

## WOMEN AS POLITICAL ACTORS: A REAPPRAISAL

by

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## ABSTRACT

Research on women as political actors has tended to focus on their separateness from men, the opposition of their goals from male goals, and on their state of oppression. It is argued that this problematic orientation stems from three primary sources of theoretical bias -- current anthropological definitions of politics which emphasize power and conflict, an acceptance of the universal oppression of women, and the linking of gender to the public versus private domain paradigm. Suggestions are made to avoid these persistent biases -- troublesome straw men and women -- and to improve anthropological approaches to women as political actors.

## ABSTRAIT

## Les femmes et l'action politique: une réévaluation

La recherche sur les femmes et leur action politique a toujours eu tendance à mettre le focus sur les différences qui existent entre femmes et hommes; sur l'opposition des aspirations féminines et masculines; et sur l'état d'oppression des femmes. Les discussions actuelles proposent que cette orientation problématique provient de trois sources de biais théoriques -- la définition anthropologique courante de politique qui met l'emphase sur pouvoir et conflits; sur l'acceptance de l'oppression universelle de la femme; et sur la relation de genre au paradigme domaine public/domaine privé. Des suggestions sont faites qui permettraient d'éviter ces biais persistants -- embarrassants hommes et femmes de pailles -- et d'améliorer la façon d'aborder l'étude de l'action politique des femmes.

## INTRODUCTION

In researching the subject of women's networks and informal associations as political entities I became aware of several recurrent themes in the analysis of women as political actors. The influence of feminist inspired research has certainly raised our perspective beyond the level of simply saying women are apolitical ("too busy or disinterested") or that women in politics are "exceptional" (Tiffany 1979:430). There is considerable concern that women be acknowledged as political actors, although as Tiffany (1979:430) argues "their means of expression and extent of formal participation often differ from men's". This argument appears throughout studies of women as political actors in several forms:

1. Women are political actors and their networks politically figured in the domestic domain alone, separate from the public politics of men (for example, Lamphere 1974).
2. Women are unable to participate directly in community affairs but do so indirectly as political strategists and manipulators, influencing men to accommodate women's goals (for example, Wolf 1972 and 1974).
3. Women, organized at the local level, often do have some degree of power but, because they are unaware of their oppressed status, their organizations are viewed as nonpolitical (for example, Caplan and Bujra 1978).

Research on women as political actors has focused on their separateness from men, the opposition of their goals from male goals, and on their state of oppression. I argue that this focus has diverted attention away from women as political actors within the community and has revealed a series of troublesome and persistent biases in much of the literature. I will address this problem with reference to studies of women's networks and informal associations from several perspectives. First, I argue that current research on women's networks includes three primary sources of theoretical bias: current anthropological definitions of politics, sociological studies of women and class, and studies utilizing the public- versus domestic-domain dichotomy. Second, I relate the issues to the rise of women's 'consciousness' in North America, arguing along the lines of Strathern (1979; 1980) that the research is plagued with "straw men". And finally, I will comment on three ethnographic examples of women's networks and informal associations in which women are viewed as political actors without polarizing male and female goals and spheres of activity or influence. My concern throughout this paper is to avoid reducing women's networks and associations to defensive strategies arising in response to male oppression. More importantly, I aim to avoid the temptation to take contemporary North American standards of "political behaviour" and "sexual equality" out of context for global application.

## APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF WOMEN AS POLITICAL ACTORS

In the first half of this paper I explore the theme of women as political actors from three perspectives. I have collapsed a wide range of ethnographic data and a variety of theoretical orientations into three sections for discussion. By doing so I wish to draw attention to four interrelated concepts -- power, conflict, the universal oppression of women by men, and the analytical separation of men and women -- which appear in various forms throughout the study of women and politics. I realize this approach may be criticized for oversimplifying the issues or reducing carefully nurtured analytic detail to its most rudimentary level. In anticipation of such criticisms I suggest the most cherished of our theoretical underpinnings are the ones most in jeopardy of becoming reified as social "facts". Essentially, I am arguing that anthropological approaches to women and women's networks as examples of political behaviour have gotten too far ahead of themselves without fully exploring the quality and implications of their most cherished premises. Notably, Ryan (1979:66) cautions feminist scholars to "face the possibility that females have participated in creating and reproducing the less-sanguine aspects of the gender system". Following Strathern's (1980) perceptive criticisms of anthropological approaches to the study of women, I would caution further that feminist scholars (and anthropologists in general) should consider themselves no less responsible for the perpetuation of the gender systems we are so eager to criticize.

