

Workshop 42

Kinship, Distance and Proximity in the Anthropology of Europe

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Kinship is a category that mediates understandings and conceptualisations of closeness and distance, connectedness and disconnection, unity and difference both in social practice and in anthropological theory. In the anthropology of Europe, an area close to many anthropologists as their own and/ or their discipline's birthplace, kinship models have been used historically to distance certain regions (e.g. 'the Mediterranean', 'the Balkans') as suitable objects of ethnographic and anthropological enquiry. The deconstruction of such models and of the associated idea of regional/ cultural difference has generated many new studies that reveal the dynamic and flexible nature of kinship and personhood in those ethnographic settings. At the same time studies on the impact of assisted conception on notions of kinship and personhood have introduced the notion of 'Euro-American' kinship as a new analytical category. These theoretical shifts however have left open the question of the wider kinship model(s) at play in European societies and in anthropological theory: is there an 'European' kinship? Is this an analytically valid category and, if not, what should replace it? What kinship model(s) do we have in Europe? Is there a 'Euro-American' model that has spread from Northern Europe to other parts of the continent replacing pre-existing diversity? If so, how and why has this happened? Or do we need a completely new way of conceptualising kinship similarities and differences, proximity and distance in Europe? Conversely, do models of kinship play a role in indigenous definitions of unity and differentiation, closeness and distance (e.g. in defining 'Europeanness' within and outside Europe)? We welcome papers that explore at a theoretical and/ or at an ethnographic level kinship connections (and disconnections) within and without Europe.

Continuity and Discontinuity, Closeness and Distance: 'Euro-American' Kinship and South Europe

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“Now while I take ‘English’ as my exemplar of a folk model and thus illustrative of Euro-American kinship thinking, there is also good reason to [...] distinguish it from some continental or Southern European models” (Strathern, 1992: 106).

This paper explores the viability of the notion of ‘Euro-American’ kinship in South Europe, an area kept geographically and culturally distinct in much literature on European kinship. Drawing on ethnographic research carried out in clinics of assisted conception in Italy, the paper compares heterosexual and lesbian and gay couples’ views and experiences of procreation, the family and relatedness as shaped by (or as shaping) the choice of assisted conception. These accounts (and those of lesbian and gay couples more blatantly than those of heterosexual couples) reveal what’s at stake in programmes of gamete donation. They expose the uncertainty, unfamiliarity and strangeness of making relatives using egg and sperm donors; at the same time they uncover certain powerful kinship idioms. Overall the material from South Europe shows some unexpected ethnographic and analytical continuities/ similarities with works on assist conception produced in the last two decades in North Europe and America that are distinctly labelled ‘Euro-American’. This begs the question of whether this material is exceptional or whether the ‘Euro-American’ kinship model contains more than it claims.

Same or Different? Kin Resemblance and Kinship Models in the Anthropology of Europe

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This paper uses ethnography from North-East Italy to interrogate Strathern’s notion of ‘Euro-American’ kinship. The ethnography analyses the notion of ‘resemblance’ as it is used in the context of kinship relations locally and shows that this notion is one of ways in which relatedness (in the sense of moral claim on persons and identification between persons) is constructed in a way that cuts across the distinction between nature and nurture, biology and culture. Moreover the kinship idiom of resemblance is one of the means by which a local sphere of identification and affiliation is defined, also self-consciously linked with specific family forms (notably the ‘peasant extended family’) marked as ‘local’ and ‘traditional’. This analysis argues that ‘kinship’ as social construction of moral and emotional identifications, claims, relations and affiliations is bound up with the social construction of place and localness and therefore contributes to constitute difference in relation to wider frames of cultural reference. This material is used to assess critically Strathern’s notion of ‘Euro-American’ kinship, in particular its use of geographical/ cultural dichotomies (North/ South; Protestant/ Catholic) to define sameness and difference in kinship models across the

continent.

“The Children of Nobody”: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives on Infant Abandonment

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This paper is based on archival research on infant abandonment in late 19th century Naples. Its main purpose is to discuss the theoretical ramification of this case study and of the historical perspective in general. What kind of insights can the comparative perspective of anthropology offer to the interpretation of a phenomenon that has largely been studied by historical demographers? And, by the same token, how do historical studies contribute to current anthropological discussions on kinship? The recent “repatriation” and “resurgence” of kinship studies (Peletz 1995) has tended to be quite ahistorical when focusing on ‘Euro-American kinship’. Similarly, in the related discussions on relatedness, performativity and personhood, the ‘west’ often figures as an implicit or largely under-theorised point of comparison. It is too easily forgotten that “pre-NRT Europe” has had a complex history that cannot be reduced to sociological notions of the unfolding of modernisation. The case study presented brings into the fore social technologies that were actually capable of ‘denaturalising’ and refashioning the natural bonds. Child abandonment was a massive, transnational phenomenon in the 19th century, when 10 million babies were abandoned in institutions. By focusing on the Neapolitan foundling home, the paper will make use of anthropological discussions concerning the social pathways of substances, identities and social relations. “Coming into being” was a complex process where parenthood could be un-made, remade and partitioned.

