Introduction: Gender, Culture, and Political Economy

Feminist Anthropology in Historical Perspective

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The feminist project in anthropology has flown under several flags. It was at first termed the anthropology of women, as we focused on correcting male bias in the discipline. We have since written of the anthropology of gender to denote our concern with both sexes and their culturally and temporally varying relations. Sometimes we refer to feminist anthropology to acknowledge our interdisciplinary affinities with women's studies scholarship. Feminist-inspired anthropological research and writing on gender relations, after two decades of practice, has come of age.

Because anthropology stands at the crossroads of knowledge production, embracing scientific, social-scientific, and humanistic modes of interpretation, feminists in the discipline have worked in every part of the globe, in every specialized subfield, from primates to politics, from tropes to T-cells. Whether heralded by feminist sociologists for advanced theory (see Stacey and Thorne 1985) or ignored by some of our colleagues, feminist anthropologists have labored to develop a corpus of work in touch with developments in the field, in allied disciplines, and within feminism itself.[1]

But to describe the evolution of feminist anthropology in Whig-historical terms, to portray a linear progression from good to better, would be to paint over a nuanced, three-dimensional reality. Behind the facade of progress is a complex history of roads traveled and then abandoned, new starts, and alliances and fissures across disciplines and among anthropological subfields. Feminist anthropologists, like all scholars, have sharply disagreed among themselves and have revised their perspectives over time. As well, the feminist anthropological project has been influenced by shifts in the larger intellectual scene and in the global political economy in which we all live. This last point is crucial. Western feminist scholars twenty years ago had a sharp, taken-for-granted starting point: to expose sexism in public and private life,

to alter the male-biased presumptions of scholarly and popular culture. We now see both the adjective of location—we are *Western* feminists, and there are others—and the noun's contingent, historically determined existence. The political source of feminist scholarship, early 1970s feminism, was not the first but the second major wave of women's rights thought and activism. And there have been organized rebellions and individual protests among women in many cultures—even in the small-scale societies anthropologists have specialized in studying—and in numerous historical periods. We now see ourselves as part of global history.

In order to envision contemporary feminist anthropological work properly, then, we need to follow the project from its inception and to locate that changing body of thought within the kaleidoscopic crossroads of anthropological, feminist, intellectual, and political-economic history.

The early 1970s were years of closely linked scholarly and political ferment in the United States. The civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s had grown and given birth to theory and activism concerned with environmental issues, American foreign policy, gay, black, Latino, Asian, and Native American rights—and feminism.

All these movements were influenced by—and inspired—intellectual shifts of the 1960s. Foremost among these broad changes was the post-McCarthyite renascence of Marxist theory. Many others, however—such as the Kuhnian disrobing of "timeless" scientific authority, criticisms and radical revisions of Freudianism, and extensions of liberal pluralism to encompass new (ethnic, gay, female) claimant groups—were key to both scholarly and political movements of the era. Although each strand of 1970s radicalism had historical precedents, some predating the twentieth century, feminism's particular trajectory was unique. The late-nineteenth/early twentieth century woman movement in the United States and Western Europe (and, among anticolonialist nationalists, in many third-world societies) culminated in the achievement of suffrage in America and Britain, and subsequently entered a period of relative quiescence. Although one of the many victories of the period was the establishment of women's colleges and the entrance of women into the professions, most of these early feminists—as they began to be called in the first decade of the twentieth century—challenged neither domestic sexual divisions of labor nor the received wisdom of the contemporary scholarly and professional establishment.[2]

Late-twentieth-century feminists did precisely that. A relatively homogeneous cohort—at least in the first decade—these largely young, white, college-educated, middle-class women built a shared vision of the world turned upside down. In classic radical fashion, they questioned all received wisdom relating to their particular issue; and that issue, comprising the lives and statuses of all female humans, past and present, engaged every branch of

knowledge and labor.[3] This statue-toppling atmosphere bore parallels to the French Revolution, when, as Wordsworth wrote,

> Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
> But to be young was very Heaven.

Both groups were convinced that politics and knowledge were innately intertwined, and for that reason set out to reconstruct knowledge. Each group attempted to extirpate language deemed reflective of the political order to be overthrown (French honorifics, women's married titles), and each coined neologisms to substitute and to express new concepts and institutions (*citoyenne/citoyen*, Ms.). And each group turned to ancient Greece and Rome for models of prior political virtues—the Athenian republic, the myth of matriarchal Amazonia.