### Anthropological Definitions of Politics

My intention in this first section is to consider Swartz, Turner and Tuden's (1966) definition of politics as one example of an influential contemporary anthropological approach to political behaviour.<sup>1</sup> Following that I will discuss recent perspectives on women in anthropological approaches to politics, arguing that basic concepts -- competition/conflict, power, and the structural bounding of political activity, in particular -- have been retained without adequate consideration of either their applicability to women's activities or the consequences of doing so.

Initially, Swartz, Turner and Tuden's (1966) approach appears to have the greatest potential for including women's activity. Closer examination, as I argue below, suggests the approach may not be so versatile. According to Swartz, Turner and Tuden (1966:7):

... the study of politics ... is the study of the processes involved in determining and implementing public goals and in the differential achievement and use of power by members of the group concerned with those goals.

Although the authors' emphasis on politics as process represents a clear and significant improvement over earlier synchronic approaches, the impact of concepts of "public goals" and "power" requires discussion. "Public goals ... are goals desired for the group as a whole" (Swartz, Turner and Tuden 1966:5, emphasis added), although these goals may not be clearly articulated and recognized nor desired by all members of the group. It is noteworthy that "public" as it is used here is a context-specific term not implicitly restricted to the public (i.e. extradomestic

or formal jural-political) domain or to the private (domestic) domain. Thus women's networks and associations which strive to maintain or achieve either community goals or women-centered goals can both be considered public. Swartz, Turner and Tuden (1966:5) hasten to add that the goal must concern the allocation of "scarce goods, the possession of which depends upon a group's consenting to the allocation" before it can be considered political. I would argue that even this criterion should not exclude the majority of women's networks which are often intimately concerned with the maintenance of group identity, support of male involvement in intergroup (extradomestic) activities, and the achievement of women-centered goals in an environment of competition. Here again, the concept of "power" was also intended to be used in a very broad, and context-specific sense.

However, Swartz, Turner and Tuden's (1966:9) "tool kit of concepts ... [which the authors hope] will not unduly restrict assumptions about the nature of ... [political] behaviour" has fallen far short of their goal. There appear to be two reasons for this shortcoming. The first is the authors' orientation to conflict, and, as the following passage illustrates, the authors themselves are concerned with the impact of this approach:

We are aware ... that the phase development [the authors' characterization of political action] is essentially oriented to conflict, and that other types of political processes may lean to cooperation, but we believe that only rarely does policy action escape conflict (Swartz, Turner and Tuden 1966:38).

The second problem derives from an inconsistency in Swartz, Turner and Tuden's attempt to "locate" political activity. On the one hand, Swartz, Turner and Tuden (1966:8) focus on "[political] processes rather than on the groups or fields within which they occur" in order to avoid restricting the investigation with predetermined boundaries. But a look at the concepts included in their tool kit -- force and coercion, political status, political officials and decisions, power, legitimacy and authority -- suggests few would seem to lend themselves to women's activity except where individuals or organizations are clearly operating in the formal political arena (women as politicians, women marching for peace, wages-for-housework campaigns). The attempt to resolve the problem of categorizing "politics" by focusing on a dynamic and fluid field or arena is there (Swartz, Turner and Tuden 1966:27), but the continued emphasis on power and conflict has the effect of excluding (and therefore assigning boundaries) to many of the activities and goals with which women's networks are concerned. In a later publication, Swartz (1968:4) attempts to show that political activity does not necessarily include either power or conflict, but the acceptance of political activity as inherently conflict-oriented and ultimately concerned with power differentials has become dogma.

Particularly disturbing to me was the realization that many "feminist" approaches have accepted power and conflict as markers of political behaviour rather uncritically. Rosaldo's introduction to Women, Culture and Society (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974), Schlegel's publication on sexual stratification (1977), and Tiffany's (1979) review of women in political anthropology all illustrate this point: previous attempts to

define politics are criticized as androcentric, but the utility of basic concepts is unchallenged. For example, Tiffany (1979:430-431) writes:

In sum, disagreements over the nature of politics combined with models which exclude or ignore the role of women have resulted in an incomplete view of women and the political process.

Politics involves the relationship between power and authority. ... [The two concepts] are essential for understanding political behavior.

