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Lessons from the Demise and Renewal of Kinship Studies¹

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For at least thirty years classical historians have written on kinship structures in antiquity explicitly using anthropological theory.² The methodology used, however, has tended to be that of traditional kinship studies, i.e., it follows a theoretical approach prevalent in anthropology before the 'demise' of kinship studies in the early 1980s. This approach pre-supposes a cross-culturally applicable definition of kinship based on marriage and procreation, and thus on the supposed universality of biology in determining kinship. Such studies employ

¹ Since this piece is largely inspired by my doctoral research, I would like to acknowledge the support and advice of the members of my doctoral committee, Franco De Angelis, Tony Podlecki, and Hector Williams.

² See, for example, Humphreys 1977, 1978, 1983, 1986; Cox 1998. Humphreys' important work comes around the beginning of the 'demise' of kinship and does reflect the general move at that time toward the relativism that brought it on; it comes too early, however, to have the benefit of the subsequent twenty-five years of theoretical debate and renewal in the field. Thus, although her work marks an important development in the anthropologically informed study of ancient Greece, the study of kinship needs updating. Cox was published in 1998 and, although she advocates for and uses anthropological methods (1998: xiv), does not address the methodological problems and theoretical debates that resulted from Schneider's challenge nor subsequent approaches in the field. Cox's work, however, is interesting and admirable for its adoption of Tilly's goals of social history, namely the rather standard goal of reconstituting the experience of particular groups and ordinary people, followed by the important and meaningful goal of connecting such reconstitutions to larger social processes and change (Tilly 1987).

<http://rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue8/articles/varto-kinship.pdf>

the terminology of traditional kinship theory (e.g., consanguines, affines, patriline, agnatic kin) as cross-cultural points of analysis and retain older kinship studies' emphasis on marriage patterns and genealogy and descent mapped out in elaborate diagrams. Approximately thirty years ago this approach received significant criticism destructive enough to signal a 'demise' of the discipline, the most damning of which came from Schneider, who declared that there is no kinship.³ At greatest issue was the assumption of a universally applicable definition of kinship and hence the use of Eurocentric or Western notions of kinship as points of cross-cultural analysis or comparison. The field has since re-invented itself through intense theoretical argument and reflection. From that discussion and the subsequent renewal and re-direction of kinship studies in anthropology, there is much to be learned by classical historians about our own ideas of, assumptions about, and approaches to kinship.⁴ This short paper highlights some of the themes of that discussion and the resulting lessons for classical historians, namely: 1) the classical connections in development of kinship studies; 2) the difficulties of defining and studying kinship across culture and time; 3) the benefits and challenges associated with contextual approaches; and 4) the exploration of kinship, state, and society without evolutionary theory.

Classical connections

Attention must be given by ancient historians to the history and development of the terminology and concepts in kinship studies, in particular, to their connection to the study of the Classical world. Many of the working definitions and ideas in kinship studies today are derived from Eurocentric models, which in turn are linked to nineteenth-century views of the classical world, ancient Rome in

³ Schneider 1972, 1984.

⁴ Conversely, recent shifts and ideas in ancient history should also be brought to bear on anthropological and sociological kinship studies, especially re-examinations the classical ideas and kinship systems which, in their nineteenth-century idealised forms, are so foundational to the field of kinship studies.

particular. For example, Stone gives the Roman *gens* as a prime example of a patrilineal descent group, referencing Morgan's *Ancient Society* from 1877.⁵ Without turning to recent or even twentieth-century scholarship on Early Rome and the *gens*, she accepts, unchallenged, Morgan's nineteenth-century ethnographic analysis of the Roman *gens* as a 'named, exogamous, highly corporate group with land and property rights held in common, and with religious and political significance.'⁶ Stone also accepts Morgan's evolutionary, idealised, and epitomising scheme of Roman history, in which the *gentes* (as clans) lose their corporate nature as Rome becomes a state and as land and property become held individually, so that by the later Republic only a sense of tribal identity remained as a holdover of the former corporate *gentes*.⁷ The acceptance of such schemes of classical history, formed in the academic and cultural climate of nineteenth-century ethnology, seemingly without reservation, is extremely curious in light of the criticisms made in anthropology for applying such models to other cultures. Perhaps the idea exists that such nineteenth-century models, while being too Eurocentric or culturally specific to be applicable to other societies and cultures, are accurate and appropriate representations of the classical societies which were their prototypes.