Feminist anthropology reflected all these tendencies—absent the romance with ancient Greece—in microcosm. Participants in early study groups and seminars shared the vision of rethinking and reworking an entire discipline, one that seemed vital to feminist thought. Because of American anthropology's historic, cross-cutting four-field emphasis, anthropology seemed to cover women from soup to nuts—from female proto-humans and primates to women in prehistoric societies to a survey of the lives of all contemporary women, whether in the first, second, or third worlds. Feminist anthropologists had a strong sense, as well, that the results of their intellectual work were of key importance to feminist political decision making. Only anthropology, after all, occupied itself with the search for human universals and the documentation of cross-cultural variation. New interpretations of these phenomena seemed likely to aid us in discovering the key factors related to women's secondary status, and thus to determine the Archimedean standpoint from which we could move the male-dominated globe. As Gayle Rubin noted, somewhat tongue in cheek,

> if innate male aggression and dominance are at the root of female oppression, then the feminist program would logically require either the extermination of the offending sex, or else a eugenics program to modify its character. If sexism is a by-product of capitalism's relentless appetite for profit, then sexism would wither away in the advent of a successful socialist revolution. If the world-historical defeat of women occurred at the hands of armed patriarchal revolt, then it is time for Amazon guerrillas to start training in the Adirondacks. (1975: 158–159)

GENDER IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL HISTORY

This sense of anthropology's edificatory place in American life, of seeing ourselves through seeing others, was in fact not an invention of 1970s feminists but was rooted in the history of American anthropology and, indeed, in

the discipline as a whole. The male Victorian British evolutionary theorists who would be labeled "anthropologists" only in the 1880s were concerned to taxonomize all known human groups, to place Hottentots, ancient Romans, and contemporary European bourgeoises on a stratified *scala naturae* according to their relatively savage, barbarous, or civilized characteristics. Although, as George Stocking (1987) demonstrates, much of the impetus behind Victorian anthropology lay in these men's efforts to establish and to make sense of a desacralized universe, moral anxieties in a newly Godless realm did not constitute the whole of their concern. Victorian Britain was the major world imperial power; it saw the growth of a vital, militant woman movement led by the daughters of its bourgeoisie. Victorian anthropology, then, was naturally engaged in attending to—legitimating but also protesting—the colonized status of third-world others. It also engaged, as Elizabeth Fee (1974) has shown, in a *dialogue in absentia* with the woman movement.

A central tension of mid-Victorian evolutionary debates was the problematized status of male rule over women. Had women once ruled and been deposed, as Bachofen asserted? Or were women now less exploited (especially sexually) than in the past and among primitives thought to be "living history"? Assertions of male lust, female purity or licentiousness, male anxieties over paternity, and female capacities for moral uplift were deeply woven into these accounts and found their way into the evolutionary schemata of those major late Victorians Marx and Freud.

In the years intervening between the Victorian evolutionists and the 1970s feminists, anthropology established itself, primarily in Britain and the United States, as a major academic field. Social anthropology in the United Kingdom and cultural anthropology in the United States jettisoned evolutionary thought and established the lengthy, intimate, daily living with and observing of people in another culture—fieldwork—as the constitutive practice of the discipline. British anthropologists, especially Radcliffe-Brown (1965), crafted structural-functionalism as a theoretical frame through which living societies could be seen to make sense. Societies were envisioned through an organic analogy: institutions such as kinship and marriage, politics, economics, and religion were demonstrated, again and again, to function in tandem with one another, like the individual organs in a body. Although Talal Asad (1973: 103–118) has noted that structural-functionalist assertions in British Africa functioned themselves as legitimations for indirect rule, the theoretical frame was also one strand of the growing hegemony of ethnographic liberalism. (James Clifford's useful term denotes a "set of roles and discursive possibilities" [1988: 78] through which ethnographers attempted to deal with their usually ambiguous roles both as advocates of particular groups and as citizens of colonizing states.)