I should stress, at this point, that the edited volumes (Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974), Schlegel (1977), Beck and Keddie (1978) and Reiter (1975), which appeared in the late 1970s and marked the arrival of the anthropology of women as a valid area of research, have certainly broadened our understanding of political behavior by drawing attention to the informal sphere of political action available for men and women, and by the very fact that they have emphasized "women's culture and women's power" (Ryan 1979:66). But in many cases emphasizing women's power has meant isolating it from other forms of power -- binding women's power to the domestic sphere, to the marketplace, or to the supernatural realm. Female power (private and domestic) is equivalent to male power (public) so long as the two are separated structurally. A second approach is to separate men's and women's goals and portray women, "as 'behind the scenes' operators [possessing power, but little authority] who [must] 'work through' men to achieve their objectives" (Tiffany 1979:432).

Both of these approaches appear in much of the literature on Middle Eastern women, or more generally, in those studies which emphasize the dichotomy of the public-versus-private domain. I will explore both more fully in the subsequent section on domain-making. At the moment I wish to return to the issues of power and conflict.

Thus far I have mentioned three key elements in anthropological approaches to politics: power, conflict, and the structural location of politics. In the next section on women in class, I attempt to illustrate a negative and unintentional consequence of emphasizing these elements. Expecting to find untapped reserves of female solidarity based on the assumption of the universal powerlessness of women in relation to men, feminist researchers have not only been disappointed in their search, but have failed to recognize the potential politicization of many women based not on male-female power differentials or class conflict but on co-operation among women.

### Women and class

In this section I discuss several articles which have a distinctly sociological approach to women's networks; the units of analysis are the family, the household, and socioeconomic class, and the data were collected primarily by formal statistical methods (surveys and interview questionnaires). The articles by Caplan, Cohen, and Stevens are from the

book Women United, Women Divided: cross cultural perspectives on female solidarity (Caplan and Bujra 1978). Their approach to the study of women's networks is representative of the opinion that women share inherent and uniform feelings of solidarity and are a potential political force.

Caplan's (1978) article focuses on upper and middle class women in Madras City who belong to voluntary organizations. When asked why they join the organizations, these well-educated Indian women respond "that they joined to learn new things; to make new friends; and to do social welfare work" (Caplan 1978:114). Caplan (1978:120-125), however, argues:

... that a major reason why women join social welfare organizations is because they gain in status, or maintain the status they already have by virtue of their class position. Philanthropy [thus] provides a cross-cutting tie between the classes which masks the fact that their interests are opposed.

By supporting a traditional domestic role for women, upholding conservative political beliefs when entering the political arena, and in other ways "seeking to preserve class interests [women] are, in effect acting as 'extended housekeepers'" (Caplan 1978:125,123). Although they "provide a means for women to achieve power and influence as people in the wider society" (Caplan 1978:124, italics in original), Caplan (1978:100) argues these associations "do not provide examples of active female solidarity, mainly because the members lack any consciousness of their own oppression".

As suggested by its title -- "Women's solidarity and the preservation of privilege" -- Cohen's (1978) paper on middle class women of London and Creole women in Freetown, Sierra Leone has a similar conclusion and focus. For the London housing-estate women, co-operation among neighbours allowed them to share the tasks of child-rearing (husbands were either unwilling or unable to divert energy from career goals), provided a means of exchanging information and opinions on the standards of education their children were receiving, and "to offer their children a protected [clearly] middle-class environment" (Cohen 1978:137). As an "estate-style culture" developed in South London, Creole women's intensive activity in family-, church-, and school-oriented associations reflected a concern for the preservation of the educational and occupational advantages Creoles have traditionally held (Cohen 1978:150). As the following passage illustrates, Caplan's (1978) conclusion is echoed by Cohen.

Solidarity in both ... [London and Freetown] developed between a relatively small number of women and was a response to their social class position rather than to their position as women. Indeed the preservation of privilege depended upon the women's ability to maintain clear boundaries between themselves and others. This effectively inhibited the development of a feminist consciousness (Cohen 1978:154).

In her article on middle-class women in Sydney, Australia, Stivens (1978) takes a somewhat different approach to the issue of women's role in the preservation of class boundaries and pursuit of goals. By focusing on

kin ties and kin aid, Stivens protests the tendency of sociologists to use class differences as the starting point for understanding the persistence of class (1978:159). In an admittedly circular argument, Stivens (1978:173) maintains that kin ties and "the provision of kin aid, in Australia at least, ... [is] very much a constant process reproducing both the structures of kin relations and class relations". Kin structures imbed women as domestic labourers thus separating women from each other ("by relegating them to isolated housework and childcare") and providing them with some measure of female solidarity (mutual support from a network of kin) Stivens 1978:160-161).

