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# INTRODUCTION

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How can the study of sexual morality be approached from an anthropological perspective? What can social anthropologists say about sexual morality that cannot be said by other social and human scientists? These are two-edged questions about an area of knowledge and about how knowledge is produced and this book is an attempt to answer these questions. I wish to develop some theoretical ideas concerning the nature of anthropological knowledge and to explore the way in which those ideas can shed light on the study of sexual morality from a specific point of view. I propose to analyse a dialectical relationship of sorts between sexual morality as an area of social-scientific knowledge and social anthropology as the means to produce that knowledge. My analysis will be constructed around a particular ethnographic study based on fieldwork done in a rural community in the west of Ireland. However, I not only wish to clarify research on sexual morality in the west of Ireland from an anthropological perspective; I also hope to throw into relief the specific contribution of an anthropological approach to the study of human behaviour.

The reader may wonder why we should emphasise the importance of a particular approach to the study of sexual morality. Should we not rather try to analyse human experience in itself, irrespective of the theoretical tools we choose for that purpose? I could answer this question in two different ways. First, I could say that I have decided to proceed in this manner simply because I was interested in researching into the nature of anthropological knowledge. Secondly, and perhaps more decisively, I believe that subjects chosen for research in the social sciences are, to a great extent at least, the product of the social-scientific disciplines that are meant to analyse them. In fact, I maintain that any kind of empirical research in the social sciences throws as much light on the particular academic discipline within which that research is being done as on the subject



of research itself. In this book, I only wish to make explicit that which usually remains implicit in more empirically oriented approaches.

Precisely because of my concern with academic disciplines, I view with special interest the need to establish the limitations of knowledge, in this case, to define what can be said and what cannot be said about sexual morality from a specifically anthropological perspective. Social scientists very often suffer from a theoretical disease, which could be called cognitive imperialism. Nothing human should be foreign to us, however it presents itself. Historians, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and even political scientists and political economists claim time and time again that all human phenomena can be caught in their analytical nets. The results are frequently confusing and disorientating. I do not think that everything or anything human can be studied by social anthropologists. On the contrary, only in so far as we can define the limits of what constitutes a specifically anthropological approach, or a specifically anthropological subject of research, will some form of valuable knowledge eventually emerge.

But what is specific to the anthropological approach? I will begin by looking at human sexuality as a subject of research. It may seem that the study of human sexuality from an anthropological perspective is just a narrow disciplinary whim. In fact the reverse is true. Although the origins of anthropology were marked by 'concerns and debates over the topic', as Davis and Whitten pointed out, contemporary anthropologists have generally moved away from it, and hence sexuality remains a rarely studied aspect of human experience (Davis and Whitten 1987: 69; cf. Vance 1991). I would even venture to say that the study of human sexuality has become interdisciplinary almost by definition, since none of the established academic disciplines in the field of social and human sciences – perhaps with the exception of Freudian psychoanalysis – can claim it as their own. This might have to do with human sexuality's characteristically ambiguous ontological status; it is neither strictly biological nor strictly cultural but seemingly both at the same time. (I will have more to say more about this in the following chapters.) But the problems involved in studying human sexuality do not end there. In fact, this is where the specifically anthropological problems begin.

However we may decide to categorise the interrelationships between biological and cultural aspects when defining human



sexuality, there is no doubt that the social anthropology of sexuality deals essentially, if not exclusively, with its cultural aspect. Unfortunately, once we have decided that we will leave the biological aspect to natural scientists, we soon realise that a strictly cultural analysis of human sexuality does not seem to make the outline of our subject of research any clearer. 'Indeed, part of the research problem for anthropologists examining sex in non-Western societies', Kulick contends, 'is first of all deciding whether it even exists as a culturally salient domain' (1995: 7). In other words, in addition to being mystified by the biological-cum-cultural essence of the sexual, as soon as we decide to concentrate exclusively on the cultural dimension, this seems to dissolve itself as merely an ethnocentric projection of middle-class Western values and obsessions. 'If ... we look to anthropology for answers to questions about sexuality, it can indeed show us that sexuality, at least in kinship-based societies, is not a "thing in itself"' (Caplan 1987: 17).

