Oedipus on tour: exploring psychoanalysis through ethnographies of Melanesia, Africa, and Asia

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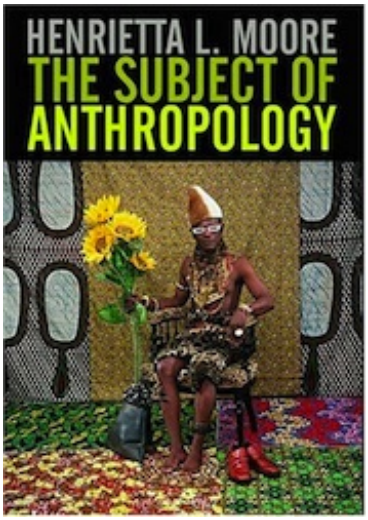
In this excellent and compelling modern classic, ***Henrietta Moore*** *invites the forging of new alliances between anthropology and psychoanalysis in their common concerns for culture, representation and the nature of symbols. Anthropologists are encouraged to work toward a theory of imagery, fantasy, and the pre-oedipal to shed new light to the classic Durkheimian question of the relation between the social and the individual. Reviewed by* ***Margherita Margiotti****.*

The Subject of Anthropology: Gender, Symbolism and Psychoanalysis. Henrietta L. Moore. Polity Press. 272 pp.



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How do we become sexed beings? What is the place of fantasy and cultural symbols in the process? Henrietta Moore, William Wyse Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge and pioneer feminist, provides an intriguing and nuanced theory of gendered subjectivity centred on desire, fantasy and sexual difference. Through her deep understanding of psychoanalysis and a comparative anthropological eye, she debates cutting-edge issues in feminist theory about how we come into being as gendered subjects.

The Subject of Anthropology has a two-pronged argument. Firstly, drawing on comparative ethnographic material from Melanesia, Africa, and Southeast Asia, Moore defends the anthropological project of providing context-specific answers to the question of how we become who we are. She is not resistant against psychoanalysis. She scrutinizes how Freud and Lacan, among others, have analysed sexual difference, and argues against its family-bounded origins and imaginary, dislodging it from the illusion of universality.

Though Moore calls our attention to the workings of the unconscious, and this is the second argument of the book. She urges us to bring in an understanding of fantasy, desire and unconscious motivations that grant to subjects their capacity for agency and refine our analysis of power and the social. As Moore writes: “we simply cannot understand people’s strenuous and determined efforts to expand their opportunities, defend the livelihoods of themselves and their families, and transform the communities they live in, as well as the other social, economic, and political structures that shape their worlds without engaging with fantasy, desire, and unconscious motivation” (p. 44).

While presenting various theories against each other with exceptional clarity, Moore argues that gendered subjects do not emerge out of a single moment in which sexual identity is acquired. This is in contrast to psychoanalytic theories on the centrality of the Oedipus complex for the inauguration of sexual difference. Moore argues that both oedipal and pre-oedipal material provide the background for the symbolic processes of adult life and post-oedipal interpretations of gender. Hence the book,

supported by anthropology and feminist theorists, proposes to move away from discussions on the universality of the Oedipus complex and on the phallus as unique referent of the symbolic order.

Moreover, Moore draws our attention on how discussions on Oedipal configurations have somehow worked within a "thin" notion of the social. She argues that mothers and fathers are not auto-evident or invariant categories, and not just unambiguously female and male. "Whatever masculinity and femininity are for a specific experiencing self, they are always modelled on the multiple and fantasized nature of one's own and other people's experience of them in concrete social relationships" (p. 158). These relationships, at the same time psychic and social, are fantasized and interwoven with multiple and complex understandings of masculinity and femininity that are often accompanied with clear models of gender linked to power, resource and status differentiation.

On this respect the book engages with rich ethnographic material from the Melanesian Gimi. This offers a culturally situated example of how in a socially recognized patriarchal society forms of femininity and the maternal are "constitutive of the social, law and exchange" (p. 135). In Gimi myths of origins, valued objects and body parts that are associated to men are viewed as dependent on, and deriving from, women. Myths of origins, Moore argues, make clear that cultural representations are open to the many exchanges between and within masculinity and femininity, and do not aim at producing any authoritative closure or unitary explanation.

Moreover Moore discusses how sexual difference is a problem that recurs in human societies, and is often worked out in rituals and in myths about betrayal and the loss of objects and body parts. Sambia people from Papua New Guinea have complex male initiation rituals that show how masculinity grows through the nurturing of men's bodies via sexual substances. The problem of sexual difference cannot be answered in the once-and-for-all defining moment of the sexed body. "Sexual difference", Moore claims, "is the retroactive consequence of the effects of masculinity and femininity, and of their careful management within symbolic systems and social relations" (p. 164).

In sum this is an excellent and compelling book that, among the many aspects worth discussing, invites the forging of new alliances between anthropology and psychoanalysis in their common concerns for culture, representation and the nature of symbols. Moore urges anthropology to work toward a theory of imagery, fantasy, and the pre-oedipal to shed new light to the classic Durkheimian question of the relation between the social and the individual. The proposal is rich and thought provoking, and is certainly worth exploring through further ethnographic engagements and cross-disciplinary discussions.

Margherita Margiotti teaches social anthropology at the University of Bristol. She is an expert of Lowland Central and South American Indigenous societies and her research focuses on forms of relatedness, village organization, conceptions of the person and material culture. She has carried out long term fieldwork in Panama with Kuna indigenous people. Her other interests include feminist theories and the relationship between anthropology and psychoanalysis. Read more reviews by Margherita.

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