Having reviewed the basic ethnographic content of each article it is possible to look more closely at their common theoretical perspective. Interestingly, a version of "biology as destiny" is the key element in each article's argument; women's primary contribution to the economic and ideological aspects of class is intimately and ultimately connected to her reproductive capacity. "It is women rather than men who are anchored in domestic labour simply because of their innate link with biological reproduction" (Bujra 1978:20). In each of the articles, class ideology (or more generally capitalist ideology) re-affirms the position of women in the household and denies them any significant economic power (Stivens 1978:179). Thus women are left with their reproductive role as the only means available for expressing or achieving their goals. Middle class women in Madras, Freetown, London, and Sydney are all devoted to ensuring their children can enjoy the privileges of a secure middle class environment. Nowhere in these articles are women's networks or associations considered political, even though the successful maintenance of class-based economic and social privileges is clearly a public and a "political" goal.

The authors' response to their informants' success is, as one reviewer cautions, one of "hearty dislike" (Ware 1980:14). While I share Ware's (1980:14) concern that women alone not be blamed for failing to "transcend class barriers," I am more concerned about the implications of assuming that either men or women inherently want to do so. That class ideology is presumed negative and oppressive by Marxist-oriented feminists, does not provide, a priori, a basis for dismissing class goals as politically invalid or at least misguided. In effect, middle class urban women have frequently been criticized and their neighbourhood or kin-based support networks rendered apolitical because they do not pursue the same goals as their feminist "sisters".

In my opinion, the failure to recognize the political nature of some of these support networks is a consequence of focusing on power and conflict and of locating politics -- assigning it to a place in society and marking or reifying the boundaries of politics. (We say a person "enters" politics, is "in" politics or is getting "out" of politics, as if it was a room in a house.) Politics is thus structured -- a domain is created. As Ortner and Whitehead (1981:4) suggest:

In the traditional social anthropological view, cultural features have been seen largely as "reflections" of primary jural structures (lineages, castes, classes), serving to "reinforce" those structures. In the Marxist variant on this view, culture has been seen largely as "ideology," "justifying" the status quo and "mystifying" the sources of oppression and exploitation.

In the articles I have discussed, this view of culture as mystifying ideology is expressed and developed as follows. First, capitalist ideology of "a woman's place is in the home" is presented as a major contributor to women's inability to recognize their lack of economic autonomy and their common oppression as women (Stivens 1978:162; Young and Harris in Jeffrey 1979:167). Second, women without economic autonomy or considerable economic power are not viewed as political actors. Third, the networks and associations which women form to deal with daily, usually non-economic, tasks and long term class goals are viewed as a further source of mystification (Nelson 1978:95). I argue that women's networks are fundamentally political in the sense that they continue to be instrumental in achieving public goals, and retaining control over class privileges in a competitive environment. That the networks are primarily concerned with the domestic aspect of those socio-economic goals should not render them any less political nor unworthy of continued attempts to improve the position of those women who desire change. Ryan (1979:82) raises a disturbing point in this regard:

The formal and national organization structures which ... have a fragile existence in today's women's movement can be strengthened and reinforced by connections with the everyday associations and informal social networks of local and neighborhood women.... It is, however, the New Right which has proven particularly successful in utilizing such power, but for antifeminist purposes.

I have commented at some length on the Marxist variation in domain-making, without adequately addressing the issue of domain-making itself. It is to this omission that I now turn.

#### Domains in anthropology: culture versus theory

I have several objectives in this section. First, I wish to discuss the general theoretical conceptions of public and domestic domains in anthropological writing and provide very brief ethnographic examples. Second, I discuss how this common and what I perceive to be a problematic theoretical paradigm has become entrenched in anthropological approaches to women in politics.

Sanday's (1973) article, "Toward a Theory of the Status of Women", has had a widespread influence on the use of public and domestic domains as relevant units of analysis. Sanday was certainly not the first anthropologist to make use of these domains; Friedl for example, wrote in 1967 of the "distinction between the public and private sector ... [and] the actual importance of each in the power structure of the [Greek] community [of Vasiliki]" (Friedl 1967:97). Sanday's work, however, seems to have been particularly influential, possibly because it was an attempt to use domains in a scientific model, rather than in a purely ethnographic context. In a later publication, Sanday (1974:190) defines these domains as follows:



The domestic domain includes activities performed within the realm of the localized family unit. The public domain includes political and economic activities that take place or have impact beyond the localized family unit and that relate to control of persons or control of things.