American cultural anthropology focused largely on the Americas and the

Pacific until after World War II, and its primary early twentieth-century concern was the documentation of vanishing Native American cultures and languages. American extermination or forced relocation of Native American groups prevented the extensive use of the structuralist-functionalist frame. American anthropologists tended, instead, to practice "salvage ethnography"—the collection of any and all information with a heavy emphasis on vanishing languages. This American emphasis on culture (mental baggage)—rather than society (observable, patterned behavior)—was fueled also by contemporary American psychology's high status and conservative, especially racist presuppositions and applications. Liberal American anthropologists were, then, doubly inclined toward the psychological arena (Rosenberg 1982; Stocking 1982: 200 ff.)—thus the "culture and personality" theoretical leanings of the two best-known women anthropologists of the early twentieth century.

Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict were students of Franz Boas, the notable German-born Columbia University anthropologist. Given their great fame and at least Mead's highly popular didactic writings on the cross-cultural malleability of "natural" sex roles, one would assume that women have been prominent in American anthropology and that anthropology has been a progressive force in providing empirical fodder for arguments in favor of gender equity. In fact, despite the admiration and envy of feminists in other fields, women have historically done poorly in anthropology departments: Mead never held an official departmental position, Benedict was passed over as chair for a man when Boas retired, and Elsie Clews Parsons achieved her influence through the use of an independent fortune to finance her own and others' field trips and publications.[4] In more recent years, studies have documented female anthropologists' significantly lower academic status (Sanjek 1982). Finally, not until the 1970s did some anthropologists begin to approach women's and men's differing experiences as topics on their own terms. Most of the notable theoretical movements of the 1920s through the 1960s—and particularly those bearing on topics of direct relevance to women's status, such as kinship and marriage or the sexual division of labor—ignored or naturalized sexual difference. Structural-functionalist work on kinship in Africa, for example, assumed natural male dominance in its considerations of kinship and marriage patterns, while the linguistics-inspired kinship analyses of the 1960s generally ignored sexual difference altogether. So great was prefeminist insensitivity that Ward Goodenough, a well-respected kinship theorist, could write approvingly of a Trukese man's beating of his daughter: "A good hard jolt was just what she deserved" (1965: 12). (Change has not come smoothly. As late as 1985, a former male colleague would assure me that the anthropology of gender was "just trivial me-tooism.")

Nevertheless, prefeminist anthropology was not like so many other

branches of knowledge, such as literary criticism, which simply represented a largely male universe. Although one could—and many did—claim that few women had been important novelists or poets, it was much more difficult to represent functioning societies without female inhabitants. Similarly, ape and monkey populations are one-half female, as are prehistoric burials. It is for this reason that feminist anthropologists had little difficulty in switching early on from the anthropology of women to that of gender as their research focus. Prefeminist ethnographers often provided rich ethnographic information on gender. Oftentimes, the woman in husband-wife teams specialized in "women's affairs," and such information was woven, anonymously, into the ethnographic text. Other wives wrote independent, insightful analyses of female worlds in a variety of third-world contexts: Mary Smith on the life of Baba, a Hausa woman in Karo (1981); Elizabeth Fernea (1969) on village women in Iraq; Margery Wolf (1968) on peasant women in Taiwan; Marilyn Strathern (1972) on the Mount Hagen women of Papua New Guinea. In many cases, information in such work has been reinterpreted by subsequent generations of scholars. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, for example, whose 1940s work on the Nuer of then Anglo-Egyptian Sudan has the classic status of Malinowski's writings, overtly states that Nuer family life is characterized by the "unchallenged authority of the husband in the home" (1951: 133). But Evans-Pritchard also provides extraordinary vignettes of observed behavior which allow us to argue for modifications in that presumption:

> [S]hould she [a Nuer wife] in a quarrel with her husband disfigure him—knock a tooth out, for example—her father must pay him compensation. I have myself on two occasions seen a father pay a heifer to his son-in-law to atone for insults hurled at the husband's head by his wife when irritated by accusations of adultery. (1951: 104)

As I have observed elsewhere,

> [P]roprietary rights lose much of their powerful "ownership" connotation when we note that in this case, Nuer husband might say to his wife, "I have rights in you: if you insult me or knock my teeth out I can run to your father and make him pay me in cattle." (1979: 630)

Thus it was that feminist anthropologists, despite having been trained in a discipline literally saturated with gender, had the feeling of discovering the topic for the first time. They—we—strapped on the wide variety of theoretical oxygen tanks available, took deep breaths, and plunged in.

