Sex, culture, and society

Monday 21st August – Friday 25th August
Summer semester 2017

Tarho and El Masri, Hashem El Madani/Studio Shehrazade, Saida, Lebanon, 1958

Everything in the world is about sex except sex
attr. to Oscar Wilde

Course summary

This course introduces students to the study of sex in comparative cultural and social perspective, exploring intersections and tensions between classical psychoanalytic thought and major approaches in British, French, and US anthropology.
It takes as its gambit the anthropological legacy of Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, which since its publication in 1913 has galvanised academic work on relations between sex, culture, and society. Deeply informed by debates in fin-de-siècle anthropology about “primitive sexuality”, Freud proposed that sex lay at the heart of cultural and social life, and in his evolving conception of an Oedipus complex developed a comparative analytic that promised to make sense of the significance of sex across diverse cultures and societies.

In this course, we shall investigate how anthropologists over the last century have responded to Freud’s “somewhat improbable conclusions” (Freud 1919 [1913]: vii), as they have sought to compare the significance of sex in the lives of the people they have studied around the world.

In our discussions, we shall chart how anthropologists have grappled with Freud’s analytic of the Oedipus complex in their intercultural encounters to articulate new comparative perspectives on:-

- the relevance of sex for how people make sense of processes of procreation and reproduction
- ways such “conceptions” may inform larger cultural worldviews about how the world is meaningfully ordered
- how forms of sexual behaviour and practice, beyond procreation, may relate to the articulation of varieties of sexual identity and other social identities
- the significance of desire in wider dynamics of social life
- the extent to which shifting possibilities of social order may depend on changing constellations of sexual order

Throughout the course, as we examine these formative debates and controversies in the anthropological study of sex, we shall analyse why some anthropologists have and other anthropologists haven’t found the Oedipus complex a useful tool to compare the similarities and differences they encounter in their studies. As we evaluate these often competing claims, we shall explore how the study of sex in anthropology sharpens our appreciation of what’s at stake in different approaches to social and cultural comparison.

**Course objectives**

By the end of the course, students will be able to:-

- discuss a number of key concepts anthropologists have developed to compare the cultural and social significance of sex among peoples they study
- analyse how these comparative heuristics have emerged out of formative debates in the anthropological study of sex, and assess the significance of classical psychoanalytic thought in these conversations
- evaluate how anthropologists’ use of these concepts to make empirical comparisons involves different assumptions about ways a person’s particular sexual lifeway can articulate with varieties of broader sexual culture

**Assessment**

Participation in seminar discussions – 30%
Final oral exam – 30%
Short written reflection on a theme or issue from the course (5 pages) – 40%
Note on readings

Readings for the course have been categorised under three headings. Required readings are obligatory and should be read thoroughly before each seminar to ensure full participation in class discussion. Recommended readings are optional. They are either somewhat longer than the required readings or a little more intellectually involved; however, reading them before each seminar would enrich contributions to the discussion. Further readings are included in the syllabus as a reference for students who wish subsequently to write their final assessment on themes raised by a particular seminar.

There are no textbooks which cover entirely the same material as this course. Students, however, may find it helpful to consult a number of recent books which address some of the issues we shall discuss:-


Given the intensive nature of this summer school programme, it is necessary for students to have thoroughly read all the readings before the course commences, as you will not have sufficient time during the week of face-to-face seminars.

Course outline

Required preparatory reading


SEMINAR 1 [Monday 21st August, morning] – Sex and the foundations of society: Professor Freud’s “somewhat improbable” conjecture

Required reading


Recommended reading


Further reading


SEMINAR 2 [Monday 21st August, afternoon] – Sex in the field: the disciplinary challenge of early twentieth-century anthropology

Required reading


Recommended reading


Further reading

Pre-WWII British anthropology


US Neo-Freudianism, Culture and Personality, and early Frankfurt School


Early French structuralism

SEMINAR 3 [Tuesday 22nd August, morning] – Sex and procreation: the “virgin birth” debate in mid-twentieth-century anthropology

Required reading


Recommended reading


Further reading

Broader intellectual context of Leach and Spiro’s debate


Psychoanalytic (sub)currents in mid-century British anthropology


SEMINAR 4 [Tuesday 22nd August, afternoon] – Sex, myth, and worldview: the “virgin birth” debate, twenty years on

Required reading


Further reading


SEMINAR 5 [Wednesday 23rd August, morning] – **Sex, behaviour, and identity: comparing “semen practices”**

Required reading


Recommended reading


SEMINAR 6 [Wednesday 23rd August, afternoon] – **Sex and desire: schismogenesis and schizoanalysis**

Required reading


Recommended reading

Further reading

Re-appraisal of Bateson in francophone social theory


Deleuze in the context of late French structuralism


Deleuze’s trajectory in (largely) anglophone anthropology


SEMINAR 7 [Thursday 24th August, morning] – Sex and subjectivity: anthropology and Foucault’s last trip to Athens

Required reading


Recommended reading


Further reading

Foucault’s final lectures in the context of late French structuralism


Foucault’s reception in anglophone and francophone anthropology


SEMINAR 8 [Thursday 24th August, afternoon] – Sexual order and social order: comparing incest taboos in western Europe

Required reading


Recommended reading


Further reading

Re-appraisal of Collège de Sociologie in anglophone social theory


Contemporary intersections between psychoanalysis and anthropology of kinship, gender, and sexuality in France


SEMINAR 9 [Friday 25th August, morning] – So could the Oedipus complex be universal? Sex and comparison in anthropology

Required reading


**ORAL EXAM** [Friday 25th August, afternoon]

**FINAL DISCUSSION** [Friday 25th August, afternoon] – **Coda: orgasm**

*Recommended reading*

Choose an article (or two) that take your fancy from the most recent issue of the journal *Terrain* on orgasm: