

Culture, Nature, and History: The Case of Ancient Sexuality

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Shortly before his death in 1984, Michel Foucault published the second and third volumes of his *History of Sexuality*, treating in turn Greek and Roman culture.¹ These studies were the product of an unexpected detour into the classical past that occupied the last years of the great philosopher-historian's life. It would be difficult to think of a contribution from an outsider that has sparked more interest and more debate in ancient studies, an area of the field that is sometimes isolated behind the forbidding ramparts of Greek and Latin. But the appearance of volume 1 of the *History of Sexuality* in French in 1976, and the two volumes on classical antiquity eight years later marked an intellectual moment of the first order, crystallizing and giving powerful expression to a number of disparate tendencies afoot in the humanities and social sciences in the 1970s and 1980s.² When compared to the scope and ambition of Foucault's earlier work, the two books on ancient sexuality are sometimes regarded (by those outside of Classics) as a curiosity, if not a disappointment. But Foucault's work on Greece and Rome was a crucial episode of disciplinary formation, not only for classical studies but also for history and anthropology more generally. The history of sexuality came together at a particular configuration of biology and anthropology that prevailed over the last quarter of the twentieth century. In Foucault's wake, as the study of sexual cultures became a flourishing enterprise, many historians of sexuality came to model their research on hermeneutic strands in the discipline of anthropology, in reaction *against* then-contemporary Darwinian approaches to human behavior. Historians today are the heirs of this episode of disciplinary formation, often in subtle and invisible ways, because the effectively dualistic conception of "nature" and "culture" which still

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¹ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 2, *L'usage des plaisirs* (Paris, 1984); Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 3, *Le souci de soi* (Paris, 1984).

² Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1, *La volonté de savoir* (Paris, 1976).

frames the study of sexuality bears the stamp of a certain moment in the relationship between the natural and social sciences.

This article has three goals. The first is to investigate what historians of sexuality have meant when they call themselves “anthropologists” in order to distinguish themselves from “biologists.” These claims are grounded in a highly contingent and even polemical conception of what biology and anthropology are. By reconstructing the strategic use of these terms in the crucial period of disciplinary formation, we can appreciate why sexuality in particular proved such a rich site of conflict between different explanatory models of human behavior. The second goal is to follow the absorption of broader ideas about culture and nature into the study of ancient sexuality, as a case study in disciplinary formation, and to demonstrate that the sub-field, in its methods and its aims, is still shaped by a particular conception of what biology and anthropology are. The interpretation of culture became the task of the historian of sexuality, because the meanings stored in culture really accounted for the astonishing diversity of human sexual behavior. If biologists claimed to explain human behavior, they were *ipso facto* guilty of the sin of genetic determinism; biological reductionism acted as a foil to the historian’s ability to process particularity and difference. The metaphysics and rhetoric of the sub-discipline developed in step. The final goal of this article is to suggest that, in the years since the history of sexuality took shape, the ground has shifted, and the terms “culture” and “nature” simply cannot mean what they did in the 1980s. Indeed, historians, anthropologists, and biologists need each other more than ever before, and the article surveys some frontiers of integration which historians of sexuality might consider exploring, looking specifically at a problem which was once, and is again becoming, relevant to historians, anthropologists, and biologists alike, and which cannot be understood without their collective input: monogamy.

It was no accident that the study of sexuality became perhaps the most fiercely contested ground in a broad struggle over the place of humanity between biology and culture. The effort by Foucault and others to denaturalize *sexuality* was a radical way of reckoning with a disciplinary heritage deeply rooted in the study of *kinship* and *marriage*. By uncovering the variability and plasticity of the sex drive itself, cultural constructionists aimed to destabilize a central prop in the foundations of the human sciences. As it happened, at the exact same time, for reasons internal to the development of evolutionary biology, others were making unprecedentedly strong and sophisticated claims for the role of nature in human social life. As one observer has put it, the timing of this collision “could hardly have been worse, with the views so polarized and the clash so severe.”³ The reverberations were widely felt, and there

³ Bernard Chapais, *Primeval Kinship: How Pair-Bonding Gave Birth to Human Society* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), 54.

were disciplinary ramifications across a broad range of fields. Whereas anthropologists have continuously and contentiously grappled with the problematic relationship between biology and culture, historians have been more reluctant to reckon explicitly with the place of nature in their analysis. This suppression is now especially problematic insofar as many of the most exciting frontiers in biology and the biologically oriented social sciences are engaged with the problem of culture and, necessarily, its history.

BIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY: DISCIPLINARY FORMATION IN LONG PERSPECTIVE

It is common in the study of ancient sexuality to find statements of the following two classes: First, historians draw a clear line between culture and biology. “Sex is about penises and vulvas (or things in between), and gender is about what we do with them; sex is about biology, gender is about culture....”⁴ Second, historians of sexuality regularly identify themselves as anthropologists. The past is a foreign country, and historians are ethnographers whose informants are dead. One historian claimed to have written “an essay in symbolic anthropology by an unlicensed practitioner, proper fieldwork being impossible until the author gets to Hades.”⁵ Another noted, “The methods of interpretive anthropology are applicable only up to a point, since no one can interview or observe living Romans, ask them about their ideas of masculinity and sexuality, or chart their behaviors.”⁶ Yet another has compared herself to an ersatz Clifford Geertz, unable to watch the cockfight in person.⁷ These are wry but self-conscious statements from some of the most outstanding practitioners in the field, and they are unexpectedly revealing. The history of sexuality, as a collective project, must be situated in a context where anthropology could be seen as an alternative to biology. In fact, “anthropology,” in this formulation, refers to one strand of a diverse field; likewise, “biology” refers to a visible but particular branch of evolutionary theory. In short, we must contextualize what “anthropology” and “biology” meant in the formative phase of the history of sexuality.

That is a long story. We must do here with a quick and partial genealogy of evolutionary and anthropological approaches to human behavior as they stood in the years when Foucault’s landmark studies appeared. In *The Origin of Species*, published in 1859, Darwin was circumspect about the implications

⁴ Holt Parker, “The Myth of the Heterosexual: Anthropology and Sexuality for Classicists,” *Arethusa* 34 (2001): 313–62, at 327–28; or David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York, 1990), 25. It would be easy, and gratuitous, to multiply virtually identical expressions.

⁵ Maud Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton, 1995), xiv.

⁶ Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 2010), 255.

⁷ Rebecca Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge, 2006), 43.

of natural selection for human origins, though he allowed himself the comment that “light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history.”⁸ The genie was out of the bottle, however, and debate instantly raged about human evolution. Not until 1871 did Darwin lay out his views, in *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*. In *Descent* Darwin pursues two goals. First, he elaborates on the importance of sexual selection as a distinct form of selection pressure. While natural selection focuses broadly on the fitness effects of various morphological or behavioral traits that allow an organism to survive and reproduce, sexual selection focuses on the fitness consequences of intraspecific competition. Second, Darwin patiently tried to narrow the gap between humans and “lower animals” by “comparison of the mental powers.” His object was to show that “there is no fundamental difference between man and the higher mammals in their mental faculties,” and that the observed distinctions were a matter of degree, not of kind.⁹

The groundwork for serious evolutionary study of human behavior was laid in *The Descent of Man*, but over the next fifty years Darwin’s insights were more abused than used.¹⁰ Darwin, moreover, had no accurate concept of how traits were transmitted between generations. In the 1930s and 1940s, Darwinian processes were explained in terms of Mendelian genetics, revitalizing evolutionary theory and establishing the “new synthesis” on firm theoretical foundations. Darwin had already recognized that selection could act on behavioral traits just as much as physical ones, and the study of animal behavior within an evolutionary framework soon emerged as the field of “ethology.” Nikolaas Tinbergen’s *Study of Instinct* marked ethology’s coming of age as a major branch of evolutionary theory.¹¹ Karl Lorenz’s *On Aggression* proved that evolutionary analysis of human behavior was an inevitable adjunct to the study of animal instincts.¹² The hostile response it—and a slew of popular and usually ill-formulated books (most famously, Desmond Morris’ *The Naked Ape*)—evoked was an early salvo in the looming battle between sociobiologists and social scientists. Yet the major breakthroughs in the study of human behavior would not come from this corner of evolutionary science.

Instead, the evolutionary study of human behavior was to emerge out of a very specific trajectory that deeply influenced the forms that it would ultimately take, and the course of its collision with the social sciences. Sexual selection theory received striking empirical support in 1948 from a study of the

⁸ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (London, 1859).

⁹ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London, 1871).

¹⁰ Kevin Laland and Gillian Brown, *Sense and Nonsense: Evolutionary Perspectives on Human Behaviour* (Oxford, 2002), 37–47.

¹¹ Nikolaas Tinbergen, *The Study of Instinct* (Oxford, 1951).

¹² Karl Lorenz, *On Aggression* (New York, 1966).

mating strategies of fruit flies by Angus John Bateman.¹³ And the 1960s saw important advances in the theoretical foundations of evolutionary thought. In 1966 George Williams demolished sloppy forms of “naïve group selection” and emphasized the gene as the dominant level of selection.¹⁴ This advance served to thrust the problem of altruism to the fore. But a potential solution was emerging almost simultaneously from the work a graduate student, William Hamilton, who recognized that individuals could benefit from the reproductive success of their kin precisely because they shared genes; Hamilton labeled the extra fitness benefits an individual receives from helping kin “inclusive fitness.”¹⁵ It was the heady brew of sexual selection theory, inclusive fitness, and gene-level selection that would give rise to a new science of human behavior in the 1970s. The first to capitalize was a Harvard graduate student, Robert Trivers, who wrote a series of brilliant papers between 1971 and 1974.¹⁶ In the papers of Trivers, sociobiology was conceived; in 1975, with E. O. Wilson’s *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, it was born.¹⁷

The appearance of Wilson’s book was a defining moment. “Wilson’s important contribution was to create and name the field of ‘sociobiology’ by showing its scattered practitioners that it existed.”¹⁸ Only the book’s last chapter is concerned with human behavior, but Wilson envisions the possibilities for explaining everything from altruism to aggression to homosexuality. The backlash was immediate, fierce, and unrelenting. The sociobiology controversy was a phenomenon quite without precedent, an academic firestorm in three dimensions.¹⁹ First, some of the most trenchant critics of sociobiology came from within evolutionary biology.²⁰ Sociobiology was criticized for its strict adaptationist paradigm—its strong emphasis on evolved traits as adaptations to specific selection pressures.²¹ Second, sociobiology was tarred as a

¹³ Angus John Bateman, “Intra-Sexual Selection in *Drosophila*,” *Heredity* 2 (1948): 349–68.