Morgan and colleagues, such as Maine, McLennan, Bachofen, and Fustel de Coulanges, who were working to identify and characterise stages in the progressive evolution of human society, were very much interested in the classical world and its systems of kinship, especially ancient Rome and its *gens*, which were for them the patrilineal society and the patrilineal descent group *par*

⁵ Morgan 1877: 285-308, esp. 292-93; Stone 2006: 76-78.

⁶ Stone 2006: 77.

⁷ Stone 2006: 76-77.

excellence.⁸ They drew their terminology from ancient Rome and the contemporary understanding of the Roman *gens* became particularly influential in developing evolutionist ethnographic models of the stages in the progression of human society. Although such models have long been questioned and/or rejected across the humanities and social sciences, terminology and concepts from these early works in ethnology remain (e.g., *pater*, *mater*, *patriarchy*, *matrilineal*).⁹ Anthropological models of tribal societies were fundamentally shaped by early ideas of the classical world, especially the now largely de-bunked evolutionary theory that early Greek society was focused on and characterised by kinship and descent groups along the order of a clan-like Roman *gens*, namely the Greek *genē* or *genos*.¹⁰ It is, therefore, necessary for classical historians to be wary of the traditional terminology and concepts influenced, at their origin, by classical models and to be aware of the circular arguments such terminology and concepts can provoke. As Smith writes, 'Taking a rigid definition of the *gens* and applying it as an archetype (explicitly or otherwise) to other societies has been the baneful characteristic of a century and more of classical scholarship.'¹¹ We must be wary

⁸ See Service 1985: 113-32. Some of the consequences of this for understanding ancient Greek kinship have been recognised, e.g., by Bourriot (1976: 29-198), Roussel (1976: 17-25, 169-71), Humphreys (1978: 175-208 [with Momigliano]; 1983: 131-43), Sallares (1991: 197-201); Patterson (1998: 1-43), and Smith (2006: 65-113, 141).

⁹ For an overview of the standard Latin kinship terminology used in anthropology, see, e.g., Parkin 1997: 14-36.

¹⁰ The idea that there is stage of human social evolution in which human society is primarily kinship-focussed and that this stage can be seen in the early history of Greece and Rome, is fundamental to the formulation of human evolutionary progress in both Fustel de Coulange's *La cité antique* and Morgan's *Ancient Society*, although the interpretation and description of that stage differs between the scholars.

¹¹ Smith 2006: 141.

<http://rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue8/articles/varto-kinship.pdf>

of circularly adopting the anthropological models formed from this and other classical archetypes.

Kinship across culture and time

Whether a universally or cross-culturally applicable terminology for family, household, and kinship is really possible was at the heart of the so-called demise of kinship in anthropology in the 1970s and 1980s. The extreme relativist view, attributed largely to Schneider, claimed that there is no 'kinship', i.e., no comparable, universal institution or concept in human societies that can be called 'kinship'.¹² Therefore, according to this position, there is nothing to be studied and no field of kinship studies can be sustained. Challenging the traditional viewpoint that all human societies have kinship because they recognise and elevate bonds created through the biological universals of sex and reproduction, Schneider cast serious doubt on the universality of biology and genealogy in determining relationships and thus also on the universality of the concept of kinship itself. Since Schneider, defining and studying kinship has largely been caught in a struggle between his relativism in which there is no universally present concept of 'kinship' and a desire or need to continue studying family and kin relations as something that, outside of theory and the academy, people recognise is there and is an important part of human existence. The challenge is to study kinship cross-culturally, while recognising that it may not be able to be cross-culturally defined.