Sanday (1974:190) goes on to argue that "an operational definition of female status [makes] it necessary to distinguish between the domestic and public domains". The starting point for the distinction is female reproductive activity. Sanday's (1974:203) purpose in emphasizing this biologically-based distinction is in part a product of the emphasis her model construes on ecology, economics, and human energy in the evolution of human sex roles. What is essential for understanding female status in Sanday's model (1974) is the "degree" of female power and its location in either the public or domestic domain.

Under the influence of subsequent researchers, the linking of gender to the public/domestic dichotomy legitimized in Sanday's model has become established in a variety of by now familiar forms -- culture/nature, social/personal, instrumental/expressive, or simply as male/female. My initial reaction, as expressed above, to Sanday's use of the domain dichotomy was that it was specific and utilitarian to the evolutionary model, but I would now agree with Strathern's (1979:8) caution that "what we take for granted as processes of socialization and social formation are concepts embedded in our own evolutionary and industrial heritage". From a different research perspective, in "The political use of Sande ideology and symbolism," Beldsoe (1984:455-456) makes a similar caution to avoid the overuse of "an ideology of binary oppositions ... in social life." In addition, Strathern (1979:7) makes clear that although this

... paradigmatic relationship between nature and culture ... [may be] useful ... to our concerns as social scientists, we should be cautious about transferring our categories in the interpretation of other systems of thought.

What we perceive as a fundamental biological distinction, a scientific "fact", has been applied as the basis for understanding gender -- a social distinction. On the journey from natural science to social science, the nature/culture paradigm came to include a structural opposition of gender. Emphasized social relations were those judged to be inherently asymmetric (relations of power and conflict) and, as argued in the previous discussion of the Marxist influence on domains, construed as powerfully constraining and mystifying. Two examples are used to illustrate this public/domestic dichotomy in anthropological analysis.

Reiter's (1975) article on men and women in a southern French village is a well-written example of the public/domestic domain paradigm in the ethnographic literature. Reiter (1975:272) acknowledges that the "sexual geography" of Colpied is an extreme, but "de facto perception of a strict division of labour and domain by sex." Women are rarely seen in public cafés, or open squares, more often they are found in the home, the back alleys, in certain shops, and in the church. (In Colpied, the church was attended exclusively by women, but other Mediterranean ethnographies and my own experience suggest men may sit towards the front of the church

while women stand at the back). Power relations between the sexes in Colpied are based on resource control -- women may inherit land but they relinquish control of that resource to their husbands upon marriage.

[Women] are secure within their realm and do not experience their position as inferior to men. From inside the village, it is possible to see the two domains as separate but equal, but it is precisely the confinement of village women to the village itself that makes this notion of distinction and equality possible (Reiter 1975:272).

On the one hand, Reiter (1975:272) acknowledges that men actually have very little extra-village power, but she also states that if "the arena is enlarged [beyond the village] that notion of [gender] equality is challenged." Domain differences at the village level are submerged by relations of domination at the extra-village level and are perceived as oppositions between men and women. It is not surprising then that Reiter (1975:268) comments "it felt as if the population were divided into two well bounded and somewhat hostile moieties."

Cronin's (1977:67) work in Sicily was premised on her rejection of the notion that sexual segregation implies the world of men is the exclusive domain of power and authority. "What then of women?" Cronin asks (1977:90). Sicily is perceived by Cronin as a system out of balance. Men, labouring for long hours in the fields, cannot possibly fulfil the culturally prescribed ideals that they "direct all activities, make all decisions, and represent the family and its members to the public" (Cronin 1977:78). Instead they must rely on women's help to run errands, pay bills and gather the information necessary to make the required decisions. These would appear to be activities essential to the fulfilment of both male and female roles. Recognition of both the impossible ideals and the arrangements of necessity are shared by the sexes, but Cronin (1977:87) considers women's "skill at decision-making and manipulation" to be the "adaptive strategies ... [which allow women] to take and use power formally denied them by the culture" (1977:91). What appears as a means of supporting a shared, but fragile cultural ideal is described as a resource of manipulative power available to women to pursue their own goals -- although in what way those goals are separate and opposed to male and/or community ones is not clear.

How has the common domestic/public paradigm become so well established in the anthropology of women? First, I must make clear that the public and domestic separation is at some level "real" both in objective terms and to the people anthropologists study, particularly in the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries. That point is not contested. The theoretical reification of those boundaries and the subsequent assumed opposition of male and female worlds are the subject of my discussion.