¹⁴ George Williams, *Adaptation and Natural Selection: A Critique of Some Current Evolutionary Thought* (Princeton, 1966).

¹⁵ William Hamilton, “The Genetical Evolution of Social Behaviour. I,” *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 7 (1964): 1–16; William Hamilton, “The Genetical Evolution of Social Behaviour. II,” *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 7 (1964): 17–32.

¹⁶ Robert Trivers, “The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism,” *Quarterly Review of Biology* 46 (1971): 35–57; “Parental Investment and Sexual Selection,” in Bernard Campbell, ed., *Sexual Selection and the Descent of Man, 1871–1971* (Chicago, 1972), 136–79; and “Parent-Offspring Conflict,” *American Zoologist* 14 (1974): 249–64.

¹⁷ Edward O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975).

¹⁸ Laland and Brown, *Sense and Nonsense*, 70.

¹⁹ Ullica Segerstråle, *Defenders of the Truth: The Battle for Science in the Sociobiology Debate and Beyond* (Oxford, 2000).

²⁰ Others came from the philosophy of science: Philip Kitcher, *Vaulting Ambition: Sociobiology and the Quest for Human Nature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985).

²¹ For example, Stephen Gould and Richard Lewontin, “The Spandrels of San Marcos and the Panglossian Paradigm: A Critique of the Adaptationist Programme,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London B* 205 (1979): 581–98; Stephen Gould and Elizabeth Vrba, “Exaptation: A Missing Term in the Science of Form,” *Paleobiology* 8 (1982): 4–15.

scientific disguise for politically reactionary ideologies: by “naturalizing” social ills—patriarchy, violence, chauvinism—sociobiology seemed ripe for misuse.²² Third, sociobiology not only claimed the ability to explain elements of human behavior in genetic terms, it openly avowed its ambitions to absorb other approaches to mankind in the grand architecture of its synthesis.²³ Social scientists mobilized and defended their sovereignty over human behavior. A very public turf war—with scientific, ideological, and disciplinary dimensions—had begun.

Sociobiology, despite its high visibility, was not a coherent movement, and almost as soon as it was born, it spread in a number of unpredicted ways. Particularly important for the study of human sexuality was the development of evolutionary psychology (EP); because EP is a social science, it quickly became the battleground over how to interpret human behavior.²⁴ EP carries the mantle of gene-level explanation and adaptationist reasoning, and the critical armory developed against sociobiology would be, with little adjustment, redeployed against EP.²⁵ In part, the opposition has been galvanized by the popular success of the EP industry. EP argues, uncontroversially, that the brain, its capacities, and its motivational systems have evolved under selection pressures. EP goes on to argue that specific psychological traits are adaptations. So, sexual jealousy evolved over evolutionary time as a motivation for behavior that promoted fitness.²⁶ Some proponents of EP hold that the brain has evolved to develop a massive number of specific motivational programs, or “modules.”²⁷ These modules, it is claimed, evolved over evolutionary

²² Elizabeth Allen, et al., “Against ‘Sociobiology,’” *New York Review of Books*, 13 Nov. (1975): 184–86.

²³ This is most clearly evident in Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York, 1998); Wilson, *Sociobiology*, 4.

²⁴ John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, “Conceptual Foundations of Evolutionary Psychology,” in David Buss, ed., *The Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology* (Hoboken, 2005), 5–67; Donald Symons, *The Evolution of Human Sexuality* (New York, 1979). The most trenchant critic of evolutionary psychology usefully distinguishes between Evolutionary Psychology the paradigm (a strictly adaptationist one, committed to a modular brain) and evolutionary psychology as a field: David Buller, *Adapting Minds: Evolutionary Psychology and the Persistent Quest for Human Nature* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), 12. See also Robert Richardson, *Evolutionary Psychology as Maladapted Psychology* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007). For the positive possibilities of a psychology founded on evolution, outside the EP paradigm, see Steven Scher and Frederick Rauscher, *Evolutionary Psychology: Alternative Approaches* (Boston, 2003); Linnda Caporael, “Evolutionary Psychology: Toward a Unifying Theory and a Hybrid Science,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 52 (2001): 607–28.

²⁵ Hilary Rose and Steven Rose, eds., *Alas, Poor Darwin: Arguments Against Evolutionary Psychology* (New York, 2000).

²⁶ David Buss, *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating*, rev. ed. (New York, 2003): 125–31; Bram Buunk, et al., “Sex Differences in Jealousy in Evolutionary and Cultural Perspective: Tests from The Netherlands, Germany, and the United States,” *Psychological Science* 7 (1996): 359–63.

²⁷ David Buss, “Introduction: The Emergence of Evolutionary Psychology,” in D. Buss, ed., *Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*, xxiv; Pascal Boyer and H. Clark Barrett, “Domain Specificity and Intuitive Ontology,” in D. Buss, ed., *Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*, 96–118.

time, so some human psychological traits may now be maladaptive.²⁸ The human skull, in the evocative metaphor of the paradigm's ablest proponents, John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, houses a Stone Age mind.

EP, predictably for any avant-garde discipline, has had a mixed record. Some of its findings are robust and significant.²⁹ But EP makes claims about how the mind develops and functions that will prevent it from being the platform for reintegrating the natural and social sciences.³⁰ It is more important to understand why EP became a perfect, ready-made foil for "cultural" approaches to sexuality in the 1980s and 1990s. First, EP predicts dimorphic sexual psychologies; consequently, much of its research program centered on the search for native psychological differences between men and women.³¹ In just the same period when historians were "denaturalizing" our starting assumptions about gender, EP seemed to be asserting a "natural" basis for sex differences. Moreover, an important working assumption of EP is that evolved human psychologies are universal; this, too, has proven a ready field for testing, and it results in strong claims for nature over culture. Further, EP is a social science, and its exponents have been vociferous about the need to introduce evolutionary paradigms into the social sciences. The landmark essay of Tooby and Cosmides in their 1992 volume *The Adapted Mind* is a powerful, almost eschatological, manifesto for the promise of EP to save the social sciences from a century of misguided dualism.³²

EP, in sum, came to maturity, and visibility, at the same moment that the history of sexuality was emerging; it was to provide a perfect counter-point for cultural approaches to human sexual behavior. Anthropologists would provide the most acute criticisms of sociobiology and EP, but to understand why this was so requires an equally long-range genealogy of cultural anthropology, which can only be offered here in abbreviated form. Anthropology formed into a discipline in the late nineteenth century, somewhere between biology and history. In the background was the discovery of geological time. Daniel Smail has evocatively shown how historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries closed ranks and settled on the idea, or pragmatic compromise, that history dealt with documents and thus "started" with writing.³³ Implicit in this formulation was a sort of division of labor with anthropology,

²⁸ For example, Arne Öhman and Susan Mineka, "The Malicious Serpent: Snakes as a Prototypical Stimulus for an Evolved Module of Fear," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 12, 1 (2003): 5–9.

²⁹ See Buller, *Adapting Minds*, 301–45, esp. 306, for a balanced assessment.

³⁰ Buller's *Adapting Minds* is the most sustained critique.

³¹ For example, David Buss and David Schmitt, "Sexual Strategies Theory: An Evolutionary Perspective on Human Mating," *Psychological Review* 100 (1993): 204–32.

³² John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, "The Psychological Foundations of Culture," in Jerome Barkow, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby, eds., *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture* (New York, 1992), 19–136.

³³ Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley, 2008), 12–73.

which would, using different methods, cover the story of *Homo sapiens* during its primitive phases.³⁴ Anthropology “was thus to operate a bridge between the history of life up to the emergence of *Homo sapiens*, the subject matter of Zoology, and the history of mankind from the time of the invention of writing, by which point historians could take over.”³⁵

The fathers of anthropology operated on universalist and evolutionary assumptions about the development of culture through primitive to advanced stages.³⁶ To appreciate the bite of cultural constructionism, and the broader turn of cultural anthropology away from history in the twentieth century, it must be appreciated that the evolutionist paradigm was squarely centered on the cluster of problems around sex, marriage, and kinship. It could be said that anthropology, as a modern discipline, was born in the gap created by the discovery of deep time, which fostered a need to understand “primitive” cultures, defined by forms of social organization centered on kinship. Henry Maine’s “Patriarchal Theory,” rooted in the study of Roman law, laid the intellectual foundations.³⁷ What is remarkable, though, is how quickly Maine’s most ambitious theories about early societies began to look obsolete in light of the time revolution. *Ancient Law* appeared in 1861, but Maine would spend his later years engaged in dispute with even more daring reconstructions of early human social order.

Though Maine declared distaste for speculative inquiries about the earliest human societies, which led into “mudbanks and fog,” the 1860s and 1870s were full of such efforts.³⁸ Johann Jakob Bachofen’s *Mother Right*, positing prehistorical stages of communism, polyamory, and matriarchy, was published in German in the same year as *Ancient Law*.³⁹ In 1865, an even more formidable rival account of early society appeared in McLennan’s *Primitive Marriage*.⁴⁰ McLennan was the most vociferous early proponent of the thesis of primitive promiscuity; he argued that early human societies were universally organized around bride capture, and he argued that traces of such early strata of human society were still visible in marriage rituals. Promiscuity, by stages, gave way to the restraints of marriage. In the 1870s the two great

³⁴ See, for example, E. B. Tylor, *Anthropology: An Introduction to the Study of Man and Civilization* (London, 1881); Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society: Or, Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery, through Barbarism to Civilization* (New York, 1877).

³⁵ Maurice Bloch, “Where Did Anthropology Go?: Or the Need for ‘Human Nature,’” in Maurice Bloch, ed., *Essays on Cultural Transmission* (Oxford, 2005), 4.

³⁶ J. W. Burrow, *Evolution and Society: A Study in Victorian Social Theory* (London, 1966); Adam Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion* (London, 1988).

³⁷ Henry Maine, *Ancient Law, Its Connection with the Early History of Society and Its Relation to Modern Ideas* (London, 1861); Kuper, *Invention of Primitive Society*, 17–41.

