

The Anthropology of Sex

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The Anthropology of Sex by Donnan, Hastings and Fiona Magowan:.
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By Christian Groes-Green, Roskilde University

As Carol Vance noted in 1991 anthropology is in a process of rediscovering sexuality as one of the central topics of the discipline. Some of this new attention to one of the most central aspects of human life derives from political, social and health related urgencies of modern times: the struggle against the global HIV and AIDS pandemic, the role of sexuality and gender among disenfranchised people in changing political economies of the Global South and the heated debates in the Western world around sex work, migration and human trafficking. This attention has yet to translate into new theoretical developments in anthropology on the issue of sex and sexuality, but perhaps the hesitancy of many scholars is tied to this very politicization of sexuality and sex research.

The new book by Hastings Donnan and Fiona Magowan adds to the growing literature demonstrating how anthropology can enlighten our cross-cultural understanding of sexualities. Unfortunately, the book also adopts popular discourses, which blur the distinction between scholarly and political or moral debates that dominate the European public sphere in which the authors work and live and at key conjunctures it omits some of the more influential anthropological work on sex, sexuality and sexual cultures.

First and foremost the book is very well written and makes use of a vivid and illustrative language that captivates the reader and seduces her or him to turn page after page. Chapter titles like 'Forbidden Frontiers' and 'Dancing Desires' and section titles like 'Sex and the Church: No 'Monk'ey Business' points to the efforts of the authors to write a book which is readable and enjoyable, even if it sometimes becomes a little too lurid as in the section entitled 'Borderless Brothels' which discusses women's sale of sexual favours around US-Mexican borders.

The book is replete with greatly illustrative examples of many aspects of human sexuality today, like processes of attraction and seduction, the making of sexual looks, erotic bodies, transgender sex, nudity and 'hot' topics like 'fat fantasies' and 'sexual surgery'. As such the book stands out as one of the few works of the kind which engage with the materiality of sex and the erotic body, and makes the apt ethnographic argument that in order to understand the complexity of the sensual and sexual body across cultures we need to abandon an essentially Western view of what constitutes the erotic body and what justify its modifications. Besides citing most classic anthropological works on this broad topic, from Bronislaw Malinowski and Margaret Mead to Mary Douglas, Kenneth Reed, Pat Caplan and Sherry Ortner the book also draws on a vast literature from recent anthropological debates as well as from other disciplines like psychology, sociology, history, women's studies, sexology and religious studies. It seems to have been one of the very premises of this book to introduce a cultural and social approach to sexuality in a cross-disciplinary fashion. Given the manifold ways in which sexuality can be discussed and addressed this book presents a daring attempt. As such the book is much more than an anthropology of sex, it is an anthropological approach to the great variety of research and public debates on human sexuality today.

Initial chapters on important new issues like erotic economies and the cultural variation of complex intersections between sex, money, power, kinship, tourism and migration are not only intriguing and interesting, sometimes inventing new concepts, Donnan and Magowan also take the discipline beyond the highly polarized debates around issues like prostitution, pornography and human trafficking. Yet, towards the end of the book it seems to gradually change style and tone as it begins to address these contested issues more concretely (pages 164 to 174). After a fairly analytical section entitled 'A Political Economy of Sex', and a descriptive section on current positions in

moral and political debates on sex entitled 'Global 'Sex Wars' the authors decide to present us with a section called 'Trafficking Gets the Red Light' in which the hitherto quite balanced and analytical character of the book is skewed towards remarkably one-sided accounts. While other anthropologists, significant works of whom are omitted (e.g. Whelehan 2001, Fordham 2001, Kulick 2005, Cornwall & Jolly 2006, Day 2009), have remained critical towards moral panic in research and the reproduction of 'dramatic narratives' on prostitution the authors cite without hesitation an official Irish study claiming that 'a very high percentage' of women in prostitution experience violence, threats, rape (and even gang rape). As the authors probably know statistics on these issues are highly contested and melodramatic narratives about human trafficking are frequently used by consultants, activists and members of the so-called 'rescue industry' (Agustin 2007, Desyllas 2007, Doezema 2010) for political and economic purposes. The emphasis on negative aspects of sexual practice such as trafficking, sexual violence, rape and torture over positive aspects like pleasure, desire and sexual health, and the explicit opposition to transgression and excess becomes problematic because the authors at the same time omit voices from the opposite end of the sexu-political landscape, like sex workers or sadomasochists. While the sex worker discourse is mentioned briefly little serious attention is paid to the global sex worker movement and its struggle for rights, protection and recognition of sex as labour. This struggle, which has been documented by anthropologists, has altered discussions of these 'hot' topics not only in Western countries but even more so in the Global South. In for example Brazil, India, Thailand and many African countries sex laws are being liberalized and sex workers are increasingly recognized in public spaces and policies on everything from sex education to human trafficking (Agustin 2007).

Similarly it would have strengthened the publication's state of the art had the authors discussed the recent theoretical substitution of moral concepts like 'prostitution' for intimate exchange focussed concepts like 'transactional sex', 'sexual capital' and 'sexual economies'. There is a growing anthropological literature on 'transactional sex', 'female erotic power' and postcolonial views on sexuality in Africa (e.g. Arnfred 2007, Cole 2003, Groes-Green 2009, Hunter 2007) and elsewhere that the authors might have included and discussed in order to avoid the risk of a European or Western bias. Nevertheless, the book offers a convincing tour de force through sexual topics of current public concern and academic interest around the world and it deserves to be read broadly by scholars and students of anthropology and neighbouring disciplines.

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