

Feminist Research and Paradigm Shift in Anthropology

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Note on the text: This is a slightly revised version of the paper, because the section following the definitions in the published version is not entirely clear.

Abstract. In her paper ‘An Awkward Relationship: the Case of Feminism and Anthropology’, Marilyn Strathern argues that feminist research cannot produce a paradigm shift in social anthropology. I reconstruct her arguments and evaluate them, revealing that they are insufficient for ruling out this possibility.

Keywords: Marilyn Strathern, feminist research, social anthropology, paradigm, isomorphism, the Other.

1. Introduction

Marilyn Strathern is an influential social anthropologist whose works are sometimes judged to be significant for philosophy (Douglas 1989; Haraway 1994). One of her best known papers can in fact be straightforwardly classed as philosophy, namely ‘An Awkward Relationship: the Case of Feminism and Anthropology’. The paper responds to a debate between two groups of academic feminists. One group would like feminist research to bring about a paradigm shift in anthropology but deny that any shift has happened. The other group think that a shift has already happened. Strathern agrees with the first group that there has been no paradigm shift (1987: 281), but she rejects an assumption of theirs, an assumption common to both groups: that it is possible for feminist research to bring about a paradigm shift in anthropology. My aim here is to evaluate her arguments for the conclusion that this is impossible. Before evaluating her arguments, I define some key concepts and present two

fictional cases of feminist research bringing about a paradigm shift in anthropology. I then show that her arguments do not establish the impossibility of these cases.

2. Definitions

To evaluate Strathern's arguments, it will be useful to first clarify some of the concepts involved in formulating the possibility which she denies: the concept of social anthropology, the concept of feminist research, the concept of a paradigm, and the concept of bringing about a paradigm shift. The purpose of this section is to provide these clarifications.

I will talk simply of anthropology, but will be referring throughout to social anthropology. The term 'social anthropology' is sometimes used to refer to a British tradition of anthropological work, but it will be used here in a broader sense. In this broader sense, anthropology is a discipline which aims to study cultural diversity.

Let us turn now to feminist research. The obvious starting point for defining feminist research is to say that it is research which has, as either its sole aim or one of its aims, the aim of helping to counter the oppression of women, where women are thought of as including all female human beings. This definition raises other issues about how we are to understand the reference to women. Are they to be conceived of on the basis of chromosomes, so that what it is to be a female is to have certain chromosomes, or else on the basis of bodily organs? Or are they to be conceived of in some other way altogether, perhaps in terms of their psychological traits or how they are classified within a culture? I shall rely on this definition of feminist research while passing over these questions. The material below can survive different elaborations of the definition and it is not crucial to elaborate on it here. Strathern herself does not spell out what she has in mind by feminist research, but this definition appears to capture the understanding she is relying on in her paper.

One can, in contrast, find statements of hers which specify what a paradigm is (1987: 281). There is a problem, however. At different points in her paper, she uses the term 'paradigm' in different senses. For now, we can take a paradigm to be a set of presuppositions of some or all research work within a discipline, but presuppositions which are not essential to the discipline itself. There could be research work within the discipline which does not have these presuppositions. These presuppositions, we can say, are contingent to the discipline. (The requirement that they must be contingent will play an important role in one of Strathern's arguments.) They are typically of a highly general character, but we can allow for exceptions to this description. To illustrate this notion of a paradigm, perhaps there was once research work in anthropology which involved the following presuppositions: (i) there are distinct societies; (ii) for each society, there is a set of beliefs about the nature of the world which is the worldview of that society; (iii) for each society, there is a set of beliefs about how one should live which is the ethos of that society. This set of presuppositions is a paradigm.

Early on in her paper, Strathern writes in a way that suggests she is using the term 'paradigm' in this sense:

The idea that paradigms can be shifted suggests two things at once. The underlying assumptions that constitute disciplinary bias in its unreformed state are exposed; at the same time, displacing these with a conscious theoretical framework challenges existing theoretical frameworks. Fundamental premises are thus open to assault. (1987: 277)

What I have characterized as presuppositions, typically of a highly general character, Strathern characterizes as underlying assumptions and fundamental premises. Anthropologists tend to speak of assumptions more often than presuppositions. There are subtle differences between what is conveyed by these ways of speaking but it is safe for us to

overlook them. The reason why the idea of paradigms being shifted implies an attack on certain presuppositions is because a paradigm, in this context, is a set of presuppositions.