³⁸ Henry Maine, *Dissertations on Early Law and Custom* (London, 1883), 192.

³⁹ Johann Bachofen, *Das Mutterrecht. Eine Untersuchung über die Gynäkokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur* (Stuttgart, 1861).

⁴⁰ John McLennan, *Primitive Marriage: An Inquiry into the Origin of the Form of Capture in Marriage Ceremonies* (Edinburgh, 1865).

works of Morgan appeared.⁴¹ Like McLennan, though with differences of detail, Morgan posited an original condition of primitive promiscuity and various intermediate phases that societies might pass through on their way to monogamy.⁴²

It is hard today to appreciate the extent to which the thesis of primitive promiscuity acted as a crucible of modern social theory. It spawned a giant literature, most of which is today forgotten, though it lurks behind much of the study of myth, religion, and ritual in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The thesis provoked one of the period's underrated intellectual achievements, Edvard Westermarck's *History of Human Marriage*.⁴³ Westermarck would confess that he began "as an adherent of primitive promiscuity and set out to find its vestiges."⁴⁴ He soon became convinced that he was on the wrong track and in fact became a prominent critic of the paradigm, "one of the most unscientific ever set forth within the whole domain of sociological speculation."⁴⁵ He painstakingly dismantles the "evidence" for the theory.⁴⁶ More interesting, however, are the positive arguments he makes against the likelihood of general promiscuity. Westermarck develops an argument, already adduced by Maine, that Darwinian sexual selection theory predicts masculine jealousy to be a biological rather than cultural trait. He argued that masculine jealousy, in turn, was incompatible with the promiscuity thesis.⁴⁷

Westermarck was one of the early anthropologists who tried to use Darwinian theory to "understand the biological facts underlying psychical and social phenomena."⁴⁸ Today he is principally remembered for "the Westermarck effect," which holds that physical proximity in childhood deactivates sexual attraction and activates sexual aversion. For Westermarck there was a biological substrate to the incest taboo. It is worth remembering that the early debates about incest took place against the background of wider discussions of primitive promiscuity. Incest, and its prohibition, was a crux in thinking about the "origins of culture" and transitions from "nature to culture." It is a testament to Westermarck's intellectual horizons that in his fifth edition he battles against Frazer and Freud, both of whom held that if incest avoidance were natural, then it would not require prohibition. The logic is revealing. For

⁴¹ Lewis H. Morgan, *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (Washington, D.C., 1871); and *Ancient Society; or, Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery, through Barbarism to Civilization* (New York, 1877).

⁴² See esp. Thomas Trautmann, *Lewis Henry Morgan and the Invention of Kinship*, 2nd ed. (Lincoln, Neb., 2008).

⁴³ The first edition appeared in 1891; in 1921. Westermarck published a much-expanded fifth and definitive edition: *The History of Human Marriage*, 3 vols. (London, 1921).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, vii–viii.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 336.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 166–206.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 300.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

Frazer and Freud alike, the necessity of the taboo implied a relationship between culture and nature that was one of repression. Westermarck offered a powerful and persuasive rebuttal that envisioned a far more complex relationship between biology and morality. Ultimately, though, this was a road not taken.

The paradigm of cultural evolution was not destined to last.⁴⁹ Westermarck's work was a major blow, and his monumental *History* is not even, after all, a history, but a cross-cultural survey. From one side, anthropology turned away from evolutionism and towards an ahistorical functionalism.⁵⁰ From another angle, the ambitions of a universal theory of culture were undercut by diffusionist models, in which the unfolding of culture over time is not subject to iron laws of development.⁵¹ Undoubtedly the axial figure in this revolution was Franz Boas. His *Mind of Primitive Man* was an eloquent broadside on evolutionary models.⁵² Boas showed that the phenomena of culture could not be considered the progressive development of the human mind in response to the same sequence of stimuli. Culture, instead, was presented as an autonomous domain, not reducible to mental or material stages in the development of civilization. Boas is described as "idiographic," "historicist," or "particularist."⁵³ He and his students evinced a sensitivity for variety, and they asserted the irreducible complexity of cultural phenomena.

Boas was immeasurably influential, and it would be simple enough to draw a line from his most outstanding students, Edward Sapir, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead, straight to the cultural constructionism of the late twentieth century.⁵⁴ But there were important subplots in the middle of the century. One was a turn toward treating culture as a "symbolic system,"⁵⁵ and the other was the advance of hermeneutics into social-scientific practice.

When historians of sexuality refer to themselves as anthropologists, they mean something rather particular—they mean Clifford Geertz. Geertz represented the fulfillment of Boasian cultural particularism, combined with a theoretically explicit commitment to interpretation as the activity of the

⁴⁹ Though it always had adherents such as Leslie White, to a greater or lesser degree idiosyncratic, and interest may be reviving: for example, Nicholas J. Allen, et al., eds., *Early Human Kinship: From Sex to Social Reproduction* (Oxford, 2008).

⁵⁰ Bronislaw Malinowski, *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia...* (New York, 1929).

⁵¹ Bloch, "Where Did Anthropology Go?," 5.

⁵² Franz Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man...* (New York, 1911).

⁵³ Herbert S. Lewis, "Boas, Darwin, Science, and Anthropology," *Current Anthropology* 42, 3 (2001): 381–406.

⁵⁴ As does James Davidson, *The Greeks and Greek Love: A Radical Reappraisal of Homosexuality in Ancient Greece* (London, 2007), 135–66.

⁵⁵ Alfred L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (New York, 1952); Alfred L. Kroeber and Talcott Parsons, "The Concept of Culture and of Social System," *American Sociological Review* 23, 5 (1958): 582–83; Adam Kuper, *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), 69.

anthropologist.⁵⁶ Geertz occupies a complex place in late-twentieth-century intellectual history. In part, his brand of anthropology was an assertion of particularism against the nomothetic tendencies of Levi-Strauss's structuralism.⁵⁷ In part, his hermeneutic stance draws from the philosophical tradition of phenomenology.⁵⁸ Geertz's significance lies in the fact that he operationalized hermeneutics for social scientists.⁵⁹ In his most famous methodological essay, Geertz distinguished between "setting down the meaning particular social actions have for the actors whose actions they are, and stating, as explicitly as we can manage, what the knowledge thus attained demonstrates about the society in which it is found and, beyond that, about social life as such."⁶⁰ When articulating his methodological stance, Geertz imagined "thick description" as the first act in a series of outwardly radiating interpretive levels. "Our double task is to uncover the conceptual structures that inform our subjects' acts, the 'said' of social discourse, and to construct a system of analysis in whose terms what is generic to those structures, what belongs to them because they are what they are, will stand out against the other determinants of human behavior."⁶¹ Yet, Geertz in his own work concentrated on the "said" of social discourse, and not on "social life as such" or the "other determinants" of behavior. Geertz compared culture to a computer program, a set of "plans, recipes, rules," but there is little attention to the ways that the computer—the brain—might download or run the software.⁶²

By the 1970s, there was a strong movement within anthropology that treated culture as something particular and irreducible, antinomian and extremely powerful.⁶³ This fact alone placed anthropologists in position to act as the lead prosecutors against sociobiology and then, a decade later, EP. Anthropologists quickly took the front line against evolutionary encroachments on the social sciences.⁶⁴ The critical stance would be sharpened by the spread of

⁵⁶ Kuper, *Culture*, 75–121.

⁵⁷ Clifford Geertz, "The Cerebral Savage: The Structural Anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss," *Encounter* 28 (1967): 25–32: "Lévi-Strauss' search is not after all for men, whom he doesn't much care for, but for Man, with whom he is enthralled."

⁵⁸ Gilbert Ryle, "The Thinking of Thoughts: What Is 'Le Penseur' Doing?," in *Collected Papers*, vol. 2 (London, 1971), 480–96.

⁵⁹ Cf. Paul Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," *New Literary History* 5 (1973): 91–117.

⁶⁰ Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973), 27.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶² Clifford Geertz, "The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973), 44.

⁶³ Cross-fertilization with literary studies, New Historicism in particular, was part of the landscape: Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago, 2000), 20–31.

⁶⁴ William Irons and Lee Cronk, "Two Decades of a New Paradigm," in Lee Cronk, Napoleon Chagnon, and William Irons, eds., *Adaptation and Human Behavior: An Anthropological Perspective* (New York, 2000), 6–10; Marshall Sahlins, *The Use and Abuse of Biology: An Anthropological*

Marxism and second-wave feminism within the field.⁶⁵ Almost immediately, sexuality became one of the most contested fields in the battle over the analysis of human behavior. Gayle Rubin's canonical essay, "The Traffic in Women," appeared almost simultaneously with *Sociobiology*, and she would become an outspoken opponent of evolutionary paradigms.⁶⁶ "The body, the brain, the genitalia and the capacity for language are necessary for human sexuality. But they do not determine its content, its experiences, or its institutional forms."⁶⁷ Here is a savvy rearguard maneuver, which would be repeated over and over. "Biology" is confined to anatomy, reducing "nature" to inert substance, mere potential that must be activated by "culture," like *res extensa* waiting to be animated by *res cogitans*. And the language of "determinism" deliberately casts the explanation of human behavior in impossibly stark and deliberately high-stakes terms.

It was in that environment, one year after the appearance of *Sociobiology*, that Foucault's first volume on the history of sexuality appeared. To be sure, it drew upon and gave sharp expression to much contemporary scholarship.⁶⁸ But Foucault's contribution was extraordinary, and it became the touchstone of cultural constructionism. Part of the book's achievement is that it speaks simultaneously to history, anthropology, psychology, and philosophy. Foucault accomplished this, in part, by cultivating his own idiom—above all in the term sexuality itself. "Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover."⁶⁹ With that claim, Foucault was breaking ranks from an entire tradition. In one of the most powerful passages of the book, Foucault argues that modernity could be characterized by the "deployment of sexuality," which was superimposed on an older "deployment of alliance." "Alliance" stood as shorthand for all that anthropology had sought from its earliest days to understand—the "system of rules defining the permitted and the forbidden, the licit and the illicit." "Sexuality" was concerned with "the

Critique of Sociobiology (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1976). The way had been partly prepared by reactions against Karl Lorenz: Alexander Alland, *The Human Imperative* (Columbia, N.Y., 1972); M. F. Ashley Montagu, ed., *Man and Aggression* (New York, 1968).