It is clear that the growth in focus on the public/domestic dichotomy as a paradigm for gender relations has paralleled the rising dissatisfaction among North American women with the perceived implications of that paradigm in their own lives. The 'sisterhood of women' has provided a powerfully motivating and captivating challenge to women to 'take control of their lives.' Writing in 1974, Collier (1974:89) expresses her dissatisfaction with studies of women in politics and

exemplifies the sentiment to show women as active, rather than passive:

With the exception of a few queens, powerful matriarchs, or talented courtesans, women are seldom seen as political actors, but rather as pawns to be used in the political maneuvers of men: hoarded for their productive, reproductive, and prestige-enhancing value, or traded to create and cement alliances.

The desire to see women as other than passive and manipulated by men, and to devote at least equal attention to women's activities in ethnographies developed rapidly with a sort of "making up for lost time" attitude. The "theme of an autonomous women's culture ... directed researchers to investigate the ways in which women took care of themselves and their families in a world apart from men" (Joseph 1983:3). Adopting the female perspective in anthropology, Strathern (1980:669-670) argues, is predicated on

... three propositions -- "women" are a category suitable for study; women anthropologists obviate customary male bias in a self-conscious focus on women, and women anthropologists are likely to have a sensitive insight into the condition of women elsewhere.... Women's activities are thus taken as a coherent point of departure for an understanding of "humankind".

#### STRAW MEN AND WOMEN

Strathern's ideas provide a suitable framework for reflecting back on the issues of separation, opposition, power, and oppression raised in this paper. Throughout the study of women's political behaviour these concerns have been both the product of and an example of the "self-conscious focus" which concerns Strathern (1980:669). The focus has entailed explaining women's behaviour in terms of their being women or in terms of their not being men. Separating male and female goals and spheres of action and expecting an inherent solidarity among women are examples of the first type of explanation. The second type is revealed in the assumed opposition and conflicting nature of these goals and action (women are manipulators and strategists) and in the assumptions that relations of domination are inherently mystifying and subordinating for women. Like many self-conscious acts, the explanations have been awkward and incomplete.

[These] straw men, those creatures of bias, appear at moments in the subject's development when a self-conscious attempt to make a subdiscipline stand for the whole is accompanied by the view that past work purporting to be about "other cultures" has in fact reflected the anthropologist's own (Strathern 1980:670).

Are we content with these straw men as they appear in anthropological approaches to women's political behaviour? A number of anthropologists have begun to seriously reconsider the basic assumption of domains as gender markers which has previously guided their research. Strathern (1979;1980), Ortner and Whitehead (1981) and Poewe (1981), although their approaches differ, implicitly share a concern with Giddens (1979:251-252) that social analysis needs to move beyond being satisfied with "the authenticity of belief" (identifying cultural domains and recognizing their constraining and mystifying impact) to the "critical evaluation of the justification of belief [what is the nature and purpose of those domains both for the native and the anthropologist]". Moreover, they are gaining the sophistication to incorporate the impact of what Bourdieu (1979:4) has called "third-order knowledge" (essentially an awareness of the cultural limits to being objective).

Strathern (1980:1) has argued: "The key motivation which makes us search for new ways to describe women's involvement in society lies in the denigration of domesticity". Strathern's implicit criticism is that the anthropology of women has in fact repeated the error of describing another culture as 'other' when "in fact ... [it has] reflected the anthropologist's own" (1980:670). In this case what is specifically reflected is the "denigration of domesticity" (Strathern 1979:1).

In many respects, my ideas and concerns presented thus far are in agreement with Strathern. But I would go on to suggest that a major stumbling block in our awkward attempts to see women as political actors exists in the shape of another reflected bias. This time it is a straw woman: the continued focus on power and conflict as markers of political behaviour. Anthropologists have been eager to separate men and women for examination, but have not stopped long enough to consider modifying or adding to these basic measures of political behaviour. Prior to summarizing my concerns with studies of women as political actors. I will provide examples from three ethnographic studies which avoid some of the problems I have mentioned.

The first example is Yanagisako's (1977) study of women-centered kin networks in an urban Japanese-American community. Second-generation Japanese-American families feel pressured to adopt the North American way of life with its emphasis on the independent nuclear family. But they are also reluctant to face alone the demands of regaining and maintaining economic stability lost during World War II and feel a need for "an all-purpose supportive network" (Yanagisako 1977:218). Yanagisako (1977:220) suggests that the non-threatening nature of "female interpersonal relationships" has been particularly important in allowing families to achieve both goals. Importantly, Yanagisako (1977:221-222) is able to show

... that while female solidarity and women-centered kin networks are assigned to the cultural-symbolic [domestic] domain of affect, they are not limited to it in actual social content and function.... [Rather, the] failure of previous discussions ... to analytically differentiate people's cultural constructs from the actual social consequences of their behaviors has obscured the extent to which ties formed by women play an important part in the integration of communities as sociopolitical entities.