¹² Schneider 1972, 1984. Although Schneider is the usual representative of the critique of traditional kinship theory, others scholars similarly questioned the categories used in kinship studies as part of a larger movement in anthropological kinship studies (see Franklin and McKinnon 2001: 2-4). On the demise, see Harris 1990: 34-35; Holy 1996: 3-8; Parkin 1997: 153-59; Stone 2006: 19-22. See Lamphere 2001, on what she labels the 'transformation' of kinship studies following the 'demise'.

So what do we do? If we become too relativist, we risk having nothing to study. If we ignore Schneider's critique, we risk mistakenly imposing a concept of kinship on other cultures or picking apples and oranges to compare. Some anthropologists have returned to a more traditional universal definition, which is connected to biology, although they importantly recognise that kinship can also be determined by social factors and that kinship in general is a matter of purely social definition.¹³ Others have accepted Schneider's challenge and through them kinship studies re-emerged from its 'demise' more attuned to cultural differences and transformed in focus.¹⁴ Collier and Yanagisako, for example, advocate that gender and kinship can be studied together as mutually constituted in social systems and that both are determined culturally, removing biological fact from both concepts.¹⁵ Carsten has tried to resurrect kinship studies in light of the lack of a cross-cultural definition of kinship by studying 'relatedness' instead, and beginning with a given culture's conceptions of 'relatedness'.¹⁶ This approach has problems in that it only really renames the initial difficulty and becomes overly broad in scope encompassing all human relationships.¹⁷ Thus 'relatedness' leaves us with the same problem of whether there are certain human relationships that are distinguishable from others and can be classified apart from others and whether such relationships can be called kinship. It does, however,

¹³ For a more traditional definition with a recognition of social factors, see, e.g., Parkin 1997: 3, 6, 32: 'All human societies have kinship, that is, they all impose some privileged cultural order over the biological universals of sexual relations and continuous human reproduction through birth' (Parkin 1997: 3).

¹⁴ For movement towards a non-biological definition, see, e.g., Collier and Yanagisako 1987; Carsten 1995. See also, articles in Carsten's edited volume *Cultures of Relatedness* (2000) and in Franklin and McKinnon's edited volume *Relative Values: Reconfiguring Kinship Studies* (2001).

¹⁵ Collier and Yanagisako 1987; Yanagisako 1987.

¹⁶ Carsten 1995, 2000.

¹⁷ For criticisms of Carsten's semantic switch, see Holy 1996: 168.

<http://rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue8/articles/varto-kinship.pdf>

have the appeal of breaking free from some of the Eurocentric or Western ideas associated with kinship, if only by a semantic substitution. Another change that took place in the 1990s as a part of the renewal of kinship studies was to view kinship as a process, i.e., as created or emerging through various actions over time or lapsing with action or inaction.¹⁸ While such an approach still does not provide a cross-cultural definition for kinship, it does present a way of thinking about kinship that is free of the constraints of biology and genealogy, but need not be divorced from them. Although no 'solution' has been found to the problem of how to study kinship universally, the field of kinship studies in anthropology and sociology is nevertheless thriving through methodological discussions and new areas of inquiry.¹⁹

The important lesson for classical historians here is to be aware of the serious methodological concerns about universal definitions and the cross-cultural applicability of kinship terminology, and, accordingly, to avoid the same weaknesses in thinking and methodology that brought about the 'demise' of kinship studies. This means avoiding strictly philological approaches that seek to match terms with supposedly universal concepts of kinship or that use such terminology to classify types of kinship and society. Consider, for example, the misunderstanding of early Greek and Roman kinship and society that resulted from earlier scholarship's matching (or re-matching) of *gens*, *genē*, or *genos* with anthropological concepts of tribe or clan. Terminology alone, moreover, may present only a small part or distorted picture of ancient kinship, and cannot be

¹⁸ E.g., Cowan et al. adopt a definition for family or kin in which 'people's being family or kin to one another constitutes a special kind of personal and collective project -kinship involves a set of task as well as relationships ' (1993: xi).