⁶⁵ Gayle S. Rubin, *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham, N.C., 2011), offers insightful reflections on the period.

⁶⁶ Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in Rayna R. Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York, 1975), 157–210.

⁶⁷ Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in Carole Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston, Mass., 1984), 276.

⁶⁸ Jeffrey Weeks, "Remembering Foucault," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14 (2005): 186–201; and *Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meanings, Myths, and Modern Sexualities* (London, 1985); I thank one of the anonymous CSSH readers for also pointing me to Barry D. Adam, "Structural Foundations of the Gay World," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 27 (1984): 658–71, and insisting on the formative influence of this somewhat forgotten statement.

⁶⁹ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1, 105.

sensations of the body, the quality of pleasures, and the nature of impressions.”⁷⁰ By calling into question the very existence of sex as an object of knowledge, Foucault offered a valediction to anthropology and psychology as traditionally practiced. Only in hindsight can we see that Foucault’s notion of sexuality was destined to be deployed against new, and in some ways even more ambitious, attempts to ground a knowledge of human sexuality and human sociality on nature.

ANCIENT SEXUALITY: THE RISE OF A SUBFIELD

The dualist metaphysics of nature and culture, and the rhetoric of determinism, were quickly absorbed by students of ancient sexuality, who found themselves, a little unexpectedly, posted in a highly visible and strategic redoubt. In a synthesis of the field and its principal discoveries, Ruth Mazo Karras described a consensus on two points: “the social construction of sexuality (that ‘sexuality’ is not a *thing* that can be found in all cultures but is created by the various discourses of particular societies), and the active/passive dichotomy (that the ancient world, both Greek and Roman, categorized sexual behaviors or identities not by the gender of the participants but by the sexual role each played).”⁷¹ Of course, any talk of a collective project, or reference to historians in the plural, is not meant to elide the important and sometimes bitter differences that have existed among students of sexuality. But it is useful to identify the shared assumptions and aims, working practices and methods, which have been constitutive for the study of ancient sexuality. More importantly, it is imperative to query what “nature” and “culture” mean in both the dominant streams of research *and* the dissenting strands. Such an analysis is revealing, because even the principal critics of cultural constructionism have, in various ways, evaded explicit engagement with biology.

Although Classics once tended to be a methodologically conservative discipline, it was not indifferent to the broader intellectual currents of the 1970s. Feminists struggled for a foothold in an unfriendly field, but behind the strength of works such as Sarah Pomeroy’s 1975 *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, they made important initial advances.⁷² The study of ancient sexuality was given extraordinary impetus by the publication of Kenneth Dover’s *Greek Homosexuality* in 1978.⁷³ The frank and scholarly treatment of sexual

⁷⁰ Ibid., 106–7.

⁷¹ Ruth Mazo Karras, “Active/Passive, Acts/Passions: Greek and Roman Sexualities,” *American Historical Review* 105, 4 (2000): 1250–65, here 1250.

⁷² Sarah Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* (New York, 1975); see Phyllis Culham, “Ten Years after Pomeroy: Studies of the Image and Reality of Women in Antiquity,” *Helios* 13 (1987): 9–30.

⁷³ Kenneth Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, rev. and updated ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1989 [1978]). The best account of the early history of the field remains: David Halperin, John Winkler, and Froma Zeitlin, “Introduction,” in D. Halperin, J. Winkler, and F. Zeitlin, eds., *Before Sexuality*, 7–16.

themes by such an eminent figure opened a new era of inquiry into the sexual cultures of antiquity. The influences that undergird Dover's framework are significant.⁷⁴ In the opening paragraph, Dover asserts that "Greek culture differed from ours in its readiness to recognize the alternation of homosexual and heterosexual preferences in the same individual..."⁷⁵ The streams of influence which led Dover to present his findings in this manner are apparent in the only passage where he cites theoretical literature. Dover refers the reader to D. J. West and George Devereux.⁷⁶ From his collaboration *manqué* with Devereux, Dover took the fundamental distinction between sexual acts and sexual orientations.⁷⁷ Equally interesting is the endorsement of West, whom Dover cites "on the power of culture and society to determine sexual behavior."⁷⁸ West was deeply influenced by constructionist currents in American anthropology, especially Mead.⁷⁹ Despite the rigorous philology and the studious control of material evidence that give it the feel of a positivist work in the traditional mould of Classics, Dover's study was not written in a vacuum.

Dover's book appeared just two years after *La volonté de savoir*. The year 1978 also saw the publication of Paul Veyne's landmark article on sex and marriage in imperial Rome.⁸⁰ Foucault's understanding of classical antiquity would be mediated by Dover and Veyne. Foucault did much more, though, than expand and publicize their insights, though it is true that the cozy world of classics was rocked by the simultaneous appearance of volumes 2 and 3 of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*.⁸¹ Foucault assembled Greece and Rome as case studies pointing to much larger claims about the historical conditioning of the human subject. He made it clear in the opening pages of *The Use of Pleasure* that the object of his study was "sexuality" as such. The term, he noted, did not appear until the nineteenth century.⁸² He wished to break with the view that sexuality itself "was a constant," and to do so he conceived of sexuality not as the sum of practices or interdictions, but as the "modes according to which

⁷⁴ For an account, see Davidson, *Greeks and Greek Love*, 107–21, distilling James Davidson, "Dover, Foucault and Greek Homosexuality: Penetration and the Truth of Sex," *Past and Present* 170 (2001): 3–51.

⁷⁵ Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 1.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷⁷ Davidson, "Dover, Foucault, and Greek Homosexuality," 9–11; George Devereux, "Greek Pseudo-Homosexuality and the 'Greek Miracle,'" *Symbolae Osloenses* 42, 1 (1967): 69–92.

⁷⁸ Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 2; D. J. West, *Homosexuality* (Chicago, 1968).

⁷⁹ Davidson, *Greeks and Greek Love*, 149.

⁸⁰ Paul Veyne, "La famille et l'amour sous le haut-empire romain," *Annales: Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 33 (1978): 35–63.

⁸¹ Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs*; and *Le souci de soi*. See David Larmour, Paul Allen Miller, and Charles Platter, eds., *Rethinking Sexuality: Foucault and Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, 1998). For the reception, see Marilyn B. Skinner, "Zeus and Leda: The Sexuality Wars in Contemporary Classical Scholarship," *Thamyris* 3 (1996): 103–23.

⁸² Arnold I. Davidson, "Sex and the Emergence of Sexuality," *Critical Inquiry* 14, 1 (1987): 16–48.

individuals are given to recognize themselves as sexual subjects.”⁸³ Foucault’s readings of individual ancient texts remain brilliant and nourishing. In the case of classical Greece, Foucault traced the ways in which sexual pleasures were problematized around the terms of self-mastery. In the case of Rome, Foucault discovered a new anxiety about desire as such and a new concern with reciprocal modes of pleasure, especially within marriage.⁸⁴ In neither Greek nor Roman culture was there such a thing as modern “sexuality,” a discursive or institutional category that strictly tied together an individual’s subjectivity and sexual preferences.

Foucault forged his own idiosyncratic lexicon and situated his arguments as a historian’s reckoning with the problem of subjectivity. But as Foucault’s ideas were absorbed by historians, the influence of cultural anthropology became more pronounced. After a predictable sequence of seminars and conference panels, the payoff came in 1990, which saw the publication of a battery of works that still represent the Foucauldian synthesis in ancient studies. John Winkler’s *Constraints of Desire* is revealingly subtitled “The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece.”⁸⁵ The book opens with a chapter on the ancient dream interpreter Artemidorus, who is said to be “like an anthropologist,” or even an “ancient Kinsey.”⁸⁶ Winkler’s commitments to anthropology define the scope and object of his investigation. “Sex is not, except in a trivial and uninteresting sense, a natural fact.”⁸⁷ Winkler cites Geertz, arguing that the prepotency of the central nervous system in *Homo sapiens* has freed human sexuality from biological determinism. This is a clear indication that the history of sexuality does not, in fact, have a neutral stance towards biology; there is a neurology, we might say, embedded deep within the framework of the entire sub-field.⁸⁸ Note the disciplinary implications: “Anthropologists, historians, and other students of culture (rather than of nature) are sharply aware that almost any imaginable configuration of pleasure can be institutionalized as conventional and perceived by its participants as natural.”⁸⁹ Understanding culture is what *we* do, “our hermeneutic project.”⁹⁰

David Halperin’s influential *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* likewise separates sexuality from nature and defines culture as the disciplinary object of the ancient historian. Halperin has been the most able and articulate

⁸³ Foucault, *L’usage des plaisirs*, 5.

⁸⁴ Foucault, *Le souci de soi*.

⁸⁵ For his methodological premises, see John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York, 1990), 8–10.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 31, 33, 42.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

defender of Foucault's paradigm in ancient studies. "Foucault detached 'sexuality' from the physical and biological sciences... He divorced 'sexuality' from 'nature' and interpreted it, instead, as a cultural production."⁹¹ Halperin emphasizes that Foucault's work gave enormous impetus "to anthropological tendencies within the humanities."⁹² There is no way to explain cultural variation, he argues, without granting a "determining role in the constitution of individual desire to social or cultural factors."⁹³ Similarly, in the landmark collected volume which Halperin co-edited, *Before Sexuality*, we are immediately told that sex is a "natural fact; it is subject to study by the methods of natural, not social, science. As such sex lies outside history and culture, and it also lies beyond the range of the various disciplines of cultural study."⁹⁴ The dualism of nature and culture becomes a programmatic tenet for historians of sexuality.

If 1990 was the *annus mirabilis* for the study of ancient sexuality, the categories which frame these investigations have guided the research agenda of ancient historians ever since.⁹⁵ The landmark volume *Roman Sexualities* reflects the absorption of the cultural paradigm into the study of western Mediterranean societies.⁹⁶ The finest study of ancient sexual art claims that its "single most startling conclusion" is "that—at least in matters of sex—the Romans were not at all like us."⁹⁷ These same assumptions are apparent in the 2002 collection, *The Sleep of Reason*, the best treatment of sex in high philosophical culture.⁹⁸ The most important study of Roman homosexuality, Craig Williams' *Roman Homosexuality*, exemplifies the powerful reach of the dualistic cultural model.⁹⁹ Williams locates his project in the Geertzian tradition and identifies his approach as "semiotic."¹⁰⁰ The semiotic system, here labeled an "ideology," simply exists, out there, to give meaning to acts.¹⁰¹ By explicitly excluding "reality" from the investigation, the dynamics of nature and society are passed by.