Strathern believes that feminist research has not brought about a paradigm shift in anthropology, but she disagrees with some other feminist academics who share this belief over why the shift has not occurred. They locate the obstacle in the emotions of anthropologists. Anthropologists feel discomfort over abandoning the paradigm under attack and that is why there has been no paradigm shift. Strathern captures the view of this group as follows:

The idea of overturning paradigms is a popular metaphor for the perceived challenge and counter-challenge in the relationship between feminist scholarship and established disciplines. It is the received radical view that people will defend their present paradigms because it is too uncomfortable or threatening to give up what one has. (1987: 282)

There would be little point in appealing to anthropologists' feelings of discomfort unless one thinks that feminist research provides anthropologists with a good reason to abandon an anthropological paradigm. If not, one could just say that the explanation for why anthropologists have not given up their paradigm is that they lack a good reason to. These feminists therefore suggest a certain account of what would have happened had anthropologists' feelings of discomfort not intervened. On this account, feminist research has provided anthropologists with a good reason to abandon a paradigm of anthropology. It has also provided anthropologists with a good reason to take up a replacement paradigm which it has constructed. If discomfort had not intervened, what would have happened is that anthropologists would have abandoned their paradigm and taken up this replacement, hence there would have been a paradigm shift.

We can construct a local variation on this account, where feminist research does not challenge a paradigm of all anthropology, only a paradigm of some anthropology. It provides a good reason to those anthropologists who operate with this paradigm to abandon it in favour of a replacement that it has constructed. If discomfort had not intervened, a local paradigm shift would have occurred. In this paper, I will only be concerned with the possibility of feminist research bringing about a paradigm shift in anthropology in one of these two ways. In the introduction to this paper, I represented Strathern as denying that feminist research can bring about a paradigm shift in anthropology. More precisely, her denial is that it can bring about a paradigm shift in one of these ways, regardless of the emotional disposition of anthropologists. That is to say, even if anthropologists are not made uncomfortable by the thought of abandoning certain presuppositions of theirs, neither the supposed possibility sketched in the previous paragraph nor its local variation is a genuine possibility in her eyes.

3. Two Fictional Cases

I am not aware of any actual cases of feminist research bringing about a paradigm shift in anthropology, but it seems that we can easily imagine this occurring. If Strathern's arguments are successful, then they will reveal what we imagine to be impossible or to in fact be something else, that is, something other than feminist research bringing about a paradigm shift in anthropology. In this section, I present two fictional cases, in order to later consider whether Strathern's arguments achieve this goal.

The first case involves feminist research which inquires into the issue of why some people who accept that certain gender norms are oppressive continue to abide by those norms, while others do not (Vasterling 2010: 176-177). An investigation into this issue, let us imagine, leads to a novel theory of how individuals relate to social norms and this theory

clashes with certain presuppositions of some anthropology. Furthermore, the theory has a much stronger justification than these presuppositions, meaning that there is good reason for anthropologists to stop operating with these presuppositions and to operate with the theory instead. Feminist researchers make this point to anthropologists, leading to a paradigm shift.

The second fictional case involves feminist research inquiring into the nature of our gender concepts. Oppression of women typically involves agents acting in a way that is reliant on gender concepts, so it may well be deemed important to understand these concepts. Investigation into our gender concepts, let us imagine, results in an understanding of these concepts which challenges various theories of concepts in general and leads those investigating to a novel theory of the nature of concepts. This theory has a much stronger justification than a rival one which is presupposed by much anthropology. Feminist researchers point this out to anthropologists, thereby bringing about a paradigm shift in anthropology.

The term 'paradigm' is associated with Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. At some points in that text, Kuhn writes as if those with a novel paradigm in a natural science cannot provide compelling reasons to abandon the old paradigm and accept the new one (Kuhn 1996: 94). The presuppositions that constitute a natural scientific paradigm are not the kind of things that can be provided with compelling reasons, he suggests. On the basis of this suggestion, Kuhn has sometimes been thought of as depicting major theoretical changes in science as non-rational (see Bird 2011). If we export this suggestion to the debate that Strathern is participating in, a worry arises about whether cases of the kind that I have presented could actually occur. These cases depend on feminist research providing a compelling reason to anthropologists to abandon a paradigm, that is to say, a reason which is such that it ought to lead anthropologists to abandon that paradigm. But the worry is that there cannot be compelling reasons in favour of or against the presuppositions that constitute

a paradigm. Strathern does not appeal to this worry. Her arguments are difficult to anticipate beforehand. I turn now to these arguments.