WRITING GENDER INTO ANTHROPOLOGY

These new feminist visions of anthropology's gendered seas were focused through both exogenous—popular cultural—and endogenous—profes-

sional—lenses. Two mid-1970s anthologies, Rayna Rapp Reiter's *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (1975) and Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere's *Women, Culture, and Society* (1974), responded to professional and public interest in bringing together much of this new work. These two volumes functioned as the "bibles" of feminist anthropology for the ensuing decade.[5]

As I have noted, American anthropology's edificatory tradition and second-wave feminism's penchant for fresh questioning led feminist anthropologists to problematize sexual relations to degrees unknown since the turn of the century. Physical anthropologists and zoologists challenged the dominant "Man the Hunter" model, which posited analogies between male-dominant African savanna baboons and the evolution of male-dominant human societies, and heralded cooperative male hunting as the key spur to human evolution. Thelma Rowell (1972), Sally Slocum (1975), and others pointed out, making use of already available information, that gendered primate social behavior varies greatly—and in any case, baboons are monkeys and are thus far more genetically distant from humans than are apes like chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans. Apes' social behavior, although various, evinces less visible male-female and intra-male stratification. Feminists also noted that in apotheosizing male hunting as the early human activity par excellence, "man-the-hunter" theorists ignored key evidence from contemporary hunting and gathering, or foraging, societies: women do some hunting, and female-gathered foods account for more than half and at times nearly all of what is eaten. (Unfortunately, these findings have had little effect on popular culture models of early human life, such as the still-ubiquitous caveman [*sic*] cartoons.)

Primatology and physical anthropology have been broadly influenced by the 1970s feminist critiques. Studies of gendered social behavior of primates in the wild, once the realm of projections of universal male rule, are now self-consciously careful to note variations between and within species. As well, primate studies have evolved to consider "primates in nature" (the title of Alison Richard's 1985 volume)—to see nonhuman primates less as Rorschach blots for human social and political concerns and more as animals existing and reproducing in a variety of floral and faunal environments.

The "woman-the-gatherer" challenge to the man-the-hunter model inspired Nancy Tanner and Adrienne Zihlman's (1976, 1978) female-focused model of human evolution. Turning man the hunter on its head, Tanner and Zihlman posited, for example, the key importance of gathered foodstuffs and thus the existence of "lost" female tools—fiber carrying nets and baskets which, unlike stone implements, would not fossilize. This model in turn stimulated consideration of food-sharing rather than hunting as a key spur to human evolution, and microwear studies on fossilized prehuman and human teeth to determine proportions of meat and plant foods in prehistoric diets.[6]

Feminists also attempted to review and reconsider gendered social rela-

tions in prehistoric state societies. Many made use of Engels's presumption that the "world-historic defeat of the female sex" coincided with the rise of private property and the state. Some, such as Eleanor Leacock (1981), used ethnohistorical evidence to argue for pre-Western contact and pre-state egalitarian societies. Others, such as Rayna Rapp (1977), concentrated on using theories of pre-state and state gender relations to rethink the meaning of kinship and its interrelations with differing economies and polities. In general, though, archeologists were slow to respond to the feminist challenge, and this lack of response stultified developments in both fields (see chaps. 2 and 3, this volume). At the same time, popular culture abhorring a vacuum, nonanthropologist feminist writers throughout the 1970s and 1980s were producing volume after volume of inferential histories of gendered humankind, many positing prior matriarchies. From Elizabeth Gould Davis's *The First Sex* (1971) to Elaine Morgan's *The Descent of Woman* (1972), these popular works merged with others recommending the "return" to Goddess worship or heralding the coming of a new "woman's era" of nurturance and nonviolence. At first, feminist anthropologists addressed this issue in popular feminist culture. Paula Webster (1975) explored the notion of matriarchy sympathetically, noting its millenarian appeal and development through Victorian kinship debates. Joan Bamberger (1974) analyzed South American Indian myths of prior matriarchy as legitimations of male rule. More recently, however, with both increasing specialization in feminist scholarship and the institutionalization of radical or cultural feminism as a counterculture, the gap between feminist anthropological knowledge and some popular feminist culture has grown. I will explore this issue, below.