⁹¹ Halperin, *One Hundred Years*, 7.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁹⁴ Halperin, Winkler, and Zeitlin, "Introduction," 3.

⁹⁵ For some critical thoughts, see, David Cohen, "Sex, Gender, and Sexuality in Ancient Greece," *Classical Philology* 87 (1992): 145–60; Ralph Hexter, "Scholars and Their Pals," *Helios* 18 (1991): 147–59.

⁹⁶ Marilyn Skinner, "Ego mulier: The Construction of Male Sexuality in Catullus," 132; and Holt Parker, "The Teratogenic Grid," 47–48, both in Judith Hallett and Marilyn Skinner, eds., *Roman Sexualities* (Princeton, 1997).

⁹⁷ John Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking: Constructions of Sexuality in Roman Art, 100 B.C.–A.D. 250* (Berkeley, 1998), 275.

⁹⁸ Martha Nussbaum and Juha Sihvola, eds., *The Sleep of Reason: Erotic Experience and Sexual Ethics in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Chicago, 2002), 12.

⁹⁹ Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 254–55.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

The constructionist paradigm has by no means gone unchallenged in ancient studies. We can identify two major lines of argument that have sought to undermine the cultural paradigm of sexuality at a fundamental level: the feminist critique and the essentialist critique. Both of these challenges open up the possibility of a different understanding of the relation between nature and culture, but, in actuality, both lines of criticism avoid an open engagement with biology.

The intervention of Foucault in ancient history, ironically, met with mixed reactions from feminist historians.¹⁰² While many feminists found his work inspiring, or salvageable, others claimed that he received credit for building on the (unacknowledged) work of the pioneers in the field.¹⁰³ Some specialists found his peculiar concerns, and his reliance on a small set of elite male texts, a little baffling.¹⁰⁴ But some of the criticism was more fundamental. His most trenchant critic, Amy Richlin, argued that Foucault's constructionism trivializes the reality of patriarchy, and she has provocatively identified herself as a "materialist and an essentialist."¹⁰⁵ In this view, patriarchy is a trans-historical phenomenon, transcending time and space.¹⁰⁶ While Richlin is willing to compass the possibility that patriarchy is rooted in nature, she identifies reluctance among most feminist historians to acknowledge the role of biology.¹⁰⁷ This conciliatory overview never actually engages in any analysis of nature. Nature is a possible *source* of continuity and sameness, but it is never directly discussed. It is safely in the distance, in the realm of the natural scientist. But if nature is reduced to "continuity," then it remains inscrutable.

¹⁰² David Larmour, Paul Allen Miller, and Charles Platter, "Introduction: Situating *The History of Sexuality*," in David Larmour, Paul Allen Miller, and Charles Platter, eds., *Rethinking Sexuality: Foucault and Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, 1998), 17–22; duBois, "Subject in Antiquity"; Lin Foxhall, "Pandora Unbound: A Feminist Critique of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*," in David Larmour, Paul Allen Miller, and Charles Platter, eds., *Rethinking Sexuality: Foucault and Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, 1998), 122–37.

¹⁰³ Amy Richlin, "Zeus and Metis: Foucault, Feminism, and Classics," *Helios* 18 (1991): 160–80.

¹⁰⁴ Amy Richlin, "Not Before Homosexuality: The Materiality of the *Cinaedus* and the Roman Law Against Love between Men," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3 (1993): 523–73; Amy Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor*, rev. ed. (Oxford, 1992). For Foucault's reliance on a masculine paradigm, see Ellen Greene, "Sappho, Foucault, and Women's Erotics," *Arethusa* 29 (1996): 1–14. On Foucault's abstraction from social context, see David Cohen and Richard Saller, "Foucault on Sexuality in Greco-Roman Antiquity," in Jan Goldstein, ed., *Foucault and the Writing of History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), 35–59. On Foucault's shallow use of literary sources, see Simon Goldhill, *Foucault's Virginity: Ancient Erotic Fiction and the History of Sexuality* (Cambridge, 1995).

¹⁰⁵ Richlin, *Garden of Priapus*, xx.

¹⁰⁶ Amy Richlin, "The Ethnographer's Dilemma and the Dream of a Lost Golden Age," in Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin, eds., *Feminist Theory and the Classics* (New York, 1993), 276; see also Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the 'Linguistic Turn,'" *Church History* 67 (1998): 1–31.

¹⁰⁷ Richlin, "The Ethnographer's Dilemma," 291.

Despite its caution, the work of Richlin has been portrayed as threatening. In an essay that marked a moment within the development of the field, Marilyn Skinner argued that Richlin's essentialist model of patriarchy was laudable, but "it must not be purchased at the price of affirming biological determinism as its inexorable corollary. Basing the legitimacy of such historical scholarship on appeals to women's unique biological experience 'closes down inquiry into the ways in which female subjectivity is produced...'"¹⁰⁸ But why is a history of patriarchy which acknowledges the role of biology doomed to "close down inquiry" into the role of culture and society?¹⁰⁹ This unease is ultimately political, lodged in the reluctance to naturalize unpalatable political arrangements. "If patriarchy were 'natural,' that is, based on biological determinism, then to change it would mean to change nature."¹¹⁰ Fortunately, over the last fifteen years, a *rapprochement* between feminism and biology has been underway that ought to neutralize the old assumptions that have painted evolutionary theories of human behavior, with a broad brush, as politically suspect.¹¹¹

A second major challenge has questioned the constructionist view of homosexuality. This line of criticism is responsible for the terminology of "constructionism" and "essentialism."¹¹² Essentialists emphasize that men and women with stable same-sex preferences existed before modernity.¹¹³ Constructionists emphasize the fundamental differences between ancient and modern

¹⁰⁸ Skinner, "Zeus and Leda," 118.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.: Skinner endorses "undermining the sociobiological doctrine of genetically programmed female behavior."

¹¹⁰ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York, 1986), 6.

¹¹¹ Especially Barbara Smuts, "The Evolutionary Origins of Patriarchy," *Human Nature* 6 (1995): 1–32. Griet Vandermassen, "Can Darwinian Feminism Save Female Autonomy and Leadership in Egalitarian Society?" *Sex Roles* 59 (2008): 482–91; Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, "Raising Darwin's Consciousness: Female Sexuality and the Prehominid Origins of Patriarchy," *Human Nature* 8, 1 (1997): 1–49, here 28; Patricia Gowaty, "Sexual Natures: How Feminism Changed Evolutionary Biology," *Signs* 28 (2003): 901–21; David Buss and Neil Malamuth, eds., *Sex, Power, Conflict: Evolutionary and Feminist Perspectives* (New York, 1996).

¹¹² See, for example, Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*, 8–10. "Essentialism" and "constructionism" are labels that everyone recognizes as problematic, yet because they identify a broad distinction, they refuse to die. Edward Stein, *The Mismeasure of Desire: The Science, Theory, and Ethics of Sexual Orientation* (Oxford, 1999), 93–116; Edward Stein, "Introduction," in E. Stein, ed., *Forms of Desire: Sexual Orientation and the Social Constructionist Controversy* (New York, 1990), 4. On the fate of "social construction" in the 1990s, see David Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago, 2002), 10–11. Jeffrey Weeks, *Against Nature: Essays on History, Sexuality, and Identity* (London, 1991); John Boswell, "Categories, Experience, and Sexuality," in Edward Stein, ed., *Forms of Desire: Sexual Orientation and the Social Constructionist Controversy* (New York, 1990), 133–73.

¹¹³ Rabun Taylor, "Two Pathic Subcultures in Ancient Rome," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 7 (1997): 319–71; John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York, 1994); John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago, 1980); Richlin, "Not Before Homosexuality"; John Thorp, "The Social Construction of Homosexuality," *Phoenix* 46 (1992): 54–61.

categorization of sexual acts and desires.¹¹⁴ The debate has been obscured by a failure to clarify exactly what questions are being asked.¹¹⁵ Clearly, ancient cultures allowed for same-sex contact in a way that is irreducibly different from modern categories of sexuality.¹¹⁶ And there is legitimate debate whether the ancient *kinaidos/cinaedus* was a “homosexual,” in the vernacular sense of a “person with an abiding preference for sexual partners of the same sex,” but he was a deviant figure with a sexual subjectivity that pervaded his whole being.¹¹⁷ These claims leave us at the level of cultural and linguistic categories, however, and it remains an altogether separate question whether men and women with stable preferences for partners of the same sex *existed* in antiquity.¹¹⁸ Virtually all observers allow that they did.¹¹⁹ Yet the same answer can be presented in tellingly different ways. For constructionists, the question is deflected as less interesting than the culturally mediated categories of desire and the possibility that these different categories channeled and created forms of desire that differed from the modern experience.¹²⁰ For essentialists these continuities open the possibility of a history of homosexuality as such.¹²¹ But even the most prominent “essentialists” are skeptical about the biological grounds of continuity.¹²² Though critics have tempered the excesses of the constructionist paradigm, none of them question the formation that left “nature” outside the realm of history. Continuity could be substituted for nature, because what matters is the existence of something that is the same across time and space, not the basis of that sameness in genes, hormones, and brains.¹²³ But if the very architecture of the discipline places nature outside the bounds of historical inquiry, then serious study of the interaction of culture and nature over time is impossible.

It hardly needs saying that the history of sexuality marks one of the major achievements of the discipline over the last generation. We know vastly more

¹¹⁴ David Halperin, “Forgetting Foucault: Acts, Identities, and the History of Sexuality,” in Martha Nussbaum and Juha Sihvola, eds., *The Sleep of Reason: Erotic Experience and Sexual Ethics in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Chicago, 2002), 21–54; Parker, “Myth of the Heterosexual.”

¹¹⁵ See Parker, “Teratogenic Grid,” 60, for a clear formulation.

¹¹⁶ Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 193, 232; Halperin, “Forgetting Foucault,” 34, emphasizes the differences. Richlin, “Not Before Homosexuality”; Gleason, *Making Men*, 396–98.

¹¹⁸ Taylor, “Two Pathic Subcultures”; Richlin, “Not Before Homosexuality.”