Similarly, Stone writes, 'Kinship relations *in general* entail the idea of rights and obligations' (2006: 5).

¹⁹ E.g., the collections of articles embracing new approaches and theory edited by Carsten (2000), Stone (2001), Franklin and McKinnon (2001).

<http://rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue8/articles/varto-kinship.pdf>

relied upon alone to reconstruct kinship systems. Ancient historians should also be careful not to adopt a strictly biological definition of kinship. Advances in DNA and genetic trait analysis on groups of buried individuals have increased our ability to determine possible biological kinship connections within hypothesized groups and will contribute to our understanding of ancient kinship; however, relationships that may fall within a cultural understanding of kinship are not necessarily recognisable through scientific tests.²⁰ Similarly, when we compile information and create family tree diagrams, we must be aware that they are modern constructions based on a notion of the universality of biological and affinal kinship. Created with modern methods of illustrating the world, such diagrams are possibly quite foreign to ancient ways of thinking about kinship. These implications for ancient historians, presented by the theorizing of anthropologists and sociologists on studying kinship across culture and time, are ultimately about being sensitive to cultural differences in the conception of kinship and, therefore, push us toward considering the matter more contextually.

Contextual approaches: benefits and challenges

Since the mid-1980s, there have indeed been calls in anthropology for more contextual approaches to kinship and family.²¹ It is not that cross-cultural comparisons are not useful or interesting, but rather that universal definitions and categories of kinship should not be assumed and used as points of cross-cultural analysis. The questioning of the universal role of biology in determining kinship reminds us that cultures may not have the same technological ability, respect, or taste for such scientific facts and may determine kin, kinship relationships, and

²⁰ See MacKinnon 2007 for an overview of the history of osteological research, both human and animal, in Classical archaeology. See also Morris 1992, 70-102, for an overview of the potential and limitations of osteology for studying ancient history.

²¹ See, for example, Collier and Yanagisako 1987; Cowan et al. 1993: ix, xi; Stone 2006.

<http://rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue8/articles/varto-kinship.pdf>

descent in ways other than through blood and procreation.²² Indeed, even the idea of being related 'by blood' or 'being of the same blood' is a cultural one, based on a metaphorical, particular, or even mistaken understanding of biological relatedness. Thus it is neither possible nor appropriate to construct definitions that are cross-culturally (or cross-temporally) applicable, even if the concepts are seemingly biologically or genealogically derived. Terms rooted in Western or Eurocentric ideas of kinship such as 'patrilinear', 'consanguines', or 'cognatic descent', for example, are useful only as descriptors and not as definitions or points and tools for analysis or comparison.²³

Contextual approaches can also treat gender as culturally determined rather than universally present through biological fact.²⁴ In this view, then, there can be no *universal* structuralist dichotomies and domains, such as the public sphere is male and the domestic sphere is female. Either dichotomies exist but are not universal and their character is culturally determined, or else dichotomies do not exist in reality and are only a theoretical product of structural analysis. Either position, however, suggests that *automatically* identifying women with the domestic sphere and domestic interests, or with nature, or any other supposedly universal pigeonhole, should be avoided. Instead we should determine spheres and interests contextually along with our terminology and concepts.

The scholarship on the social history of ancient Greece, however, often does link or equate the family with women and therefore links the study of family with the

²² See the discussions in Collier and Yanagisako 1987: 27-35; Franklin and McKinnon 2001: 10-15.

²³ This was a major component of Schneider's critique of kinship studies (1984: 196-97). See also, Parkin 1997: 7-8.