4. The No-Isomorphism Argument

Strathern's first argument appears very early on in her paper. She attempts to identify a commitment of those who think that feminist research can produce a paradigm shift in a traditional discipline, even if it has so far failed to:

Much of the literature on the failure of feminist scholarship to change disciplines assumes the isomorphism of feminist studies and traditional disciplines, for it is often couched in terms of the immense task of paradigm shift. (1987: 277)

The commitment is to feminist research and traditional disciplines being isomorphic. I will consider what isomorphic means after reconstructing Strathern's argument. We can leave this issue for now and observe that she denies that there is this isomorphism:

The fact that feminist scholarship works across disciplines means it cannot be parallel with them, and this is awkward in relation to the idea that feminist insights might modify work in any single discipline, for instance, anthropology. For its impact to be registered on mainstream theorizing, feminist scholarship would have to be construed as an isomorphic sister "discipline" from which ideas and concepts could be borrowed. (1987: 276-277)

Strathern's thinking in these two quotations can be summarised as follows. Those who believe that there is a possibility of feminist research bringing about paradigm shifts in traditional disciplines are committed to a view of feminist research and traditional disciplines as isomorphic, but they are not isomorphic.

From this summary, we can reconstruct an argument against the possibility of feminist research bringing about a paradigm shift in anthropology:

- (1) Feminist research can only bring about a paradigm shift in a traditional discipline if feminist research and that discipline are isomorphic.
- (2) Anthropology is a traditional discipline.
- (3) Feminist research and anthropology are not isomorphic.

From (1) and (2):

- (4) Feminist research can only bring about a paradigm shift in anthropology if feminist research and anthropology are isomorphic.

From (3) and (4):

- (5) Feminist research cannot bring about a paradigm shift in anthropology.

Note that premise (1) is intended to express a necessary condition, not a sufficient condition. That is to say, even if feminist research and a traditional discipline are isomorphic, this in itself may not be sufficient for it to be able to bring about a paradigm shift in that discipline. There may be other obstacles.

In order to evaluate Strathern's argument, it is important to have some grasp of what it means to say that one discipline and another are isomorphic. Strathern does not clarify this notion, but I shall offer an interpretation based on suggestive material within her paper. (The interpretation will leave the notion looking vague, but a more precise consideration against feminist research being able to bring about a paradigm shift will emerge by the end of this section.) Two disciplines are isomorphic if they do not largely overlap in terms of what is studied but members of both disciplines have a similar way of relating to their respective objects of study. A way of relating to an object of study, in this context, is a way of researching it that is guided by certain values. A person who takes notes on the structures of living things would not necessarily be a biologist for Strathern, despite studying living things

and even if some of these things have never been studied before. To be a biologist, on a Kuhn-inspired understanding which I think she accepts (1987: 285), one must evaluate the information in terms of its value for solving problems which are currently recognized as theoretical problems for biology or in terms of whether it raises a new theoretical problem for the community of biologists. A physicist must also relate to information in terms of its theoretical problem-solving or problem-raising value, but in this case for physics, and so physics is an isomorphic discipline to biology.

Strathern does not say whether she takes feminist research to be something other than a discipline or whether she takes it to be a discipline, just not a discipline which is isomorphic to anthropology. She perceives a lack of isomorphism because feminist research draws upon different traditional disciplines to achieve its aim and, a point which she emphasizes (Strathern 1987: 277), because it involves some other way of relating. Feminist research aims to help counter the oppression of women. Researchers evaluate material studied in terms of its value for this aim. The principal aim of anthropology, meanwhile, is knowledge. On the basis of the definition which I earlier introduced, it aims for knowledge of cultural diversity. Presumably, on other definitions the idea of anthropology aiming for knowledge will be preserved. Anthropologists relate to what they study by judging its value for extending the discipline's knowledge.