Kinship, Difference and the Idea of Nation: Some Thoughts from Eastern Europe

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Many of the classic kinship studies of the anthropology of Europe from the twentieth century focused on geographical differences and types of family structure. Implicit in the models of geographical distinctiveness of European regions were particular assumptions about the backward or more exotic, and certainly less modern, nature of Eastern European kinship (and thereby of Eastern Europe itself). To a great extent, these family models were linked to the peasantry, or at least were based on ethnographic and ethnological studies of rural Eastern Europe. However, another model of Eastern European kinship also developed in the twentieth century (or perhaps earlier) which was based less on structural difference and more on ideological distinction. This looked at kinship in terms of ideology. Kinship ideologies were based in strong systems of classification, in

which the symbolic or load bearing elements were gender, blood and soil, articulated first and foremost in a fierce, if decidedly un/modern, sense of nation. This paper looks at these two very different constructions of what makes Eastern European kinship 'special', and then, looking at specific ethnographies, goes on to question the relevance of such regional models for kinship studies generally.

A Society of Virtual Kin: State, Family and Children's Homes in The Russian Far East

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Over a decade has passed since the beginning of perestroika, which marked the outset of the enormous societal changes affecting all aspects of the life of the Russian population. Political, social, and economic changes have often been extreme, overt and tangible. One of the crisis areas is child and family welfare. In the 2000s the number of street children in the Russian Federation is estimated to be over 1 million. The number of children without parental care has also been growing steadily, reaching some 776,000 in 2003. One third of these children, or 'social orphans', have living relatives but are raised in institutions, while the rest are placed in adoptive or guardian families. The discourse on 'social orphans' often identifies the actor responsible and accountable for their initial placement and further difficulties: their birth family, who is believed to have abandoned the children. The State, on the contrary, is often construed as a partner in childcare, that in the absence of the biological family is compelled to take upon itself the parental responsibility for these children. Economic hardship is the most plausible explanation for such a large number of 'out of family' children. Yet there may be deeper processes at work. Based on ethnographic data, this paper explores the language and practices of social kinship and considers a (post) Soviet 'kinship through institutions and ideology' model, which goes beyond, and often outwardly rejects, biological connectedness in favour of symbolic reproduction. The presenter uses Russia as an example of processes found in other European countries where 'society' or 'State' take up many responsibilities previously carried out by the biological family, which contributes to the feeling of responsibility and unity.

Ossifying Kinship Through Politics: A Study of Kinship Values Attributed to the Body in Post-Conflict Serbia

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The proposed paper will investigate the ways in which idioms and practices of kinship are inflected by situations of conflict, identifying and analysing discourses of value that circulate around dead bodies in post-conflict contexts. Based on an ongoing fieldwork research in Belgrade, the paper will discuss how Serbian society

addresses and comes to terms with past injustices by recourse to images of the sundered body, which resituates important issues in kinship and political anthropology, particularly as these pertain to Balkans region and European ethnography. During the recent Yugoslav wars, the body was often invoked as a metaphor for national wholeness and resilience; it symbolised people's claims to a particular territory and motivated them to take sides or to take up arms. In the aftermath, when many bodies had become body parts, human remains were in turn invested with a unique significance, as carriers of certain defining forms of kinship and national identity. I propose that arguments over the meaning of human remains can serve as metonyms for debates over "local" and "non-local" kinship models within former Yugoslavia. The practices of identification, retention and respect of human remains appear crucial in informing contemporary indigenous definitions of "Serbian kinship ties" in opposition to other (non-Serbian, Balkan, European, American) kinship ties and practices. The proposed analyses of images of the dead body mobilised for purposes of reinforcing local kinship ties in Serbia thus hopes to address and interrogate the use of broader anthropological concept(s) of "European kinship".

The Validity of a European Kinship Model: Dowry, Agnation and the Anomaly of the South Slavs

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South Slavic societies have often been described as exceptional because, in an otherwise bilateral region, they are agnatic. However, the transmission of familial property to women amongst South Slavs is just as often considered to be similar to the rest of Europe. Are South Slavs then doubly anomalous: agnatic within a conventionally defined bilateral region, and dowry-givers to boot? This paper examines the analytical validity of wide-scale comparativism and the saliency of a European model of kinship.

European Kinship Ties as a Source of Social Security - One System or Several?

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Though there has been a tendency in recent anthropological work (e.g. Goody, Strathern) to emphasise what European family and kinship systems have in common, there are also well documented differences within contemporary Europe. These differences concern household composition and residential patterns, as well as the role of kinship in providing social security (care, access to education, financial support, help finding employment). Changing patterns of marriage, cohabitation and divorce, declining fertility and aging populations mean that the patterns of regional difference are changing but not disappearing.

Should these differences be understood as the responses of a single underlying kinship system to differing economic and political circumstances, or do they require us to think in terms of a number of distinct kinship systems within Europe? In this paper I will outline a new EU-financed project, coordinated by MPI Halle and covering eight countries, that aims to investigate this question. The paper will describe how we plan to combine ethnographic fieldwork with quantitative methods and historical data to throw light on these issues, and to explore their potential implications for social policy.