²⁴ E.g., Collier and Yanagisako 1987; Yanagisako 1987; Comaroff 1987.

<http://rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue8/articles/varto-kinship.pdf>

study of women.²⁵ *Linking* the two can be sound, when it is not done automatically and when it results from the evidence; *equating*, however, is a problem. Following the structuralist framework, in which male equals public and female equals domestic, promotes the assumption that family is primarily a female concern, diminishing or even excluding both male concern or involvement. It also either distances kinship ideas from the public sphere or distances kinship ideas or larger kinship groups from a smaller family unit. Moreover, while female activities in ancient Greece seem to have been largely, but not wholly, what we might characterise as domestic, to assign opposing structuralist domains to genders can be misleading. As Rawson writes, '[t]he public-private opposition was not absolute. We therefore risk distorting women's experience if we go too far in de-emphasising the public sphere.'²⁶ She adds, 'we should try to reconstruct women's relationship to the city and the state.'²⁷ As complement, I would add that we should also reconstruct kinship's relationship to the city and the state, breaking down both the opposition between private and public spheres and the equation of the family with women.

Kinship and society

Ethnographic evolutionary models in which kinship is understood to characterise or constitute a whole society at a particular stage in its development, also

²⁵ See Pomeroy's interesting comments on women's history and family history, in which she writes that she assumed that she would be concentrating on women while studying the family, since women's sphere was the family. Her assumption proved false in that "it was easy to lose track of women" (1997: 14) and she attributes this to male interest and bias in the sources. While I accept this argument (there is clearly bias in the sources), it is interesting that this does not lead her also to reconsider the usefulness of dichotomies and spheres of interest as analytical tools.

²⁶ Rawson 1995: 13.

²⁷ Rawson 1995: 13.

<http://rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue8/articles/varto-kinship.pdf>

received a significant amount of attention in the criticism that signalled the 'demise' of kinship.²⁸ This idea of a primacy of either state or kinship groups can be found in both evolutionary and structuralist approaches to political and social change in Greek antiquity.²⁹ Both involve a notion of competition between different types of human relationships. Both evolutionary and structuralist models set the interests of each party up as antithetical and explain political change through the breaking down of certain bonds (usually kinship) in favour of new bonds (those of the state).³⁰ These models have meant studying societies as kinship-focused, i.e., as societies in which there is a primacy of kinship bonds over other bonds, dominated by unilineal descent groups before they become state-focused at the expense of those previously powerful descent groups.³¹ They, therefore, pit descent systems against societies of low and high levels of

²⁸ For a critique of the idea of kinship-based societies as part of a wider critique of traditional anthropological kinship studies, see Schneider 1984: 57-65, 181-85. See also Fortes 1978: 14-16.

²⁹ Manville, for example, writes that the *oikos* "provided the primary principle of classical society, and everything known about earlier time suggests that this had long been the case" (1990: 58). Patterson firmly rejects the evolutionary view of the family-state relationship and its primary focus on the clan, but argues that the primary focus is the *oikos* or household, emphasising "the centrality of the household as the primary focus of both family loyalty and identity" (1998: 47).

³⁰ In Seaford's work (1994, 2004), for example, a "contradiction between *polis* and household" (1994: xviii) and the need for the *polis* to triumph over kinship groups (the clan and the household) in order to become established are major themes.

³¹ The idea of kinship-based society is implicit, e.g., in Andrewes' conception of the development of the Athenian *polis*: he sees a time in which kinship was "the basis for social and political organization" and from which remnants of clan power were held over into the non-kinship-based society of fourth century Athens (1982: 367-68).

