

# THE CONFERENCE WORKSHOPS

## PART I: ANTHROPOLOGY

*Jackie Crawford*

This workshop was given by Bonnie Kettel, who teaches in the Anthropology Department at York. She introduced it by outlining the purpose behind the afternoon sessions, to bring together women from within a particular discipline and women from other disciplines with a need to know about areas of research relevant to their own work. Since there were few participants in this session, and only two with a background in anthropology, Professor Kettel concentrated on providing an overview of the anthropology of gender.

With the exception of a few figures like Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict and Laura Bohannon, anthropology has largely been a male dominated discipline. Anthropological knowledge about women and issues of sex and gender has been limited by the androcentric bias of most ethnographers, as well as the fact that male researchers have limited access to the lives and experiences of women in the societies they are studying. These factors, combined with the impact of colonialism on male-female relations, have contributed to a distorted view of women in the anthropological literature. As Professor Kettel noted, the resulting bias has been inculcated in all students of anthropology, men and women, until fairly recently, so that anthropologists have not had the conceptual tools necessary for understanding the behaviour of women cross-culturally. Citing her own experience from working among the East African Tugen people, Professor Kettel described her difficulty in accounting for the behaviour of Tugen women. The Tugen are patrilineal and pastoralist, and a supposedly classic example of a patriarchal society. Tugen women, however, are bold, assertive and, as Professor Kettel described them, formidable and not at all submissive. Her training as an anthropologist, she said, did not provide her with ways of understanding this apparent contradiction.

In the mid-1960s, the North American social and political climate gave rise to a series of critiques on the nature of anthropological knowledge and theory. The

## THE CONFERENCE WORKSHOPS



anthropology of women developed as a feminist attack on the male bias of previous anthropology. From this grew the anthropology of gender, which was most immediately concerned with gathering new data on women and attempting to develop a series of concepts and hypotheses with which to talk about women cross-culturally. Professor Kettel described the anthropology of gender as a subdiscipline at the heart of contemporary anthropology, because it attempts to deal with two issues fundamental to the discipline.

These issues centre on the nature-nurture debate – that is, the impact of biology and culture on human behaviour. For feminist anthropologists, one question has been, what is it about women that

makes us alike: is it being biologically female or is it similarities of social, cultural and historical experience? Professor Kettel suggested that the issue can be posed as, who are our natural allies in social life – for example, do Canadian women have more in common with Canadian men or Zulu women? The answer raises issues not only of sex and gender, but of race, class and cultural heterogeneity and points to the issue underlying anthropology, that of universality versus cultural particularity. In attempting to deal with this question, the anthropology of gender is fundamental to the whole discipline.

Research in this area now encompasses a wide range of issues, including biosocial research focusing on primates, the impact of chromosomes on human behaviour

and the issue of gender in human evolution. Further areas include women's roles in production and reproduction, women as political actors, ritual, gender systems and sexuality. Professor Kettel pointed out that, in relation to the bibliography she circulated to participants, many of the books listed were originally considered groundbreaking, but that some are now seen to contain much that is problematic or simply wrong. As she noted, the initial wave of feminist anthropology produced a wealth of questions and suggested directions for future work, positing concepts and hypotheses for studying women cross-culturally. Now we need to develop new conceptual models for the burgeoning descriptive literature being produced.

## PART TWO: POLITICAL SCIENCE

*Anne Louise Currie*

Barbara Cameron, professor of Political Science at York University, began the seminar by putting into perspective some of the problems that Women's Studies scholars face within the discipline of Political Science. Women's Studies has tended to focus on the private sphere of the political, while Political Science has traditionally focused almost exclusively on the public sphere. The questions that political scientists have asked in the past have generally ignored the family and gender dimensions of politics. She outlined two basic approaches to integrating women into Political Science at the University level. The first is to work within the framework of the discipline and to try to integrate women's issues into mainstream Political Science. The second, and according to Professor Cameron, the more appealing, is to redefine the traditional borders of the discipline to include the gender dimension, which is, for the most part, ignored.

The seminar was then opened to discussion. We discussed ways of reconciling a professor's obligation to represent to her undergraduate students a wide variety of topics with the need to introduce non-traditional (i.e. feminist) perspectives into an often overcrowded syllabus. We discussed the difficulty of finding non-sexist texts and reading material. Professors are faced with problems of credibility and are put in a position of having to convince

## THE CONFERENCE WORKSHOPS



students – and other faculty – of the legitimacy of presenting a feminist viewpoint with very little source material to substantiate their claims. Further discussion revolved around a suggestion that it was useful to look at the Australian model, where Women's Studies is not offered at the undergraduate level; instead, students begin Women's Studies at the graduate level and are thus able to bring a disciplinary base to their studies.

Participants next debated whether a successful Women's Studies program should have as its goal the eventual abolition of Women's Studies, when women are completely integrated into main-

stream scholarship, or whether Women's Studies finds its justification for existence as a separate discipline from something other than the attempt to incorporate the study of women into various disciplines.

We discussed the problem of determining which central questions in the discipline of political science do not include, or ignore, women. The problem, it was suggested, centred on how debates are defined and articulated. This problem begins at the most basic level with the language used being male-oriented. At another level the problem is methodological: how significant is the gender division?