Even if feminist research and anthropology are not isomorphic, this does not present any obvious problem for the possibility of the former bringing about a paradigm shift in the latter. If one thinks back to the fictional cases introduced in the previous section, the possibility of these cases does not appear to be jeopardised by accepting non-isomorphism. Consequently, premise (1) seems both false and bewildering. The question we are left with is why Strathern believes that being isomorphic is a necessary condition for one discipline, or body of research, being able to provide another with a paradigm. I will not directly answer

this question, but will consider why Strathern might have thought that the specific non-isomorphism of feminist research and anthropology means that feminist research cannot provide anthropology with a paradigm. Consideration of this issue will reveal her argument to be more defensible than it seems at first blush.

Strathern says that feminist research cuts across traditional disciplines, of which anthropology is one. Her thought then might be that any paradigm developed within feminist research is already in anthropology, and so cannot be said to enter anthropology from beyond. But this is not necessarily true. The feminist paradigm might not have been developed by involving any anthropology. Furthermore, even if it is already within anthropology, it may be that non-feminist anthropologists are still working with a set of presuppositions which clashes with this paradigm, presuppositions which are dubious in light of the findings of feminist research. And so we can envisage a paradigm shift occurring in which the rest of anthropology takes up this paradigm developed by feminist research and already within anthropology. This too is feminist research bringing about a paradigm shift in anthropology.

An alternative interpretation of her thinking focuses on the claim that feminist research and anthropology involve different relationships to the material studied. If feminist research involves evaluating material in terms of its value for countering the oppression of women, then it can only present a set of presuppositions as worth adopting because of their value for this goal. However, this goal is not the goal of anthropology, so feminist research cannot present an evaluation of these presuppositions which speaks to anthropological concerns. This strikes me as the most defensible construal of Strathern's thinking, in terms of how difficult it is to object to. But it relies on an overly restrictive conception of the evaluations that feminist research can engage in. In seeking to counter the oppression of women, one might also seek knowledge of certain things, for instance how people relate to gender norms and the nature of gender concepts. That might put feminist research in a

position to judge that certain presuppositions of anthropology are inadequate representations of important phenomena. A justified judgement of this kind is going to constitute a reason to abandon those presuppositions, unless anthropologists can make a special case for preserving them when studying cultural diversity, despite their distorting effect. Thus I think we have to say that the non-isomorphism argument does not work. The possibility of feminist research bringing about a paradigm shift in anthropology remains.

5. The No-Paradigms Argument

The second argument that Strathern makes involves denying that anthropology has paradigms. Kuhn introduced the concept of a paradigm to discuss the development of the natural sciences. Strathern contrasts these sciences with the social sciences by saying that in a social science there are a number of different theoretical frameworks which are in competition with one another, unlike in natural science. On the basis of this contrast, she denies that anthropology has paradigms:

So why the resistance? ... The answer cannot lie in “paradigms,” first, because the different theoretical positions occupied in the social sciences are not analogous to the paradigms of Kuhnian science. They are based on overt conflict between competitive conceptual frameworks which cannot be reduced to single positions... (1987: 286)

In this quotation, Strathern writes as if the only candidates for being paradigms in a social science are its explicit theoretical frameworks, but these are not paradigms. We will later see that she moderates her position, but I shall begin by discussing this argument.

We can reconstruct Strathern’s argument once again as three premises and two inferences from these premises:

(1) Feminist research can only bring about a paradigm shift in anthropology if there is at least one paradigm in anthropology.

(2) If the theoretical frameworks which anthropologists refer to are not paradigms, there are no paradigms in anthropology.

(3) The theoretical frameworks which anthropologists refer to are not paradigms.

From (2) and (3):

(4) There are no paradigms in anthropology.

From (1) and (4):

(5) Feminist research cannot bring about a paradigm shift in anthropology.

I have not explained Strathern's grounds for endorsing (3). The section of her paper in which the argument appears is difficult to follow, and open to more than one interpretation. I shall focus on the clearest interpretation.

At a certain point in her paper, Strathern raises an objection to operating with our understanding of a paradigm as a set of contingent presuppositions, typically of a highly general character. She writes:

...one might get away with a commonsense understanding of paradigms as "basic conceptual frameworks and orienting assumptions of a body of knowledge." Yet one significant feature of the Kuhnian paradigm is that the scientists he studied become aware of paradigm shift only after the fact. (1987: 281)

What this quotation suggests is that, according to Strathern, we should add to our understanding that the presuppositions that constitute a paradigm are not objects of awareness for those operating with that paradigm. In other words, if a researcher is aware of certain presuppositions of their work, then it does not count as a paradigm of theirs. With this modified conception of what a paradigm is, we can realize why she discounts the theoretical

frameworks that anthropologists refer to – Marxist frameworks, psychoanalytic frameworks, cognitive anthropology frameworks and so on – as paradigms. Anthropologists who are committed to one of these frameworks advertise that fact and comment on how it differs from other frameworks which it is in competition with. Their awareness of their framework discounts it from being a paradigm. On the interpretation I shall work with, this is Strathern's justification for (3).

