AFTER BUTLER: MATERIALIZING AND HISTORICIZING THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF GENDER

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As asked to write about gender and inequality for this issue of Voices, I found myself wondering if the topic doesn't belong more to archaeology these days than to ethnography. Among archaeologists, both terms have been at the forefront of the research agenda, provoking major upheavals in method and theory. Questions of gender forced researchers to take apart units previously studied as wholes, from individual households to entire ethnic groups; a complementary movement towards studying societies "from the bottom up" placed new emphasis on the lives of non-elites within complex societies. The methodological challenges involved are enormous—and enormously interesting—as scholars begin to look at the archaeological record for traces of the ways in which marginalized actors shape their societies.

In cultural anthropology, the picture is a bit less clear. Most ethnographies are still written about marginalized peoples, and specific forms of inequality—racism, poverty, or heteronormativity—are certainly being studied. Still, there is no consensus that to study gender is to study inequality; indeed, many researchers would shy away from the word, finding it, like patriarchy or misogyny, a bit too crude in its politics. A big word, it seems to call for big, unifying theories, but these are out of fashion at a time that emphasizes particularities, complexities, and ambiguities.

It was different in the heady days of the 1970s, when fiercely radical scholars embraced an explicit goal: not only to study inequality but to eradicate it. That sense of purpose is now blunted and diffused—and not only because the political climate has changed. Research seems fragmented and rudderless, the distances between the subdisciplines unbridgeable, and cultural theory becalmed in a post-post doldrums, passively awaiting the next big thing.

These rather invidious comparisons between archaeology and ethnography, the present and the past run counter to the tale usually told. Courses on gender studies look back on "70's feminism" with knowing condescension as a time of naïve scholarship marred by unexamined racist, neocolonialist and heterosexist attitudes. At the same time, we trace a direct line of descent from that period to the present: we do similar work,
but better, with greater theoretical and political sophistication. This triumphant version of a history of steady progress is suspect; like most histories, ours has been uneven and selective. As the unabashed feminism that sat so uneasily within the academy became professionalized into a more palatable, ideologically neutral ‘anthropology of gender’, tenets of belief were rejected, and promising avenues of inquiry suddenly abandoned. One route out of our contemporary malaise, then, may lie backwards, with a renewed commitment to an explicitly feminist scholarship focused on the study of inequality. By placing this question at the center, we could discover connections, not only between one another’s work, but also to pressing social concerns outside the academy.

The most obvious unifying theory for this project is one that has deeply shaped feminist anthropology, but is now often vilified: historical materialism. Eleanor Leacock’s editions of Morgan and Engels, designed for classroom use, testify to the importance she and others placed on 19th century materialist theory as the starting point for the study of gender and inequality. Now, ethnographers recoil in horror from grand evolutionary theories, cognizant that crude, reductionist Marxisms produced bad research, in which real histories were made to conform to ideal ones, and only certain kinds of oppression mattered. As a necessary corrective, more recent theories insist on the indeterminate nature of the relationships between race, class, gender and sexuality, and emphasize the agency of actors, eschewing narratives about passive victims of world history. But this turn away from the ethnological ideal of broad comparisons across space and time has made it more difficult to see social processes in their entirety. Without grounding in a theory of political economy, terms such as globalization and transnationalism are rendered meaningless, and so too, ultimately, are our finely tuned studies of social microcosms.

A new look at the two defining terms of Marxist feminism—history and materialism—should logically be led by archaeologists, for whom the study of material objects and temporal processes are always fundamental. Such a move would upend one of anthropology’s unspoken assumptions, that sociocultural anthropology is always at the forefront in developing theory: a sort of metropolitan core to which archaeology is condemned to play a peripheral colony. Historically, there is literal truth here: for a long time, archaeology was largely run by and for men. But today, although programs at many institutions are still saturated with sexism and homophobia, the discipline boasts a cohort of senior feminist scholars whose landmark publications have engendered an outpouring of new research by younger scholars.

These archaeologists are sophisticated consumers of cultural theory and ethnographic writing, an enthusiasm unreciprocated by their sociocultural colleagues. For earlier feminist theorists, Engels provided a
bridge: cultural anthropologists cared about early forms of inequality, and the enigmatic processes that have caused it to accelerate over time. Today, while archaeologists have expanded their field of interest forward in time to include historic sites such as slave plantations, whores and missions, ethnographers' notions of history have become shallower, usually limited to the beginnings of colonial regimes in the region being studied. This disinterest in, even open contempt for, the study of the truly longue durée belies ethnography's claim to progressive politics. The effect of ignoring the millennia-long history of Native Americans, Africans and Asians before European hegemony and outside of capitalism is to inadvertently reproduce the very colonialist, racist and Eurocentric forms of thinking we claim to abhor.

The more pressing need is for a return to materialism, which grounds us in empirical specificities—the marks of violence, hunger or disease that can be read from a pile of bones; the accumulated detritus in a trash heap, eloquent testimony to a household's wealth and habits—even as it allows comparison and generalization. Oddly enough, it is not only ethnographers who may need to re-learn materialism; following contemporary cultural theory, the trend in archaeology has been towards reading through and past material traces to focus on the intangible. Here, a renewed attention to the materiality of social life—and of inequality—would balance the celebratory key of recent work on gender and sexuality, which has been captivated by the allure of ancient queens, two-spirit persons, and women buried in warrior's tombs. These studies are important: in documenting past lives far less constrained by gender than we might expect, they remind us that the shape of inequality is historically contingent. But this work needs to be re-centered within a broader materialism that pays attention to ordinary people, whose lives are too often circumscribed by penury and drudgery.

A new historical and dialectical materialism would insist upon the specificity of each historical conjuncture, and give equal weight to structures of symbol and meaning as causal factors in social life. At the same time, it would open up our local and temporally defined studies by placing them within the broader perspective of global transformations in political economy over the largest possible time scale. Within such a framework, archaeology, ethnography, and history can be folded into a single synthetic vision with a sharply political focus on the injustice of material inequity.

For a brief survey of some of the many excellent recent publications on the archaeologies of sex, gender and inequality, readers might begin with the following:

Rosemary Joyce
Lynn Meskell, Egypt; Randal McGuire and Robert Paynter
In press “The Archaeology of Inequality” in Mesoamerican Archaeology. Julia Hendon and Rosemary Joyce, eds.

Please note that none of these authors would necessarily agree with any of the ideas expressed in this essay!

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