Early social-cultural feminist anthropologists responded enthusiastically to the challenge of rewriting anthropology as if gender really mattered. One of their first and most important tasks was the reconsideration of entire subdisciplines in the light of feminist insights. Jane Collier's key 1974 piece on political anthropology, for example, redrew that discipline's map to include women's kinship struggles, which are concerned, after all, with the distribution of whatever domestic power is available to women and often also entail female influences on male public political actions. Louise Lamphere (1974) surveyed a wide variety of societies to consider the public political ramifications of women's cooperative and conflictual networks, and Sylvia Yanagisako (1979) wrote compellingly of the anthropological tradition of dichotomizing "male" public kinship and "female" domestic kinship—and, of course, of providing only "thin descriptions" of the latter. A number of feminist ethnographers, among them Pamela Constantinides (1979) considered women's strategic use of institutions and roles within organized religions in order to gain power, autonomy, or wealth.

Some feminist anthropologists of this period did restudies of populations well-known through earlier work. Annette Weiner (1976), for example, re-

turned to Malinowski's Trobriand Islands to consider women's lives in great detail. Jane Goodale's 1980 ethnography of the Tiwi of Melville Island (Melanesia), earlier studied by C. W. M. Hart and Arnold Pilling (1960), was perhaps the most instructive of these works. Hart and Pilling had been fascinated by men's narratives of strategic acquisition of young wives as a form of property and had been uninterested in women's perspectives. Goodale discovered that Tiwi kinship was enormously complex, but that the key affinal relationship was *ambrinua*, the label by which son-in-law and mother-in-law referred to one another. These Tiwi mothers-in-law, however, usually contracted an ambrinua relationship as young adolescents. Each girl's ambrinua would then labor lifelong for her and eventually be allowed to marry her daughter. An older woman, far from being a "toothless old hag" (Hart and Pilling 1960: 14), held considerable power and prestige among the Tiwi.

Other feminist ethnographers studied third-world peasant populations, overturning in the process anthropological peasant studies' tendency to focus on the labor, perceptions, and decision making of only male householders and to assume that peasant women's activities and thoughts belonged to a "timeless" domestic realm. Anna Rubbo (1975) documented rural Colombian women's ability to manage small subsistence farms without the assistance of adult men. With capital penetration and development, however, and the state's introduction of Green Revolution seeds and pesticides, women lost their farming autonomy and were forced into urban migration as large landowners increased their holdings and turned to factory farming. Susan Brown (1975) considered poor women's and men's lives in the Dominican Republic and noted the political-economic realities behind the common, and commonly decried, pattern of female serial monogamy. Poor women strategically allied with and broke with poor men, from whom they could receive little financial support, while relying on female kin and older children to form networks of economic cooperation for survival.

In the process of rewriting subdisciplines and ethnographies, feminist anthropologists were also rewriting theory. Collier's and Lamphere's emphasis on the interpenetrating dynamic of kinship and politics is in part an improvement on Radcliffe-Brown. Yanagisako's focus on the symbolic realm in kinship is a feminist revision of the cultural approach to kinship elaborated by David Schneider. Rubbo and Brown, like many feminist anthropologists since, made use of a transformed Marxism. The influential essays of Michelle Rosaldo, Nancy Chodorow, and Sherry Ortner, as we shall see, reflected Weberian, Freudian, and Levi-Straussian frameworks, respectively. And the maverick Gayle Rubin (1975), whose coinage the "sex-gender system" has greatly influenced subsequent work on sexuality, employed a wild bricolage of reoriented Freud, Marx, Lévi-Strauss, and Lacan.

Whatever theoretical frame they worked within, however, feminist

anthropologists were forced to deal with a key contradiction between their feminist conviction that male dominance over females, in any cultural setting, was fundamentally illegitimate, and the reigning notions of what would turn out to be the last gasp of ethnographic liberalism.