One objection to this justification is that the lack-of-awareness condition that she recommends is not worth incorporating. If feminist research were to provide a compelling reason to abandon a set of contingent presuppositions running through some or all anthropology, in favour of a framework that it has constructed, and if anthropologists act on that reason, it is pedantic to deny that a paradigm shift has occurred, should it turn out that anthropologists were already aware of these presuppositions. They might have been aware of the presuppositions while regarding them as uncontroversial, either believing that there are no coherent alternatives to them or believing that the alternatives are implausible. In the context of the debate Strathern is involved in, the lack-of-awareness condition is not important.

Even if we grant this condition and so concede that the theoretical frameworks that anthropologists refer to are not paradigms, there are other candidates for paradigms in anthropology. If we try to lay out the commitments of the recognized theoretical frameworks within anthropology, further analysis might reveal certain assumptions common to all of the different frameworks yet contingent to the discipline as a whole. Would not sets of these assumptions constitute paradigms? They are presuppositions of much familiar anthropology but there could be anthropology without these presuppositions. Strathern is aware of this objection. She writes:

It may be objected that such positions are not, then, really of paradigmatic status, and we should look for deeper paradigms. Yet to do so would be easier

from *within* anthropology: for instance, it is encounters with alien social and cultural systems that allow one to scrutinize the subject/object dichotomy or commodity notions that inform Western concepts of personhood and identity.

(1987: 286)

In the first quotation of this section, Strathern sounds as if she is denying that there are paradigms in anthropology, hence the no-paradigms argument. In this second quotation, she moderates her position by being open to the possibility of deeper paradigms: presuppositions common to the different theoretical frameworks yet contingent to the discipline. Nevertheless, she thinks that it would be difficult for feminist research to challenge any such paradigms and easier for a challenge to come from within anthropology.

Strathern does not spell out why she thinks in this way, but I believe that her thinking in expanded form is as follows. If feminist research is to challenge some of these deeper presuppositions, it will need to be aware of them. That awareness is difficult to achieve. It will usually depend on an encounter with a way of representing the world which involves alternative presuppositions. But that is much easier to achieve from within anthropology. Feminist research is unlikely to be in a position to achieve an awareness of the deeper contingent presuppositions of anthropology in order to attack them.

There are three objections to this line of thought. The first objection is that feminist researchers may end up abandoning deeper presuppositions common to both them and anthropology when trying to understand certain phenomena, without necessarily studying people with alternative presuppositions. Returning to my two fictional cases, the effort to understand how people relate to gender norms and the effort to understand gender concepts may result in deeper presuppositions being abandoned. Natural scientists sometimes end up departing significantly from folk models of the world, without studying others with a different model. Whatever differences there are between natural science and feminist inquiry

outside natural science, I do not see why feminist inquiry of any kind might not also lead to significant departures.

The second objection is that Strathern's thinking overlooks other disciplines which sometimes involve the study of people with hitherto unfamiliar worldviews. One such discipline is psychology. I have in mind specifically child psychology. Child psychologists do not think that the child begins as a blank slate in terms of its worldview and that the culture that it is in simply writes its worldview onto the blank slate. Some child psychologists think that a child has to go through a series of theoretical revolutions, a series of personal paradigm shifts, before arriving at presuppositions about the world shared by the adults around them (Carey 1988). These psychologists study the unfamiliar worldviews of children, which suggests the possibility of becoming aware of deeper anthropological presuppositions through this study.

The third objection is that Strathern's thinking overlooks that, if it is easier to become aware of deeper anthropological presuppositions through anthropology itself, feminist research might use anthropology to achieve this awareness. It could, for example, rely on feminist reinterpretations of anthropological works. This is a way in which anthropology might play a role in enabling feminist awareness of deeper anthropological presuppositions, in order for these presuppositions to be attacked. Indeed, sometimes interpretations of anthropological research by commentators are more revolutionary in orientation than anything claimed by the original researcher (e.g., Bloor 1991: 139).

