

Let's Talk About Sex, Baby: Why biological sex remains a necessary analytic category in anthropology

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Session Type: Oral Presentation Session

Organizer: Kathleen Lowrey

Participants: Kathleen Lowrey, Carole Hooven, Elizabeth Weiss, Silvia Carrasco, Kathleen Richardson, Michèle Sirois, Kathleen Lowrey

Session Description: While it has become increasingly common in anthropology and public life to substitute 'sex' with 'gender', there are multiple domains of research in which biological sex remains irreplaceably relevant to anthropological analysis. Contesting the transition from sex to gender in anthropological scholarship deserves much more critical consideration than it has hitherto received in major disciplinary fora like AAA / CASCA. This diverse international panel brings together scholars from socio-cultural anthropology, archaeology, and biological anthropology who describe why in their work gender is not helpful and only sex will do. This is particularly the case when the work is concerned with equity and the deep analysis of power, and which has as an aim the achievement of genuine inclusivity. With research foci from hominin evolution to contemporary artificial intelligence, from the anthropology of education to the debates within contemporary feminism about surrogacy, panelists make the case that while not all anthropologists need to talk about sex, baby, some absolutely do.

Presentations: No bones about it: skeletons are binary; people may not be. Sex identification – whether an individual was male or female – using the skeleton is one of the most fundamental components in bioarchaeology and forensic anthropology. Anthropologists have improved their ability to determine sex since their initial studies on skeletal remains, which depended on subjective assessment of skeletal robusticity to say whether someone was male or female. An understanding of physical differences in the pelvis related to childbirth, hormonal impacts on bones, and extensive comparative studies have provided anthropologists with an array of traits, such as those in the Phenice Method, to determine sex using just bones. The use of DNA to identify sex in skeletons by their 23rd chromosomes enables anthropologists to say whether infants are male or female for use in both criminal abuse cases and archaeological cases, such as in recognizing infanticide practices. Anthropologists' ability to determine whether a skeleton is male or female is not dependent on time or culture; the same traits can be used to make a sex estimate in a forensic case in Canada, or to estimate sex in a Paleoindian dated around 11,500 years ago in Brazil. As anthropologists study more remains from more cultures and time periods, sex identification has improved, because sex differences are biologically-determined. In forensics, however, anthropologists should be (and are) working on ways to ensure that skeletal finds are identified by both biological sex and their gender identity, which is essential due to the current rise in transitioning individuals and their overrepresentation as crime victims. Elizabeth Weiss

The intriguing disappearance of sex in education against sex-based oppression Far from being just the education of girls and boys together and teaching them the same curriculum, coeducation has been a key feminist tool to fight against the persistence of patriarchy even though laws declare women and men to be equal. However, coeducation has been apparently hijacked in recent times and substituted by ideas that deny the very existence of sex as a material reality and,

therefore, render the struggle against sex-based oppression pointless. In Spain, what seemed to be an almost sudden and unexpected government interest in coeducation less than ten years ago has actually resulted in the introduction of reactionary ideas at all stages of education redefining gender as an identity based on deep individual feelings rather than a social construct to artificially differentiate men from women and subordinate them. The paper will present the results of a thorough investigation of the impact of education new normative frameworks, teaching materials and teacher training on children and youth, teachers and families while trying to understand the intriguing disappearance of sex in the education against sex-based oppression, violence and exploitation. Silvia Carrasco

A survey of property relations: How tech bought into gender ideology and sold out women. In 2019 the prestigious and well-funded Leverhulme Centre for the Future of Intelligence in Cambridge, UK published a report 'AI and Gender', which aimed to highlight disparities between men and women in tech arenas. It added the proviso 'When the report refers to feminist work or women's rights, this should be interpreted as mutually inclusive of trans, queer, and non-binary equality'. Why was this so important to include in an era when male driven technology has become synonymous with pornography, and porn dolls, robots and avatars are regarded as 'progressive' alternatives to women for use by men? In a context in which slave labour is being used to mine cobalt for digital technology in the Democratic Republic of Congo and cell phone factories in China have become notorious for worker suicides? In the first half of the twentieth century, Walter Benjamin wrote, 'Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property.' The embrace by professional managerial class workers in academia and the tech sector of gender ideology and queer theory and the concurrent rejection of materialist and sex-based understandings of power and inequality are, this paper will argue, the twenty-first century incarnation of Benjamin's prescient twentieth century warning. Kathleen Richardson

Comment l'utilisation idéologique de concepts anthropologiques peut soutenir l'exploitation La mauvaise application du relativisme culturel, un concept anthropologique clé, sous-tend une grande partie de la rhétorique de l'activisme trans. L'idéologie du genre a pénétré de multiples institutions telles que l'ONU, l'Organisation mondiale de la santé, Statistique Canada et son recensement. Même les organismes voués à la défense des droits des femmes (Conseil du statut de la femme, Secrétariat à la condition féminine, Fédération du Québec pour le planning des naissances, etc.) sont captés par cette nouvelle rhétorique et son langage de fluidité, de multiplicité et de diversité. Cependant, la reproduction sexuelle pose des problèmes à la fois idéologiques et pratiques à l'idéologie du genre. Mettre les utérus de femmes pauvres à la disposition d'autres personnes riches (et disproportionnellement masculines, composées principalement de couples d'hommes hétérosexuels et homosexuels) nécessite des régimes législatifs et politiques rigides qui ne sont guère 'relativistes' dans leur mise en oeuvre. Cet article offre un résumé ethnographique des façons dont les féministes du Québec se sont organisées pour documenter, clarifier et s'opposer à l'industrie de la maternité de substitution qui s'exploite et qui se cache sous le couvert de 'l'équité' et de 'l'inclusion'. Michèle Sirois

With the return of grand narratives, what are anthropologists still not saying about sex? David Graeber and David Wengrow's 2021 book *The Dawn of Everything* has been acknowledged by enthusiasts and critics alike as marking the salutary return of "grand narrative" to anthropology after a long absence. Hierarchy, inequality, property, the state, power itself.... All are expounded upon in a sweeping epic involving a cast of billions, arrayed in dazzling settings ranging from ancient Mesopotamia to present-day Chiapas. And yet this ambition, rather like that of bewhiskered imperialist gentlemen of the nineteenth century, quails at the merest mention of sex. One mustn't make any strong claims there, but instead consider the delicate complexities of gender. This paper will argue that the pious modesty about sex began right around the time grand narratives generally were declared out of fashion, and had the same source as the current curious reluctance to lift the edict in that one domain: a misogynist refusal to grapple with the fundamental challenges posed to anthropology by analyses of the human story told from the sexed vantage point of women and women's experience. The highly ambitious and holistic work of anthropologists like Jacquetta Hawkes or Marija Gimbutas has for nearly fifty years been derided in favor of accounts that make an analytic virtue of fragmentation, partiality, hesitance, and incompleteness. Ruins, frictions, monsters, cyborgs, properties, effects and things now stalk the halls of academe where goddesses all too briefly roamed. The repressed, however, always does return. Kathleen Lowrey