ETHNOGRAPHIC LIBERALISM AND THE FEMINIST CONUNDRUM

By and large, anthropologists in the mid-twentieth century heyday of ethnographic work tended to function as advocates for "their" groups, making sense (Western sense) of and justifying their "exotic" lifeways—right up to the boundaries of state power. Whether that authority was colonial (most often) or that of an independent capitalist or (rarely) communist state, it behooved the ethnographer who wished to be able to return to avoid criticism of government structures and policies. As well, anthropologists tended, in the great twentieth-century division of the pie of knowledge into lucrative disciplinary, professional, and departmental slices, to lay claim to social organization *beneath* state structures. Thus the liberal ideology of cultural relativism could decree that anthropologists justify cross-cousin marriage, ritual scarification, belief in witchcraft, or separate spheres of exchange but not protest against colonial domination, state-enforced economic and racial stratification, or the international economic pressures (such as austerity plans imposed by the International Monetary Fund) that may have been directly related to the continued operation of these customs. Thus the proliferation of liberal cultural relativist (and sexist) textbook titles in the 1960s and early 1970s: *Every Man His Way* (1968), *Man Makes Sense* (1970), *Man's Many Ways* (1973).

Feminist anthropologists in this period, then, were faced with a conundrum: how could we analyze critically instances of male domination and oppression in precisely those societies whose customs anthropology was traditionally pledged to advocate? I have discerned at least six separate modes of solving the conundrum, although of course many writers in practice combined two or more arguments. What follows, then, is a somewhat schematized typology of a complex two decades of feminist anthropological theorizing.

The first, and most traditional, response is to argue that women in a particular society actually enjoy a less onerous life or higher status—higher than one might have expected or higher than contemporary Western women. Margaret Mead, of course, is most well known for her 1928 argument that Samoan adolescent girls did not experience the anxieties and uncertainties of their American counterparts due to very different cultural constructions of sexuality, adulthood, and parenthood. Elizabeth Fernea, in her 1969 autobiographical ethnography *Guests of the Sheik*, argued that seclusion allowed village Iraqi women the opportunities to enjoy one another's company, offer

genuine emotional support, and, most important, to attain status through specialization as religious or medical professionals, as men had to avoid intimate contact with unrelated secluded women. Susan Carol Rogers argued that women in peasant societies worldwide, "actually wield considerable amounts of power," while both sexes perpetrate "the myth of male dominance" (1975: 752). Annette Weiner, in her 1976 restudy of the Trobriand Islanders, argued that Trobriand women held high symbolic status as reproducers of social meaning. I discovered—in a 1979 review of the West African ethnographies cited by Ward Goodenough as underwriting a presumption of women's universal lower status—that the original (and all male but one) writers had documented extraordinary instances of female sexual autonomy, wives' rights to husbands' labor and sexual services, and women's economic parity (and sometimes superiority) to men.

Making the "native women better off" argument afforded feminist anthropologists a number of advantages. It fit well with the advocacy stance of ethnographic liberalism, thus neatly solving the feminist conundrum. It functioned to *epater* complacent Westerners, since one major legitimation of Western imperialism, after all, had been that "they are brutish to their women." There have been, as well, numerous third-world complaints about uninformed Western feminist deprecation of non-Western gendered practices. And finally, depending on our agreed-upon standards for cross-cultural comparison, to argue that women in a particular population experienced certain freedoms or status unavailable to specific groups of Western women was sometimes simply to tell the truth.

Other feminist anthropologists returned to the Marxist evolutionist model Engels had put forward in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884). This work had key salience in the early 1970s for several reasons. First was the renascence of American Marxist thought after the period of McCarthyite censorship. Anthropologists such as Eric Wolf and Sidney Mintz were particularly active as writers and teachers in this era, and concern over the Vietnam War alerted many young anthropologists to the need for a radical rethinking of their theoretical premises. Returning to Marx led second-wave feminists to the text on which he and Engels worked together and that Engels had finished after Marx's death in 1883. Second, Marx and Engels relied on the extensive research and writing of a man who has been named the first American anthropologist, Lewis Henry Morgan. Morgan, a railroad lawyer in New York, became fascinated first by Seneca Indian life and then, more generally, by human kinship labeling systems around the world. Good Victorian that he was, Morgan linked differing terminology systems to evolutionary stages of humankind. Marx and Engels associated these kin terminology/social-level stages to particular modes of production, and to an originally egalitarian social structure that tipped to male dominance with the emergence of private property and institutionalized social stratification