Whatever the objections to the line of thought from Strathern that I have been considering, this line is not a contribution to the claim that it is impossible for feminist research to bring about a paradigm shift in anthropology. Its conclusion is that it is difficult for feminist research to bring about such a shift, but difficult things are sometimes achieved. The next section of this paper resumes the focus on impossibility.

6. The No-Contingency Argument

In order for feminist research to bring about a paradigm shift in anthropology, it needs to provide anthropologists with a good reason to abandon a contingent presupposition of some or all anthropology. Towards the end of her paper, Strathern imagines a dialogue between a type of anthropologist, a literary anthropologist, and a type of feminist, a radical feminist. Neither party manages to target contingent presuppositions of the other. The anthropologist criticizes an essential presupposition of feminist research and the feminist criticizes an essential presupposition of anthropological research.

In this paper, I will only present the radical feminist's criticism of the literary anthropologist. This kind of anthropologist accepts the following claims: (i) it is an ideal of anthropology that the perspective of those studied by anthropological research is revealed in the final text; (ii) this ideal can only be realized if the text is multiply-authored, rather than purely the authorship of the anthropologist; (iii) literary experimentation with the genre of ethnography is essential for efforts to achieve this ideal. Hence this anthropologist engages in literary experimentation. The radical feminist points out that, whatever experiments are made, ultimately the anthropologist organizes his text guided by the interests of his discipline, not the interests of those studied. His ideal of revealing the perspective of those studied cannot therefore be realized:

The anthropological ideal is a delusion, overlooking the crucial dimension of different social interests... They have no interests in common to be served by this purportedly common product. (1987: 290)

However, this ideal is essential to anthropology, so the radical feminist, by asserting that different interests will block any attempt to realize the ideal, fails to undermine a contingent presupposition of anthropology. The only way in which the literary anthropologist could

change so as to incorporate the radical feminist's point would be to give up on anthropology altogether. (Strathern does not explain why different interests would prevent the realization of the anthropological ideal. I do not think this is necessarily an obstacle. As most people who have ever told a lie know, there are times when others with significantly different interests are able to detect and articulate what one actually believes.)

Strathern thinks that any other critical dialogue between feminist research and anthropology will also be a case where no contingent presuppositions are undermined. We will come to why she thinks this later. At this stage, we are in a position to reconstruct her argument:

- (1) Feminist research can only bring about a paradigm shift in anthropology if feminist research can provide a good reason for anthropologists to abandon a contingent presupposition of theirs.
- (2) Feminist research cannot provide such a reason. (If it tries to, it ends up criticizing essential presuppositions.)

Therefore:

- (3) Feminist research cannot bring about a paradigm shift in anthropology.

In order to properly grasp this argument, we need to understand Strathern's grounds for (2). This involves her reason for thinking that any critical dialogue between a feminist researcher and an anthropologist will follow the pattern of the dialogue she presents between the radical feminist and the literary anthropologist.

Strathern locates the obstacle to contingent criticism in different conceptions of the Other. She writes:

Although I dwelt on particular approaches, the construals of the Other briefly described here can be generalized to feminism and anthropology overall. These constructions are fundamental. When brought out into the open and

compared, their proponents cannot possibly challenge each other, for the one is no substitute for the other. (1987: 291)

We can say that the Other in relation to a project is a person or group that is subject to a significant amount of attention by those engaging in the project, as part of pursuing the project, and is represented as significantly different to those engaging in the project, in beliefs or experiences or behaviours. On this definition, not all research projects have an Other, but some do. Strathern depicts anthropology and feminism as having incompatible conceptions of the Other. For feminist research, the Other is patriarchal institutions and men (Strathern 1987, 288). It depends on a conception according to which those engaged in feminist projects should not collaborate with the Other, because the Other is a source of oppression. For anthropological research, the Other is the object of study (Strathern 1987, 289). It depends on a conception according to which the Other has a perspective that is valuable to know and according to which the Other can be and must be collaborated with, for this is necessary to develop knowledge of the Other's perspective. The incompatibility comes from the fact that a feminist anthropologist in the field will receive conflicting prescriptions from their feminist and their anthropological commitments. Their feminist commitments lead to the conclusion that they must not collaborate with men, while their anthropological commitments entail the necessity of collaboration.