¹¹⁹ Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*, 9; Parker, “Teratogenic Grid,” 60.

¹²⁰ Halperin, “Forgetting Foucault,” 26–28; Parker, “Teratogenic Grid,” 60.

¹²¹ Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions*; Boswell, “Categories, Experience, and Sexuality”; Boswell, *Christianity*; Taylor, “Two Pathic Subcultures”; Richlin, “Not Before Homosexuality.”

¹²² See Bernadette J. Broonen, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago, 1996), 3, for orientation. Bernadette J. Broonen, “Lesbian Historiography before the Name? Response,” *GLQ* 4 (1998): 623–24. For pointed criticism of much evolutionary speculation on same-sex sexuality, see Joan Roughgarden, *Evolution’s Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People* (Berkeley, 2004).

¹²³ For example, see James Davidson, *Courtesans & Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens* (London, 1997), 309–13, who poetically conjures and gives agency to “natural appetites.”

than we did thirty years ago about the way that past cultures regulated genital acts. The pioneers of the field had to face down the encroachments of sociobiology, even as they legitimized the study of sexuality within their own discipline as serious rather than prurient or frivolous. Their achievements are nothing short of heroic. Clearly, a thick understanding of culture is an imperative for any study of human sexuality. And, a certain epistemological humility that allows historians to focus on culture, as a way of getting on with work in the face of unsettled and changing evolutionary science, clearly has advantages in its favor. But epistemological humility becomes dangerous when it reinforces the dualism that lays at the origins of the project and insulates historians from the natural sciences altogether. That dualism is less rhetorically powerful than it once was, but it is still there, quietly, as a conceptual frame. As the heat of the sociobiology controversy has faded, flamboyant claims of cultural primacy have lost their charge, and an inarticulate compromise has been left hanging over the field: soft constructionism.¹²⁴ This conciliatory label is a strategy for having it both ways without really confronting the deeper issues. Obviously cultures and sexual discourses change and therefore have a history; obviously sex is biological, and nature is a necessary precondition.¹²⁵ The principal merit of this position is that it is unobjectionable. But unobjectionable, muddled compromises usually indicate a conceptual impasse.

The emphasis on cultural difference has de-familiarized past sexual cultures and opened new avenues of critical inquiry. But the suppression of nature has been carried out with an excess of zeal, and now there is much to be gained from reconsidering the exclusions that lie at the foundations of the project. By evading a discussion of the real character and role of nature, by relegating nature to other disciplines while appropriating cultural hermeneutics as the object of the historian, nature is banished just as fully as ever. Thus the study of ancient sexuality has come up against the limits that it set for itself in the beginning. By construing *differences* as what we study, we block off not only nature, but also and more importantly the interdependence of nature and culture. As a methodological premise, the awareness of cultural difference is an invaluable critical tool, exposing silent assumptions about continuity.¹²⁶ But as a conclusion, the thesis of cultural difference becomes trivial. ("Past sexual cultures were different from our own....") As a constitutive boundary of what historians study, the search for difference is simply deadening.

¹²⁴ See Karras, "Active/Passive, Acts/Passions," 1251; Thorp, "Social Construction," 56, on the distinction between strong and weak constructionism.

¹²⁵ Kate Gilhuly, *The Feminine Matrix of Sex and Gender in Classical Athens* (Cambridge, 2009), 10–11; Rosanna Omitowaju, *Rape and the Politics of Consent in Classical Athens* (Cambridge, 2002), 9; Peter Mauritsch, *Sexualität im frühen Griechenland: Untersuchungen zu Norm und Abweichung in den homerischen Epen* (Vienna, 1992), 7.

¹²⁶ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 20th anniversary ed. (New York, 2008 [1988]), xxxvii.

The costs are not hypothetical. Treating bygone cultures as irreducibly distinct isolates is its own sort of myopia, and one prime example of the cost is that historians of classical antiquity have, despite all the interest in sexuality and private life, almost completely missed what truly made these cultures most peculiar: monogamy. Ironically, that which nineteenth-century evolutionists took for granted as the most civilized state of social organization proves, on a broad and deep view, to be exceptional and by no means predetermined. The spread of monogamy is precisely the sort of problem whose solution will defy any compartmentalization of history, anthropology, and biology. And it calls into question, in a particularly acute and challenging way, the relationship between nature and culture.

BEYOND DUALISM: BIOLOGY AND CULTURE REUNITED

Undeniably, sociobiology and some of its offspring belonged to an ambitious moment in the history of Darwinian thinking, and its key texts are imperious. But the image of sociobiology formed in the heat of battle was always something of a caricature, and its assumptions about genes, the brain, and human behavior were always only one strand of biological thought. If sociobiology is problematic, the solution is better biology, not a retreat to the Cartesian metaphysics that make culture a mental realm outside of nature. More to the point, while the history of sexuality has been built on a particular understanding of nature and culture, the plates have been shifting. Biologists of various stripes are becoming more interested in culture, while various movements within anthropology continuously strive to integrate the study of nature into their field. In this final section, I outline three frontiers of research where culture matters for biology. Each of these plainly defies the stereotypes of genetic determinism. Furthermore, each directly intersects with human mating behavior. After this brief overview, we can look at the phenomenon of monogamy, as the sort of problem that can only be understood with the input of biologists, anthropologists, and historians. Far from the manifest destiny of human social organization, monogamy represents a true puzzle.

Evolutionary approaches to human behavior encompass an array of work on proximate mechanisms and ultimate explanations. Human behavior can be explained at various levels, and one of the most exhilarating frontiers of research focuses directly on the mechanistic explanation of behavior. The inter-related fields of neuroscience, endocrinology, and genetics are only beginning to unlock some of the complexity of human behavior. The endocrine system, as the body's diffuse chemical signaling network, is a rich site for thinking about the physiological basis of behavior—and behavioral variety.¹²⁷ Hormones and neurotransmitters mediate behavior in fundamental ways, along two temporal

¹²⁷ Randy Nelson, *An Introduction to Behavioral Endocrinology*, 3d ed. (Sunderland, 2005); Peter Ellison and Peter Gray, eds., *Endocrinology of Social Relationships* (Cambridge, Mass.,

axes.¹²⁸ Hormones have short-term, reversible effects on behavior (*activational* effects) by transmitting information about the body's present state or environment; in this way hormones can promote physiological processes like lactation or behavioral responses like aggression. Hormones also have long-term effects on development, known as *organizational* effects. Genes provide a blueprint for building the brain, but that blueprint is full of possibilities, and the motivational networks of the body and brain can be assembled in different ways, depending on environmental cues. Culture is part of that environment and thus can become fixed in the body.

Some of the most intriguing avenues for connecting culture and nature in the brain focus on developmental plasticity, in the burgeoning field of epigenetics.¹²⁹ Developmental plasticity is already well documented in animals. In one of the best-known case studies, it has been shown that the behavior of adult rats is highly sensitive to early experience, specifically the amount of licking the rat received as a pup.¹³⁰ The genetic and environmental interaction that accounts for adult behavioral patterns is being unraveled.¹³¹ Maternal licking influences gene expression in a part of the brain that regulates response to stress hormones; in rats without maternal licking, a genetic switch for a crucial receptor gene was capped, blocking the production of receptors that set off signals in the hippocampus to shut down the production of stress hormones. An under-licked rat thus remains acutely vulnerable to the circulation of stress hormones throughout its life. Experience fundamentally influences gene expression; gene expression shapes the endocrine system; hormones deeply affect behavioral patterns.

Animal examples are more thoroughly known, but there is tantalizing evidence for developmental plasticity in the human behavioral system. For example, American Southerners and Northerners are popularly reputed to respond differently to perceived insults to individual honor; the stereotype has been elegantly documented under laboratory conditions.¹³² "Culture," as

2009); Anne Fausto-Sterling explores the potential implications for students of sexuality and gender in *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World* (New York, 2012).

¹²⁸ Kim Wallen and Janice Hassett, "Neuroendocrine Mechanisms Underlying Social Relationships," in P. Ellison and P. Gray, eds., *Endocrinology of Social Relationships* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009), 32–53.

¹²⁹ David Crews, "Epigenetics and Its Implications for Behavioral Neuroendocrinology," *Frontiers in Neuroendocrinology* 29 (2008): 344–57. For an overview, see Richard Francis, *Epigenetics: The Ultimate Mystery of Inheritance* (New York, 2011).

¹³⁰ Darlene Francis, Josie Diorio, Dong Liu, and Michael J. Meaney, "Nongenomic Transmission across Generations of Maternal Behavior and Stress Responses in the Rat," *Science* 286 (1999): 1155–58.

¹³¹ Danielle Champagne, et al., "Maternal Care and Hippocampal Plasticity: Evidence for Experience-Dependent Structural Plasticity, Altered Synaptic Functioning, and Differential Responsiveness to Glucocorticoids and Stress," *Journal of Neuroscience* 28 (2008): 6037–45.

¹³² Richard Nisbett and Dov Cohen, *Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence in the South* (Boulder, 1996).

it turns out, measurably affects the circulation of cortisol and testosterone. “An insult that has trivial effects in a Northerner sets off a cascade of physiological changes in a southern male that prepare him to harm the insulter...”¹³³ Culture is not just information that shapes behavior at a first-order, conscious level; it participates in the construction of the brain’s motivational architecture. Culture is not just “software”; it helps build the very “hardware” that runs the “plans, recipes, rules” transmitted from the environment. Far from disproving the power of “biology,” cultural constructionism might find that some of its central intuitions will be explained in terms of developmental plasticity.

Mechanistic approaches are only one way to consider the relationship between culture and behavior. At a higher-order level, evolutionary theorists and social scientists try to explain human behavior in terms of function and selection. Here historians will find a field of inquiry full of rich and productive disagreements. One of the most developed bodies of research and theory in evolutionary social science is human behavioral ecology. Human behavioral ecology brackets the *mechanisms* of human behavior to focus on the *outcomes* of human behavior as adaptive responses to environmental conditions.¹³⁴ Behavioral ecologists assume that individuals modify their behavior under various constraints to maximize their fitness; the psychological processes underlying this behavior are not the province of behavioral ecology. In this sense, behavioral ecology can be seen as the *alter ego* of evolutionary psychology.¹³⁵ Behavioral ecology defers discussion of traits and assumes that behavior is adaptive in present environments. The paradigm allows anthropologists to use optimization models under the assumption of an evolved agent trying to maximize fitness in the context of material tradeoffs. The rich body of literature demonstrates the value of behavioral ecology.¹³⁶ As we will shortly see, one of the most productive applications of behavioral ecology has been the study of mating; behavioral ecologists treat monogamy and polygyny as the outcomes not of preset behavioral programs but of complex tradeoffs between mating and parental effort.