Joseph (1978;1983) has studied working-class women's networks in Beriut -- a situation of extreme state-level political instability and virtually inoperative government 'public' institutions. Networks of women formed, "regardless of kin, sect, ethnic, ... [or] national affiliation" -- Christian, Muslim, Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syrian women acted together to help with life's essential tasks, maintain social control, provide a "forum for customary justice" and integrate the community (Joseph 1978:550-551). These women's goals are political and the networks are "a genuine local-level political culture" (Joseph 1983:1). (Joseph (1983) even suggests the sectarian government's destruction of the mixed sect neighbourhoods where these networks flourished was induced by government fear of the manifest success and action of these networks.) The strategies women adopted are political, not as Lamphere (1974:100) maintains because they "are centered on ... influencing the men who hold authority", but because they concern fundamentally public goals.

The domestic role of women is therefore one of many strategies families can adopt periodically or continuously in their development.... It is not sufficient to argue that women are universally assigned to the private domain and men to the public (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974). Such arguments ignore the historical [economic, political and social] specificity in which men and women live their lives.... In terms of this discussion, it is clear that women in this sector of Lebanese society do operate in a domain that can be called "public" (Joseph 1978:555).

The third, and final ethnographic example I mention in any detail is Aswad's (1974;1978) study of visiting patterns among upper-class Turkish women. Like Yanagisako (1977) and Joseph (1978;1983), Aswad is particularly concerned to show the nature of these women's networks within the specific political and economic context. Kabul is a pattern of visiting based on relations of balanced reciprocity that "allows communication of information across divisive [political] lines which men [constrained by party loyalty] may not cross" (Aswad 1974:20). Interestingly, when Aswad writes in 1978 on kabul she openly reconsiders her initial statement that these networks were primarily channels of gossip. As the following passage illustrates, Aswad became much more aware of the public, political and economic content of their talk.

In the study of upper-class women the power of the families is so extensive that much of the "domestic" becomes "public".... [This suggests] the importance of not confusing the physical structure of the home with "domestic" functions. Thus, women engage in visiting patterns important to class organization. These are not "domestic" functions just because they occur in the home.... They are publicly acknowledged and serve as institutionalized forms of the important "grapevine" component of power and decision-making (Aswad 1978:480).

## SUMMARY AND SUGGESTIONS

I have organized my summary of concerns and suggestions about the study of women as political actors according to the four concepts -- power, conflict, oppression and domains -- which have provided the organizational structure for my argument. A more general summary statement about "politics" appears in the conclusion.

1. Power: I have argued that "power" has been overemphasized as a key marker of women's political activity. Furthermore, relations of power that do exist within and between "public and private domains" do not necessarily manifest themselves in gender relations as asymmetric, opposed, and mystifying. I suggest an overall reduction in the use of "power" as an index of politicalness particularly at the level of the individual. Relations of power are more usefully conceived as occurring between a group or community and some "external power" like the state. Relations of power, for example, often exist between the village and the state, street level women's visiting networks and the village, kin group and the street. Relations of cooperation and support that often occur within each group (and possibly, more often among women than among men) have been poorly examined and greatly undervalued.

2. Conflict: I have argued that the predominant concern in studies of political behaviour on conflict and competition has had two major effects on studying the nature of women's informal associations and networks. First the emphasis on conflict has tended to transform emically-perceived differences between the sexes into opposed and conflicting interests and goals. Women are then able to achieve "their goals" only by the manipulation of men or through male avenues of power. Second, the assumption that gender relations are "inherently ... relations of asymmetrical power and [conflicts of] opportunity" (Ortner and Whitehead 1981:4) has reduced women's associations and networks to defensive, self-protective mechanisms that arise naturally (Nelson 1978; Ryan 1979; Stivens 1978). Perhaps greater attention should be paid to the reasons women give for associating with other women and their own view of power between the sexes.

3. The universal oppression of women: Until we are able to consider women in relations other than ones of power, relations that place them in perpetual opposition to men, and implicit competition with men, we will continue to perpetuate and live within the assumption of the universal oppression of women. I share Poewe's (1981:25) concern that this assumption "makes the inferior status of women absolute". Not only does the assumption of universal male dominance lead to simplistic models of gender interaction, it has also made biology a potential basis of solidarity. Women, although the authors in Caplan and Bujra's volume (1978) wish it were true, are not resources of untapped solidarity simply because they are all women, or because they are kin, or for that matter, because they are all of the same socio-economic class.