Strathern's representation of feminist research is extreme and dubious. From the definition of feminist research that we are working with, according to which it aims to help counter the oppression of women, it seems that feminist research only requires no collaboration with men in situations where any collaboration is a hindrance, all things considered, to countering the oppression of women. To arrive at Strathern's view, that feminist research requires no collaboration with its Other, one needs to argue that every situation is of this kind. Strathern does not provide any such argument and I cannot see any

plausible argument available. The picture of incompatibility that she mentions is inadequately justified and, most likely, unjustifiable. Penelope Harvey, in a Strathern-inspired passage, writes that ‘The feminist self exists through... an antagonistic separation from the male Other’ (1998: 74). But I think that this self can just as well exist while thinking, ‘Sometimes it is good to work together, sometimes not.’ What a feminist anthropologist needs to consider is whether collaborating with men as part of anthropological research can help counter the oppression of women, a question that should surely be approached on a case by case basis.

Even if there were the incompatibility that Strathern posits, it would not prevent feminist research from bringing about a paradigm shift in anthropology. As we observed in part 4, the feminist research that gives rise to material justifying a paradigm shift does not have to involve anthropology. Thus significant concessions can be made to Strathern’s attempt to ground (2) while still finding that premise objectionable.

7. The Replacement Picture

Strathern does more than just deny the possibility of feminist research bringing about a paradigm shift in anthropology. She also offers a memorable replacement picture of how they relate to one another. Before presenting this picture, it will be useful to briefly consider an issue that was passed over in the previous section. Strathern depicts feminist research and anthropology as each unable to provide good reasons to abandon contingent presuppositions of the other. But can they instead provide good reasons to abandon essential presuppositions and therefore cease pursuing one of these activities? Strathern thinks that they cannot. When the radical feminist criticizes the literary anthropologist’s ideal, he responds like so:

Anthropological practice would cease if it could not implement in some way
or another a working ethic of humanism. (1987: 290)

Strathern's thinking is that it is reasonable for the literary anthropologist to set aside the criticism of the radical feminist, even if it is indeed true that he can never capture the perspective of those studied. It is reasonable for the radical feminist in turn to set aside the criticism of the literary anthropologist. These responses need elaboration, otherwise we cannot see why they are reasonable. I will set aside the task of elaborating them myself in order to now sketch Strathern's replacement picture.

Anthropology and feminist research cannot produce relevant criticism of one another, but they can mock each other (1987: 289-290). There are two kinds of mockery that Strathern draws attention to, although they are not distinguished in the original text. One kind involves criticism which targets presuppositions that are essential to the other kind of research. Feminist research can criticize presuppositions that are essential to anthropology and vice versa. This kind of criticism leaves those criticized feeling vulnerable, since the presuppositions targeted are far from self-evident, yet the nature of their project makes it reasonable for them to set aside the criticism. When the criticism is made in the knowledge that it can reasonably be set aside, this is mere mockery. It is only done to expose the vulnerable points of another. The other kind of mockery involves so nearly achieving what those criticized aim to achieve. Thus Strathern suggests that the radical feminist can say, 'Look what I can do!' to an envious literary anthropologist:

But feminists come close to displaying an alternative route to what anthropologists hope to achieve in collaborative enterprises. Feminists can claim substantial interests in common with the people they study. They may be speaking woman to woman, or else have a common ground in understanding systems of domination. (1987: 290)

Strathern's literary anthropologist, in turn, mocks the radical feminist with what he can do. The picture of mutual mockery, yet no relevant criticism, is a memorable one, but Strathern's arguments do not justify it.

We can envisage ways in which feminist research might bring about a paradigm shift in anthropology. If we come to Strathern's text with such ways in mind, her arguments are not sufficient to show that a paradigm shift could not occur in those ways. It may be said that we should consider the arguments while working with a narrower sense of what a paradigm is, which is more faithful to Kuhn's original thinking. But a narrower sense does not seem important in this context. It is enough that the broader possibility remains: that feminist research might provide anthropologists with good reasons for abandoning some general presuppositions of anthropological work in favour of the alternatives it has uncovered. An attempt to deny that feminist research can bring about a paradigm shift in anthropology diminishes greatly in significance if it does not rule out this possibility.

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