One might wonder at this stage why in a book that attempts to be an essay on general anthropological knowledge I have decided to start from such an ambivalent, elusive and problematic topic. How can something which is not a 'thing in itself' provide the basis for anything close to a solid argument? Would it not have been better to depart from firmer anthropological grounds such as those provided by kinship theory or the interpretation of ritual symbolism? It might. But this is precisely the reason why I have chosen so indefinite a point of departure: 'all discourses about sexuality are inherently discourses about something else; sexuality, rather than serving as a constant thread that unifies the totality of human experience, is the ultimate dependent variable, requiring explanation more often than it provides explanation' (Simon 1996: xvii). Taking everything that has been said so far into consideration, I would argue that the social anthropology of sexuality, because it is nearly always the social anthropology of something else, offers a most apposite theme for an essay whose purpose is to look at different aspects of anthropological thought and research. In sexuality, 'as we peel off each layer (economics, politics, families, etc.), we may think that we are approaching the kernel, but we eventually discover that the whole is the only "essence". Sexuality cannot be abstracted from its surrounding social layers' (Ross and Rapp 1981: 54). It is the layers that surround a non-existing kernel that I will be looking at in the following pages.



As Ortner and Whitehead feared concerning their book on sexual meanings, the reader might end up wondering 'where is the sex' (Ortner and Whitehead 1981: 24–25). This question can hardly be pertinent to the present essay, if for somewhat different reasons. My concern is not with the erotic but with the institutions and regulations that surround human sexuality in a particular context. Thus some might call the anthropological view of human sexuality I hope to develop a 'deconstructive analysis', a gradual peeling off of several social and cultural layers with no intention of approaching the essence. It is the nature of anthropological knowledge I am concerned with, and this is what will constitute the central target of my investigation. Be that as it may, I must rush to add that sexuality in this essay is not a mere rhetorical device to talk about the presumably more substantial topics of economics, politics and the like. As was once said about the anthropology of kinship, sexuality in this book is not a mere idiom; in the end I hope to have said something substantive about the cultural construction, or deconstruction, of human sexuality.

Now the institutions and regulations that surround human sexuality are what I call 'sexual morality'. Seemingly, but only apparently, we have made the purpose of our investigation a bit more concrete, because in actual fact sexual morality is as much an elusive and ambivalent research object as human sexual behaviour. The sexual morality I am interested in does not consist of a set of explicit rules. On the contrary, much of what will be analysed in this book under this concept can only be indirectly inferred from the existence of other institutions whose manifest concern does not seem to be the regulation of human sexual behaviour as such. Thus sexual morality is largely an analytical construct. Let me insist on this point: I am not saying that the people we will meet in the ensuing chapters do not have any moral values that rule their sexual life, I am simply arguing that those moral values do not normally present themselves as an explicitly sexual morality. The issue is then: why do we have to interpret as sexual morality what does not present itself as such? This is the key question that will enable us to identify the characteristics of a specifically anthropological approach.

I have said before that, perhaps with the exception of psychoanalysis, none of the human sciences can claim human sexuality as their specific research object. Practically the same could be said as regards sexual morality. It is necessary to say a few words



concerning the way in which I have decided to engage with Freudian psychoanalysis in this essay. There are two aspects in particular of Freud's work that I wish to highlight. First, there is Freud's commitment to scientific research. At a time when so many and so virulent attacks against the alleged scientific status of anthropology, and even the social sciences on the whole, are being levelled, it is certainly refreshing to probe into the intellectual project of a man who felt science as a vocation, even as a moral principle and duty. Next, I am similarly intrigued and fascinated by Freud's capacity to combine the physicality of human biology, of the biological study of the human body, with a hermeneutical analysis of the human subject in what is meant to be a general theory of human behaviour. Despite all the criticisms that this unseemly articulation has received from several quarters, I believe there is something unique in it that deserves careful consideration.

My admiration for Freud's work is not paralleled by a commitment to any of the branches of the so-called psychological or psychoanalytical anthropology. Specific examples of psychologically oriented ethnographies will be critically assessed in this essay. Furthermore, I believe that the anthropological perspective on human sexuality and sexual morality I espouse is, in many respects, at the antipodes of psychoanalysis and of Freud's thought. It is not the affinity but the contrast that I wish to emphasise. And it is precisely through this contrast that I hope to clarify the contours of my own approach.

The notion of contrast plays a very prominent role in what follows. Not only with psychoanalysis, for the concatenation of several contrasts, dichotomies, binary oppositions perhaps, provides the rhetorical tools I need to unfold my theoretical propositions. A cursory view of these contrasts will serve as a presentation of the structure of this book. The first is an ethnographic one. All the ethnographic and historical information I use in my analysis comes, directly or indirectly, from fieldwork done in a rural parish of western Ireland. But the book begins with a presentation of Gilbert Herdt's studies of ritualised homosexual behaviour in Papua New Guinea. The ethnographic contrast is multi-stranded. Melanesian societies are perhaps the most culturally distant societies we can find from the rural communities of the west of Ireland. Furthermore, the sexual behaviour analysed in Herdt's ethnography, ritual fellatio, is in all appearances a sexual practice radically alien to the sexual customs of



