinship studies, no kinship is ever given at birth; rather, it is “created” through the process of sharing food, love, memory, affection and activity, as Sahlins shows in his ethnographic excursus. Viveiros de Castro notes that, in this specific case, kinship means consanguinity rather than affinity. In the “constructivist” model that distinguishes the contractual dimension from the “natural” one, it would be redundant to state that affinity is socially constructed (Viveiros de Castro 2009, p. 257).

Moreover, in the course of re-interpreting kinship and Lévi-Strauss’ theory of alliance in particular, Viveiros de Castro further addresses the issue of exchange of women. The Brazilian anthropologist stresses that, for Lévi-Strauss, the dimensions of nature and culture are given together; neither is granted ontological priority over the other. Both consanguinity and affinity as components of the elementary structures of kinship are considered to be given at birth, and affinity is understood to include the formal cause of consanguinity: no relative exists beyond this, before the exchange. The category “women” can be described according to the same principle:

Men do not ‘exchange women’, and women are not there *for* exchange: they are created *by* exchange. As are men. Indeed, as a matter of fact, (or, rather, a matter of right), it is never a case of some people (men) exchanging some other people (women): marriage is a process whereby people (men and women) exchange kinship *relations*, as Lévi-Strauss suggested a while ago [...], or *perspectives*, as Strathern put it more recently (Viveiros de Castro 2009, pp. 256-257).

According to this view of kinship, there is no place for categories of gender such as masculine and feminine, or for the appropriation of female fertility beyond and before kinship, because it is the very exchange of kinship relations that makes gender and bodies.

11 Viveiros de Castro points out that anthropology and its different views were not exactly responsible for overcoming Eurocentric conceptions. Rather, Western thought has changed independently of anthropology due to a number of specific developments: reproductive techniques, cultural trends, creativity and self-fashioning, in which nothing is given at birth (2009, p. 253).

12 Viveiros de Castro references the conception of kinship and the person in the Amazon, his long-term field of research, see Viveiros de Castro 2010.

Strathern, with whom both Sahlins and Viveiros de Castro often engage, has also addressed the issue of exchange of women, pertaining to her field in Melanesia. In Strathern's view, the idea that exchange of women involves an appropriation of feminine fertility is linked to notions of maternity, gender, person and commodity that must not be taken for granted regardless of the specific ethnographic context: reproduction cannot be separated from ideas of paternity, maternity, corporeality and gender. To clarify, I quote the entire passage in which Strathern deals with this issue:

It seems evident that women embody fertility [...] It leads only to one conclusion, which is also its premise: what differentiates men and women is their physiology, and marriage arrangements across the world have as their purpose the management of female fertility. And why do we imagine that female fertility presents itself as having to be controlled? Because of something else we imagine, that women make babies. Of course 'we' are all sophisticated enough to know that genetics requires coupling and that people do not in that sense procreate alone. But the Western imagination plays with the idea that mothers make babies in the same way as a worker makes a product, and that work is their value (1988, pp. 314-315).

Just as Rubin argued that the issue of sexuality needs to be brought back into kinship theories, Strathern places gender, bodies and, in the end, the very production of relatedness at the center of her analysis.

The never solved tension between anthropology and feminism, their particular relationship and the consequences of accounting for gender (Strathern 1987, Abu-Lughod 1991, 2002) introduces a productive dynamic that insists on the historical-political implications of anthropological knowledge production. On the issue of reproduction the new wave of kinship studies has problematized the question of procreation in anthropology after the long and relatively inconclusive debate that took place in the 60s and 70s¹³. This historical disciplinary debate has been resurrected thanks in particular to the wealth of studies on reproductive techniques and how these techniques unsettle assumptions about kinship and gender. It is surprising that there is no reference to this field of research in Sahlins' text (Brightman 2013). Addressing these studies might have enabled him to further account for the differences and complexities that accumulate behind the notion of "biological filiation" assumed under the rubric of the West (Edwards 2013). Feminist anthropologists specifically have made a radical contribution to questioning the facts of life through their work on the notion of reproduction itself; indeed, this work constitutes a key element underlying the multiple shifts in conceptualizations of relatedness and gender. These stud-

13 On the notion of paternity and the so-called "Virgin Birth debate," see Franklin 1997, Delaney 1987 and Strathern 1995.

ies, analyzing kinship and gender as constitutively intertwined (Collier and Yanagisako 1987), theorize a radical rethinking of the domestic-sexual-reproductive dimension that also takes into account power imbalances and inequality.

In anthropological studies, gender has historically been a site for reflecting on nature and culture and a key element lending concreteness to social relationships. It is therefore a privileged space in which to recover the dimensions of generation, intimacy and identity that are at the core of relatedness, mutuality, sharing and exchange but also violence, exclusion and subordination, no matter what terms, “substances” or “metaphors” are used to articulate them. What is valuable for anthropology is the situated nature of approaches that deal with gender issues. Thanks to its situatedness, anthropology addressing gender has raised concerns about how we might account for authentically different views and practices, bodies and subjections through a political and ethical sensibility. The way the issue of gender has been discussed in ethnography and in particular its intertwine with kinship and genealogy, represents a complex knot: if gender has to be understood as a processual and not fixed category, at the same time it has not to be forgotten how deconstructing the process of naturalization upon which power relationships rely does not mean underplaying how strong and operative categorizations are. Retaining the given as a part of what anthropology needs to understand addresses the scholars’ responsibility to account for local renditions of politics of kinship and the intimate affective and gendered processes in the making of hierarchy, subordination and conflict in the field of relatedness.