Behavioral ecology works from the assumption that individuals maximize their inclusive fitness—a productive working assumption, but one whose limits

¹³³ Peter Richerson and Robert Boyd, *Not by Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution* (Chicago, 2005), 4.

¹³⁴ Bruce Winterhalder and Eric Alden Smith, “Analyzing Adaptive Strategies: Human Behavioral Ecology at Twenty-Five,” *Evolutionary Anthropology* 9 (2000): 51–72.

¹³⁵ Steven Gangestad and Jeffry Simpson, “An Introduction to *The Evolution of Mind: Why We Developed This Book*,” in S. Gangestad and J. Simpson, eds., *The Evolution of Mind: Fundamental Questions and Controversies* (New York, 2007), 10–13; Laland and Brown, *Sense and Nonsense*, 132–39.

¹³⁶ For example, the papers in Cronk, Chagnon, and Irons, eds., *Adaptation and Human Behavior*; William Irons and Napoleon Chagnon, eds., *Evolutionary Biology and Human Social Behavior: An Anthropological Perspective* (North Scituate, Mass., 1979).

are a matter of enduring controversy. Indeed, the foundation of inclusive fitness theory has been a matter of intense dispute among population biologists, flaring recently because E. O. Wilson's defection to the multi-level selection camp has turned an abstract and mathematical disagreement into a stormy debate.¹³⁷ These debates matter to evolutionary social scientists, for whom the foundations of human sociality are a central problem.¹³⁸ There is intuitive and empirical evidence that human altruism exceeds what kin selection and reciprocal altruism can explain, and despite persistent attempts to reduce human altruism to gene-level explanations—"selfishness in disguise"—these efforts have so far fallen short.¹³⁹ Yet, once again, the solution to the quandary of human altruism is not a retreat from biology into dualism. One of the most promising paradigms to account for culture within an evolutionary framework is gene-culture co-evolutionary theory, or dual-inheritance theory. The core insight of co-evolutionary theory is that culture should not be "lumped together" with other environmental influences.¹⁴⁰ Culture drives genetic evolution, and genetic evolution drives culture.¹⁴¹ The gene-culture co-evolutionary paradigm allows that selection does not always operate at the level of the gene. Co-evolutionary theory accommodates multi-level selective processes.¹⁴² Certain altruistic behaviors may be maladaptive at the level of the individual's genes but promote the success of the individual's group, and many aspects of human altruism may be artifacts of "social instincts" evolved through group selection.

This corner of evolutionary science is still an expanding area. It will continue to develop, but its merits are already considerable. Unlike behavioral ecology, co-evolutionary models do not have to operate on the assumption that behavioral outcomes are adaptive for the individual. Information can be costly to obtain, and the imperfect information-retrieving processes we have evolved sometimes motivate maladaptive behavior. Moreover, behavior with fitness costs can be explained by "*population-level* evolutionary trade-offs that are intrinsic to cultural adaptation."¹⁴³ Co-evolution allows the coexistence of primate social instincts, including kin selection and reciprocal altruism, with

¹³⁷ Martin Nowak, Corina Tarnita, and Edward O. Wilson, "The Evolution of Eusociality," *Nature* 466 (2010): 1057–62; with numerous responses in *Nature* 471 (2011).

¹³⁸ For example, see Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *A Cooperative Species: Human Reciprocity and Its Evolution* (Princeton, 2011).

¹³⁹ Richerson and Boyd, *Not by Genes Alone*, 199.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁴¹ William Durham, *Coevolution: Genes, Culture, and Human Diversity* (Stanford, 1991); L. L. Cavalli-Sforza and M. Feldman, *Cultural Transmission and Evolution: A Quantitative Approach* (Princeton, 1981).

¹⁴² See especially Elliott Sober and David Sloan Wilson, *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998).

¹⁴³ Richerson and Boyd, *Not by Genes Alone*, 151.

“‘tribal’ instincts that allow us to interact cooperatively with a larger, symbolically marked set of people, or tribe.”¹⁴⁴

Culture, in all its variety and complexity, is being recognized as an essential part of nature. More than ever, anthropologists and biologists need each other. But they will also need historians, especially historians who have deep domain knowledge of past systems of sex and marriage. The truth, though, is that the concept of culture as something over and apart from nature still imposes powerful blinders on the ways that history is written, and the very organization of the past as a research field. As historians know better than anyone, the division of time is never an innocent act. The history of sexuality does not begin *in medias res* in classical Greece, where Foucault, without accounting, launches a narrative that has been so formative within the discipline. It is surpassingly valuable to have a clear idea of the sexual mores of the classical Greeks; it is surpassingly unclear why the “history” of sexuality should begin in an early Iron Age culture of southeastern Europe. Partly, this is expedience (documents—and what documents!). Partly, this is clever mimicry of the widespread origins story of “western civilization.” Not least, the Greeks and Romans present a culture *before* Christianity, the great watershed. It is possible that the whole edifice would have been more apparent if Foucault had lived. But, ultimately, has not the fundamental aim of the Foucauldian project been to find the non-existence of a transhistorical subject, by defining a field, “sexuality,” beyond nature? Yet if “nature” is not within the historian’s remit, some of the most interesting and important questions are impossible to solve, and even threaten to disappear from view. Monogamy is a prime example. The history of monogamy should be a rich topic for historians in general; the history of monogamy should keep classical historians occupied, in particular. The Greeks and Romans did not invent the institution of monogamy, but by any reckoning the early Iron Age was one of the absolutely decisive chapters in the history of monogamy. That this development has aroused so little discussion—the bibliography runs to maybe two dozen articles—is an astonishing testament to the frame imposed by the conceptual foundations of the sub-discipline.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 196–97.

¹⁴⁵ Most important are Walter Scheidel’s “A Peculiar Institution? Greco-Roman Monogamy in Global Context,” *History of the Family* 14, 3 (2009): 280–91; and his, “Sex and Empire: A Darwinian Perspective,” in Ian Morris and Walter Scheidel, eds., *The Dynamics of Ancient Empires: State Power from Assyria to Byzantium* (Oxford, 2009), 255–324. See also Satoshi Kanazawa and Mary Still, “Why Monogamy?” *Social Forces* 78 (1999): 25–50; Kevin MacDonald, “The Establishment and Maintenance of Socially Imposed Monogamy in Western Europe,” *Politics and the Life Sciences* 14 (1995): 3–23; Kevin B. MacDonald, “Mechanisms of Sexual Egalitarianism in Western Europe,” *Ethology and Sociobiology* 11 (1990): 195–238; David Herlihy, “Biology and History: The Triumph of Monogamy,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 25 (1995): 571–83; Laura Betzig, *Despotism and Differential Reproduction: A Darwinian View of History*

Monogamy has become a hot topic in recent years, because the spread of monogamy has profound implications for contemporary theoretical questions in evolutionary theory. The mechanisms that promote monogamy are both natural and cultural; the categories that must be used to study it are comparative and anthropological. As the primatologist Bernard Chapais has argued, pair-bonding is a deep structural element of hominid kinship systems. Although humans are not the only primates who form long-term breeding bonds, we are distinctive in the amount of variation exhibited *within* our species. Human pair-bonding is a “biological phenomenon,” with “remarkable flexibility.”¹⁴⁶ But this flexibility is analytically tractable, and not simply due to unaccountable cultural forces. In 1979, Richard Alexander introduced an influential distinction between “two kinds of monogamy in human societies” which can help us begin to understand the causes of variation: ecologically imposed monogamy (EIM) and socially imposed monogamy (SIM).¹⁴⁷ In EIM, monogamy is “universal or prevalent apparently because, owing to the ecological situation, individual men are typically unable to gain by attempting to provide for offspring of more than one wife.”¹⁴⁸ EIM emerges when the relative costs and benefits of mating effort and parental care make monogamy the optimal outcome for individuals.¹⁴⁹ EIM refers to an actual condition in the mating system, an equilibrium between the countervailing pressures to spend energy on mating and to invest energy in child-rearing. The EIM model allows that human mating strategies are complex and pluralist, but under most conditions, a mildly polygynous mating system seems to emerge in human societies.¹⁵⁰

SIM, in distinction to EIM, is said to be unique to humans, a “cultural phenomenon.” SIM refers to a marriage system; its existence is determined by the rules that prevail in a society, not necessarily the realities of mating. The crucial feature of SIM is that it imposes normative monogamy regardless of the fitness costs and benefits for individual actors. Although EIM and SIM

(New York, 1986). More generally, see Ulrich Reichard and Christophe Boesch, eds., *Monogamy: Mating Strategies and Partnerships in Birds, Humans, and Other Mammals* (Cambridge, 2003).

¹⁴⁶ Chapais, *Primeval Kinship*, 162.

¹⁴⁷ Richard Alexander, et al., “Sexual Dimorphisms and Breeding Systems in Pinnipeds, Ungulates, Primates, and Humans,” in William Irons and Napoleon Chagnon, eds., *Evolutionary Biology and Human Social Behavior: An Anthropological Perspective* (North Scituate, Mass., 1979), 402–35.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 418–19.

¹⁴⁹ Low, “Complexities in Human Monogamy,” 165.

¹⁵⁰ Robert Quinlan, “Human Pair-Bonds: Evolutionary Functions, Ecological Variation, and Adaptive Development,” *Evolutionary Anthropology* 17 (2008): 227–38; Bobbi Low, “Ecological and Socio-Cultural Impacts on Mating and Marriage Systems,” in Robin Dunbar and Louise Barrett, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology* (Oxford, 2007), 449–62; Steven W. Gangestad and Jeffrey A. Simpson, “The Evolution of Human Mating: Trade-Offs and Strategic Pluralism,” *Behavior and Brain Sciences* 23 (2000): 573–87.

represent different causal mechanisms, the distinction should not be allowed to reify an artificial divide between “natural” and “cultural” causes of monogamy. The capacity for social control is fully natural, too, and social controls function at least partly through the power of social norms to activate motivational systems in the human brain. It is a question, then, of which aspects of nature are at work. SIM is a simplifying assumption; it provides a catchall category of causes for monogamy that are “non-ecological,” that is, not arising from an equilibrium between mating effort and parental care. SIM has functioned through different control mechanisms, which intervene in the processes of sexual competition in different ways; it has taken different forms, historically, and has arisen for different reasons at different times.¹⁵¹ In short, if SIM is to be more than “not EIM,” it must be a historical category and enriched by the work of historians. Historians, in turn, must recognize that just because SIM prevails in a society, the processes of mating competition and parental investment, with their underlying motivational systems, are still operative.