<http://rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue8/articles/varto-kinship.pdf>

complexity, and corporate descent groups against states and economic markets in complex societies.³² Although such evolutionary schemes have long drawn serious criticism in many disciplines, *neo-evolutionary* typologies and evolutionary ideas continue to be adopted in historical and anthropological studies of kinship and society, most often implicitly.³³ For example, some scholars see the formation of kinship bonds as being in competition with other modes of human bonding.³⁴ This has long been the case in scholarship on Early Greek society and state formation. There are, however, serious problems with such analysis. We need not assume that humans are incapable of belonging or being loyal to multiple social groups or networks at one time nor that the interests of those various social groups or networks are so antithetical that they cannot co-exist, both retain or even share social power, or contribute to the other's wielding of social power.³⁵ It is, therefore, necessary to adopt a more holistic picture of the many ways in which people could be identified and identify themselves and divide their loyalties, obligations, and rights.³⁶ The recognition of overlapping and interpenetrating groups or networks, in particular, allows multiple identities and

³² For examples of such theories, see the discussion in Pasternak et al. 1997: 262-64.

³³ A criticism, for example, lies in the fact that, although descent groups are less common in what anthropologists have classified as simple and complex societies, they are not absent from them, as Pasternak et al. point out (1997: 264).

³⁴ Parkin writes "human society has a long history of relationships formed in other ways than kinship, namely through informal associations or networks and formal contractual obligations. These, of course, are alternatives to kinship, and, while they may push back its boundaries, they have not so far been able to eradicate it entirely" (1997: 128).

³⁵ On social identity and social groups, see Hall 2007: 338.

³⁶ For a useful overview of the relationship between the concepts of evolution and kinship in anthropology, see Jamard 2006: 45-58.

<http://rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue8/articles/varto-kinship.pdf>

varied affiliations of individuals to be incorporated within a model, instead of constraining individuals and interests to one social group or network or another. Thus we can situate kinship among state, society, culture, and economy and not just as a structuring principle of the state or as only a part of society and culture completely separate from the state.

One way to incorporate such thinking is to focus on kinship as relationships involving actions, obligations, rights, and privileges, instead of focusing on kinship as comprised of concrete separate entities in a system.³⁷ This means concentrating less on descent or cognatic groups and more on the whole class or category of relationships which may be based on indigenous ideas of kinship. Such an approach looks at the ways in which relatedness was expressed and thought what was important about kinship and its expression. This avoids the use of traditional kinship methodology as points of analysis and comparison, and attempts to understand kinship culturally and contextually. It still, however, allows for kinship to be understood or determined both biologically and socially. It is an attempt to identify and study the ideas people had and expressed concerning their own relatedness. Thus, although such an approach *is* predicated on the idea that there is at least some loose category of human relationships to be studied across culture and time, which we might call kinship, the approach need not rest on a universally applicable definition or concept of kinship.

In Conclusion

This kinship ideas approach allows ancient historians to explore how ancients conceived of and expressed kinship, and what was important in its expression. To this end, it is useful to accept kinship as a certain type or classification of relatedness or human bonds, which can contain notions of obligation, privilege,

³⁷ In this, I advocate more of a relational approach than a substantive approach, although it also involves a processual idea of kinship. See Parkin (1997: 138-39) on the substantive and relational debate.

<http://rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue8/articles/varto-kinship.pdf>

and affection often based on, but not limited to, procreation and marriage. While this is a very loose working definition of kinship, this looseness allows the components of the definition to be filled out and characterised contextually by ancient concepts and terminology. Therefore, where categories or terminologies need to be established in order to proceed beyond the paralysing effects of extreme relativism and move on to analysis, we need not accept their traditional definitions from kinship studies, but we can instead attempt to use them descriptively and to understand them contextually. Given the lack of a theoretical universal definition or concept of kinship resulting from the challenge to traditional approaches to and definitions of kinship based on biology, the best method for moving forward for classical historians is to recognise the profound limitations of earlier conventions, adopt an approach sympathetic to Schneider's critique, and consider the matter of kinship contextually, before moving, with a firmer grounding of ancient ideas of kinship, to cross-cultural comparisons and universal analysis.

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