4. Domains: I have argued along the lines of Joseph (1983) and Strathern (1979) that the linking of structural domains with gender is generally problematic. Specifically, the equation of structural and ideological domains with gender -- Poewe's (1981:25) "fatal intertwining" -- has led to the encapsulation of men and women in relations of inherent opposition. The domains have become reified and it is particularly difficult to conceive of political activity as occurring anywhere except in the "public" domain. I suggest domains and boundaries be given up for fluid, dynamic spheres of responsibility that make available context-specific strategies. In effect this is a return to Swartz, Turner and Tuden's (1966) original suggestion that the study of political behaviour is one of processes through dynamic fields and arenas (see also Swartz 1968). In agreement with the work of Yanagisako (1977) Aswad (1974;1978) and Joseph (1978;1983), assessment of the broader historical, economic, social and political context must precede and inform the placement of any gender-based boundaries to political behaviour.

#### CONCLUSION

In this paper I have reviewed anthropological approaches to the study of women as political actors, focusing on the concepts of power, conflict, oppression and the public-domestic domain paradigm as problematic. My basic criticism is that the study of women as political actors has been plagued by straw men and women -- persistent biases that stem from the anthropologist's own cultural matrix. I have argued against the a priori linking of gender to domains and the tendency to view them as structural oppositions. I have also suggested anthropologists resist the temptation to fall back on power and conflict when searching for markers of women's political activity. Having done so, I now suggest that an adequate definition of "politics", one that is amenable to political activity by either gender, should recognize: 1) co-operation as a potential source and indicator of political activity, 2) domestically-oriented political activity (in the home, among women in neighbourhoods, by families), and 3) the historical, economic, and social context of any 'political activity' prior to assigning any gender-based boundaries.

It is time to turn our attention to levels of political behaviour, to the levels of goals and of responsibilities that men and women within a community share (Joseph 1983:4; Aswad 1974;1978). A focus on shared and overlapping responsibilities and interests will broaden our understanding of community level political activity. It will also avoid turning culture into a mystifying ideology that necessarily subordinates women and places the sexes in opposition.

## NOTES

1. Although I have chosen to deal exclusively with Swartz, Turner and Tuden's (1966) processual approach, anthropologists in general emphasize "power" as the primary marker of political activity. Cohen (1976:n.p.) for example, argues that

... 'power' is ... an aspect of nearly all social relationships, and 'politics' ... (refers) to the processes involved in the distribution, maintenance, exercise and struggle for power.

More recently, political anthropology has been outlined as "the study of the competition for power, and the way that group goals are implemented by those possessing power" (Lewellen 1983:89).



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INTRODUCTION TO THE EXCERPT FROM DRAGONS AND DYNASTIES

Anthropology has a long-standing interest in the subject of mythology. Unfortunately, the rich heritage of Chinese oral and written traditions has been unavailable to Western English-speaking scholars. This situation will be improved shortly with the 1986 publication by the Beijing Foreign Language Press of Dragons and Dynasties by Nie Zhi-xiang and Kim Echlin.

NEXUS is pleased to present an excerpt from the first chapter of this book. The chapter includes translations of seven creation myths, adapted for a Western audience from the 1950s work of Yuan Ke's Ancient Chinese Mythology. Yuan Ke is the foremost authority on mythology in China today. His work was based on numerous ancient textual sources, including the 12th century Records of the Historian. The stories are thought to have originated in the oral tradition of the Yangtze River basin about 1,500 B.C. In the past decade, archaeological research has uncovered cave paintings of the mythical Pan Gu and Nu Wa who feature in the creation stories.

Mr. Nie was a student at the special English language program of the Dalian Institute of Technology in Dalian, China. His ability to speak several Chinese and minority peoples' dialects has contributed to his interests in mythology and story telling. He is currently teaching English at the Guangxi Institute for Nationalities, Guangxi, China.

Dr. Echlin is a recent graduate of York University, Downsview, Ontario. Her special interests in mythology and translation took her to the Dalian Institute of Technology where she co-authored the book. She is currently teaching part-time at York University.

Both authors hope that a Western publisher will be interested in a more academically-oriented, complete version of Dragons and Dynasties, thus enabling a greater distribution for Western students of Chinese mythology.

The Editors of Nexus