When debating on kinship, relationships of power, dependence and subjection cannot be excluded. Erasure of the relationships of power and of gender artificially flattens debate in a field that is, on the contrary, problematic and requires a constant re-thinking of reproduction, relatedness and the very notion of reciprocity¹⁴.

It may be asked: is it possible to heed Sahlins’ reflections on mutuality and take into account denial, prohibitions and violence within reproduction and kinship relationships? What is the link with sexuality, reproduction of community, nation, and race? The intertwine between gender theory and anthropology provides a perspective that may contribute to rethink bodies

14 Regarding the resilience and thickness of kinship relations in the USA, Faubion and Hamilton comment on the category of women within Lévi-Strauss’ theorization: “That Lévi-Strauss ultimately treats women within the elementary (and perhaps also the complex) structures of kinship as categorically inconsistent – they are at once objects of desire, gifts, signs and persons (1969, p. 497) – is perhaps an indication that he was aware that the logic of reciprocity alone could not exhaust the terrain he had traversed” (Faubion and Hamilton 2007, p. 541). For a critical review of reciprocity, gender differences and marriage exchange through ethnography, also see Weiner 1992.

and gender without missing the chance to account for conflict and dynamics of change through an analysis of how kinship and relatedness produce, and at the same time are crossed by, politics of the bodies and of generation.

Veena Das' work (1995, 2006) on collective sexual and reproductive violence on women's bodies in India during the time of Partition, shows how abducted, raped, forcibly married women sent back with their children to their own families by state intervention, became the undesirable living testimonies of the transgression of kinship norms and the governing order of the family. Das highlights how state logics, constraining women's religious identity and family belonging, acted in some cases against women's will to stay within their new (abductor's) family. Diverse kinship practices, in the face of collective disaster, deployed strategies to absorb women within families in an ambiguous dynamic of recognition and denial.

Regarding the issue of sexuality another example are Borneman's reflections (1992, 1996, 2001) on kinship and subjectivity as a nexus of relationship and self-techniques constituted over time through state politics and local strategies in the two Berlins during Cold War. Addressing, among other issues, practices of everyday life to include kins and partners under unnamed forms of recognition, his approach uncovers how marriage and kinship are not prior to sexuality and intimacy, but produce and are produced by the foreclosure of non-heteronormative abject subjects.

An engagement on kinship theory can be found in Butler's reflections (2004) on the rather anachronistic revival of structuralist references by French psychologists, following Héritier (1998), as an argument against the possibility to legalize homosexual kinship in France¹⁵. Her analysis of the entanglements of gender, race and the reproduction of culture in Lévi-Strauss' theory, illuminate the link between homophobia and xenophobia.

If kinship has to be recognized as a privileged issue for anthropology to understand the terms in which difference and sameness are perceived and created (Casten 2004), we should remark that concern about gender issues may lead to the emergence of ambivalence, conflict, and processes through time, showing how the same fabric of relatedness, belonging, and intimacy is constantly weaved, disrupted, repaired, contested, changed.

Conclusion

Sahlins uses kinship to talk about human nature and relatedness in an attempt to respond to two different positions: individualistic and neoliberal views on one hand, and intrinsic indeterminacy on the other; in other words, he seeks to reject Shapiro's paradigm of fixity and save kinship from

15 On conservative uses of Lévi-Strauss' work, see also Favret-Saada, 2000.

Schneiderian nihilism. In so doing, he sketches out an anthropological approach that is, as every critical approach, also *sensu lato* political. A reflection on gender problematizes power relations in a way that grants complexity to a notion of kinship that eventually expands to overlap with the notion of culture itself in its positive, inclusive and mutual dimensions. The gender and sexuality dimensions question mutuality of being as an intrinsic element of kinship and potentially blur the differentiation between internal-structural and external-contextual aspects (Sahlins, 2013b p.345).

By bringing bodies, genders, identities and substances together with the re-production of continuity and relatedness over time, we can recognize the value of kinship studies' particularly thick history. Keeping in mind that "neither gender nor kinship is a thing in itself" and "neither can simply be isolated from other markers of social difference or inequality, such as those of class or race" (Carsten, 2004 p.82), we can account for authentically different ways of living reproduction, the body and fertility itself within the analysis of kinship. The debate surrounding Sahlins' observations offers an opportunity to rethink the language, logics and practices of kinship and relatedness together with race, nation, religion and gender. Furthermore, ethical and political dimensions cannot be overlooked when accounting for how kinship and gender operate within specific contexts and, jointly, how these concepts are analytically employed.

The study of kinship is a tool for reflecting on issues related to belonging and identity in a wide variety of contexts, from reproductive technologies to international adoption, citizenship, community policies and transnational migration: contexts that powerfully call into question how and which bodies and relationships matter.

The discussion about kinship is a key field for fine-tuning our understanding of the ethnographic endeavor. The intertwining of relatedness, gender and power grants a visible form to the implications of telling the "truth" about kinship in an increasing globalized context, implications which are always both political and relevant. The density of anthropological history and wealth of ethnographic investigations into relatedness both enable us to continue the discussion on kinship and gender and, at the same time, highlight how kinship, thanks to its plasticity, its ability to include and subordinate, its foreclosures and leftover traces, is capable of capturing the reality we face and the very tools we employ to understand it.

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