A historically rich comparative approach will eventually reveal how much diversity the category of SIM lumps together. The most powerful criticisms in this direction have already come from the ancient historian who has been most engaged with the problem of monogamy, Walter Scheidel. He has argued that the EIM/SIM distinction cannot account for the mating systems of the classical world, in which marriage was monogamous but mating was effectively polygynous.¹⁵² Indeed, as Scheidel has started to show, the institution of slavery—a fundamental part of human history, almost never integrated into the anthropological categories of human mating—must be part of the analysis of mating systems. He argues that Greece and Rome combined SIM with effective polygyny through the institution of slavery.¹⁵³ Chattel slavery masked the reality of continued reproductive inequality. Scheidel’s powerful insights demonstrate the urgency of combining thick historical understanding with paradigms informed by evolutionary assumptions; his deep engagement with both the biological and anthropological literature produces a richer and more robust analysis of a historical problem.

On a very long view, both the ecological and social factors affecting human mating systems have changed, and it is presently disputed what the decisive historical moments truly were. In a series of articles, Laura Fortunato argues that monogamous marriage “emerged in Eurasia following the adoption of intensive agriculture, as ownership of land became critical to productive and reproductive success.”¹⁵⁴ In the aftermath of the Neolithic revolution,

¹⁵¹ MacDonald, “Establishment and Maintenance.”

¹⁵² Scheidel, “A Peculiar Institution?,” 282–83.

¹⁵³ Scheidel, “Sex and Empire.”

¹⁵⁴ Laura Fortunato and Marco Archetti, “Evolution of Monogamous Marriage by Maximization of Inclusive Fitness,” *Journal of Evolutionary Biology* 23 (2010): 149–56. Especially Laura

monogamy became a strategy that promoted inclusive fitness. Certainly, this account must affect the way historians treat monogamy: it makes EIM appear a more robust force in the last ten thousand years. At the same time, it is not clear why polygyny remained prevalent in societies practicing agriculture, or why monogamy was socially imposed in some human groups but not others. Above all, the model rests on the assumption of intense scarcity in small-scale societies, whereas there is empirical evidence that differences in wealth and power—the sorts of stratification enabled by large-scale agricultural states—encourage polygyny.¹⁵⁵ A deep history of monogamy will have to acknowledge that domestication reshuffled the ecological context of mating strategy, but probably not that it was the decisive turning point in the history of monogamy.

Another recent interpretation places more emphasis on cultural influences. In this model, monogamy is a form of social cooperation enabled by evolved human capacities to coordinate behavior in large groups. Historically, the emergence of SIM in the archaic Mediterranean appears as the crucial historical vector—carrying monogamy to Rome, to Christianity, to European societies, and eventually globally. Of particular interest is the argument that the spread of monogamy is a form of cultural group selection.¹⁵⁶ The hypothesis is that monogamy depresses sexual competition, which promotes social cohesion to the extent that monogamous societies are able to out-compete polygamous societies. The authors marshal evidence suggesting that polygamous societies experience high levels of interpersonal violence and other social maladies. They argue that testosterone, which, as they note, circulates differently in men in monogamous and polygamous societies, promotes aggressive behavior in ways that undermine communal cohesion. This model has its merits and its limits. Cultural group selection is not the only way to explain monogamy's spread by cultural influences; monogamy may simply have been attached—not unlike the way certain alleles tend to be inherited together in genetic linkages—to a package of social characteristics that prevailed for independent reasons. Certainly, at times, polygamous societies have “out-competed” monogamous ones—Islamic expansion comes to mind.¹⁵⁷ But the idea that the cultural evolution of monogamy *physiologically* changed human beings is provocative and well worth further investigation.

Fortunato, “Reconstructing the History of Marriage Strategies in Indo-European-Speaking Societies: Monogamy and Polygyny,” *Human Biology* 83 (2011): 87–105.

¹⁵⁵ Betzig, *Despotism*.

¹⁵⁶ Joseph Henrich, Robert Boyd, and Peter Richerson, “The Puzzle of Monogamous Marriage,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society: Biological Sciences* 367 (2012): 657–69.

¹⁵⁷ On Islamic polygamy, see Kecia Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010).

Both ecological and social influences must be part of an overarching model of monogamy. But it should be apparent, even at this early stage, that history is an essential dimension for the study of monogamy. Historians must provide the rich domain knowledge that furnishes data about *when* and *why* monogamy prevailed. But more profoundly, historians will need to provide a historicized account of the mechanisms of culture. The Greco-Roman case bears out the importance of written law; religion, too, must be part of the answer. Here is an almost unexplored continent, at least in terms of human mating systems. In the Roman Empire, an epochal shift from monogamous marriage, combined with effective polygyny, to normative monogamous mating occurred, driven mostly by the rise of Christianity as a public ideology.¹⁵⁸ Christian sexual ideology, one of the most unlikely triumphs in the history of culture, fundamentally attacked an ancient social system that allowed untrammelled access to out-group women like slaves and prostitutes.¹⁵⁹ Historians have mostly treated this shift as the rise of a new conception of the body: a hermeneutic upheaval.¹⁶⁰ It needs to be treated as a revolution that deeply reconfigured the cultural mediation of sexual competition. And historians will need to ask why, in advanced Iron Age societies, civil law and religious ideology allowed the diffusion of monogamous norms more broadly than ever before.

The grand temporal division, which allots the study of humanity before *Homo sapiens* to Science, the study of “early” humanity to Anthropology, and the study of “civilized” humanity to History, may only exist visibly in the organization of History Departments, but it remains a potent schema implicit in the research agendas and modes of hypothesis formation within the discipline. The human past is not a catalogue of discrete societies waiting to be coded and analyzed. The past is cumulative; the Neolithic revolution, the rise of formal institutions, the spread of religious ideology, industrialization, colonialism, and so on, are all folded in upon us in ways that require elucidation. Foucault’s treatment of Greek and Roman sexuality was a form of parachute-drop ethnography, a thick description of specific texts without any external orientation or comparative framework. As much as his work has enriched the study of ancient texts, his approach—and the embedded assumptions about the role of nature in human life—do not now represent the way forward. In some sense, the present moment is not unlike the 1860s, when the boundaries of history, anthropology, and biology were dizzyingly uncertain. Historians have a greater opportunity than at any moment since the collapse of

¹⁵⁸ Kyle Harper, “The Family in Late Antiquity,” in Scott Johnson, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2012).

¹⁵⁹ Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013).

¹⁶⁰ Brown, *Body and Society*, from an enormous bibliography.

Victorian “cultural evolutionism” to rethink the place of nature in the study of the past.

TOWARDS THE REINTEGRATION OF BIOLOGY INTO HISTORY

History is a discipline that has always been enriched by the runoff of neighboring fields. But an invisible dam, erected in the academic struggles of the last generation, is blocking the inflow of nourishment from other disciplines. The relationship between “nature” and “culture” has changed drastically since the history of sexuality, as a collective project, took shape. Some historians are beginning to recognize the possibilities of a natural science of culture, extended in time. Daniel Smail’s inspired call for a Deep History that breaks down the old divisions of disciplinary labor by ignoring the false boundary between “pre-history” and “history” is one way forward; Randolph Roth’s biohistory, which integrates hormonally mediated behavioral plasticity into the study of past violence, is another.¹⁶¹ These are pioneering forays, but reconnecting history and nature will not be easy. Yet if it is true that culture simply cannot be an immaterial entity, then we must begin to reckon with this fact, however hard it may be. Nothing—not language, not domestication, not writing, not even Greek philosophy—allowed humans to leap out of nature. Evolutionary theorists are recognizing that human nature cannot be studied apart from human culture and human history, and they admit that “the study of human behavior from an evolutionary perspective is in far greater disarray than most outsiders realize.”¹⁶² Evolutionary science, in other words, is not a settled body of knowledge that historians must apply. It is an unsettled but rapidly advancing body of theory whose most compelling exponents are affirming the need for culture and for history. It would be a lost opportunity if historians do not also come to accept, and embed in our working practices, the fact that no part of human culture or the human past is outside of nature.

¹⁶¹ Smail, *On Deep History*; Randolph Roth, “Biology and the Deep History of Homicide,” *British Journal of Criminology* 51 (2011): 535–55; see also the provocative essays in Andrew Shryock and Daniel Lord Smail, eds., *Deep History: The Architecture of Past and Present* (Berkeley, 2011); and Edmund Russell, *Evolutionary History: Uniting History and Biology to Understand Life on Earth* (Cambridge, 2011).

¹⁶² David Sloan Wilson, “Evolution, Morality, and Human Potential,” Steven Scher and Frederick Rauscher, *Evolutionary Psychology: Alternative Approaches* (Boston, 2003), 56.

Abstract: This article analyzes the configuration of biology, anthropology, and history over the last generation by taking the sub-field of the “history of sexuality” as a case study. The history of sexuality developed at a particularly important site of engagement with neighboring disciplines. I argue that the concepts of nature and culture that came to prevail among historians of sexuality were deeply influenced by the debate between a particular strand of evolutionary biology, namely sociobiology, and its critics, who were committed to cultural hermeneutics. This debate encouraged a formulation of nature and culture which is effectively dualist and which remains present within the sub-field. By focusing the analysis on the study of *ancient* (classical Mediterranean) sexuality, I seek detailed insights into the reception of this debate within a specific domain of historical investigation, one whose stakes have been particularly high because of the intervention of Michel Foucault. The article closes by arguing that biologists and anthropologists in the last two decades have advanced the study of culture as a part of nature, and that historians have much to gain by engaging with more recent models. The institution of monogamy is highlighted as an emerging theme of investigation that can only be approached with the unified insights of history, anthropology, and biology.