my Irish informants. And, finally, Herdt's specific interest in the ethnography of the erotic appears also fairly distant from my concern with sexual morality. Cultural distance is a precondition of anthropological knowledge, even though, as I will argue in this essay, it cannot be taken for granted. Cultural distance is not an absolute category but is relative (obviously enough, it seems to me) to the subjects who participate in the ethnographic encounter and to the specific object of the anthropological research. Now underlying all the patent dissimilarities between the culture of sexuality analysed in Herdt's work and my ethnography of sexual morality in an Irish rural Catholic community there is an interesting, if highly polemical, common thread. Both societies have been defined, by Herdt in one case and by several social scientists and commentators in the other, as 'repressive' societies as regards their sexual mores. They both seem to constitute the perfect apt illustrations of Freud's theory of sexual morality. That is the reason why in chapter 1 I have decided to use Herdt's work on ritualised homosexuality in Papua New Guinea as an introduction to Freud's thought. Thus we go from ethnographic contrast to theoretical contrast.

As I have pointed out, in this book Freudian psychoanalysis will be recurrently used as a foil to my own approach. In chapter 2 there is a short presentation of the part of Freud's theory specifically relevant to my argument: the role that he attributed to 'cultural constraints' in the configuration of adult sexuality in what he understood as a 'civilised' society. A similar move is undertaken in chapter 3, this time in relation to the other author whose theories I also wish to discuss: Michel Foucault. The bearing of Foucault's work on my analysis is different from Freud's. Foucault deliberately erected his theory on human sexuality as the polar opposite to Freud's perspective – what he termed 'the repressive hypothesis'. Thus it comes as no surprise that my affinities in this respect run closer to the Foucauldian approach, specifically in what concerns the historical understanding of the Western sexual theories and moral ideologies he proposed. Be that as it may, I make no attempt at introducing the whole of Foucault's theoretical and philosophical project. My purpose is merely to situate his *History of Sexuality* within the context of what to my mind constitutes his methodology for the analysis of cultural and historical formations. I will use some of Foucault's insights to interpret my own material and to articulate several parts of my argument. This is particularly clear in chapter 8,



where I discuss the relationship between culture and power, and in chapter 9, which posits a systematisation of the history of Irish sexual morality into what I term 'disciplinary regimes'. As will become apparent throughout this essay, however, there are also important aspects of Foucault's perspective which I do not follow. This is partially expounded in chapters 3 and 11.

My aim with this presentation of Freud's and Foucault's thought is to delimit the theoretical space within which my analysis of sexual morality in rural Ireland will proceed. It is the contrast between these two approaches to the study of human sexuality that I wish to emphasise rather than their theoretical legitimacy in itself. But there are more theoretical contrasts in the following chapters. In part II, I undertake the analysis of my Irish material, which begins in chapter 4 with a discussion of the traditional way in which the history of Irish sexual morality has been interpreted. These traditional arguments can be properly defined as 'functionalist' or 'structural-functionalist' arguments in the anthropological sense of these words. I wish to underline the merits and the limitations of this theoretical paradigm or paradigms in anthropology, and critique it in the chapter that follows. My aim is to show that the emergence of a particular sexual morality and ideology in Ireland cannot be reduced to its social and economic conditions of possibility, which is what the functionalist arguments claim to be able to demonstrate. To clarify my point, I introduce in chapter 6 an assessment of the incidence of so-called 'cultural factors' in explaining Irish demographic history. We can see in this analysis an attempt at delimiting the culture concept this time by reference to another conceptual dichotomy, that between structure and event. Culture originates in certain social and economic conditions but its interpretation cannot be reduced to those social and economic conditions, in the same way as culture is the product of a historical process without being in itself 'historical'.

The complex relationship between culture and history, another way of talking about the structure/event opposition, is explored from two complementary angles. Up to chapter 6 the discussion focuses on the ways in which culture can be said to explain history, to explain the production of particular events. In chapter 7, I consider the opposite, namely, how history can account for the constitution of a cultural form. The key question in all this discussion is the question of power, the power we attribute to cultural forms to mould human behaviour. What is the power of culture to determine the production



of particular actions, what does it mean to say that culture ‘explains’ this or that act, this or that event? Chapter 8 deals with the theoretical analysis of power from what I define as an anthropological perspective. Finally, in chapter 9 the history of sexual morality in Ireland is reinterpreted in the light of that theoretical analysis. Chapter 9 concludes the examination of the Irish case-study; further references to this material will crop up here and there in the chapters that follow, but my concern is from then onwards to proceed on a more abstract level.

Part III has the nature of anthropological knowledge as its main theme. Several theoretical points or theoretical problems that have emerged in the former account will be reconsidered and re-argued, taking into account that it is the subject-matter of anthropology, the anthropological perspective on human affairs, that I wish to examine. Thus part III begins in chapter 10 with a ‘clarification’ of the culture concept. I say clarification because I do not intend to put forward any new formulation of this controversial concept. In a way, the whole book can be considered as a protracted reflection on the culture concept – to my mind, that is what an anthropological perspective amounts to. Clarification means simply the identification of the key elements that should be taken into account while thinking about culture in anthropological terms. Culture is a bit like language, I argue in that chapter, it tells us how to say things but it does not tell us what to say. But, again, it is the contrasts that I wish to highlight – together with the analogies. The difference between culture and language lies in the concept of intersubjectivity, to be discussed in chapter 11. Intersubjectivity is inherent to the culture concept as it is to anthropological knowledge. And intersubjectivity leads us to the problem of subjectification and to the last concept to be discussed in the concluding chapter of this essay: the concept of interpretation. In this way, my critique of the psychoanalytic approach is somehow resumed. As far as the study of human sexuality is concerned, interpretation in both psychoanalysis and anthropology seems to be interested in uncovering some sort of sexual meaning, or sexual ‘truth’, behind non-sexual appearances. But there is an important difference between the two perspectives that turns the anthropological project into the theoretical opposite of psychoanalysis. I hope to be able to convey clearly the sense of this crucial difference.





This is an essay on interpretative social science specifically concerned with drawing the limits of its object of knowledge. The theoretical field that makes interpretation possible in social anthropology will be constituted by means of a non-essentialist, 'perspectivist' concept of culture. What looks like culture from one point of view is no longer culture from another point of view. But it is precisely in this shifting viewpoint that anthropological knowledge originates.

A last point related to my Irish material should receive brief notice now. There is both first-hand and second-hand information, historical and ethnographic. All historical information has been obtained from secondary sources, whereas a substantial part of the ethnography comes from the fieldwork I have been doing in a rural Catholic parish of western Ireland since 1990. My informants are mainly middle-aged men and women, most of them married, in their forties and fifties, sometimes older. The majority of men are middle-sized, full-time or part-time farmers and factory workers; most of the women are housewives, helping their husbands on the farm and a few of them with off-farm jobs. Primary education is widespread amongst both men and women, and a few women but fewer men have gone to secondary school. The community lies on good farm land, even though for the last ten years several families have been giving up farming altogether. Those with off-farm jobs normally commute to the nearest town, only ten miles away. Tourism is practically non-existent. The reader can consult my monograph (Salazar 1996) for further data on this community.

In keeping with ethnographic research, I make no claims to any general applicability of my findings beyond the people I met. Even though I do not think that my data are in any way unique, nothing of what I will say, particularly in the more ethnographic chapters, is meant to be by any means representative of Irish society, not even of the rural society of western Ireland. Ethnography is valid as long as it is meaningful, not as long as it is typical or has general applicability. It is true, on the other hand, that to interpret and to complement my ethnographic material I will use historical and demographic information that presumably represents the whole of Ireland. But this should not be taken as a proof, let me stress this point, that the ethnography that this information complements or helps to interpret is similarly representative of the whole Irish society. Ireland is a complex society in a double sense. First, as is the



case in the majority of modern nation-states, Ireland is a heterogeneous conglomerate of ways of life, many of them with very little in common apart from sharing some politically bounded territory. Secondly, again, as in the majority of modern complex societies, Irish society has been studied from the viewpoint of a host of different academic fields in the social sciences, each one providing its own image out of its own particular set of data. The research tools of social anthropology are utterly inappropriate to producing general statements concerning such a vast and complex unit, not only because of its inherent size and complexity, but also because such statements would be meaningless in the face of the more quantitative and statistically informed facts that can be supplied by other disciplines.

At any rate, in this book I have very little interest in delivering general 'truths' concerning the Irish or any other national groups, even though I believe that much of what I will say in my ethnography will resonate with those who are familiar with Irish rural society and several other rural societies in Europe. But the main objective of this book is theoretical and can be formulated in the following way, in very simple terms: what do we mean when we say that the culture concept is needed to understand human behaviour? This may be a burning issue, perhaps, for contemporary social sciences but, without a doubt, it is the most elementary and perennial question for social anthropology. What follows is an invitation to look at and to think about a particular human phenomenon in a certain way. I would like to introduce my essay as an invitation to social anthropology, to the practice of anthropological research and, eventually, to anthropological thought. I firmly believe that social anthropology is a 'mode of thought', a distinctive way of reflecting upon human experience. Nothing better than a concrete investigation can show the way in which this mode of thought proceeds.