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The Anthropology of Kinship – the Avatar Debate

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Is it possible to think about kinship without referring to procreation? Closely linked to contemporary issues, the question lies at the heart of one of the oldest debates in anthropology. Heavily charged with epistemological, philosophical and political implications, this quarrel over kinship has divided each generation of anthropologists and given rise to extreme antagonisms and virulent polemics.

However, this dispute is far from being structured by a simple binary opposition (such as the one between “culture” and “biology”). The lines of cleavage that traverse and polarize it are diverse and multiple, and do not necessarily converge to form a single division. The landscapes of kinship controversies are complex, varied and full of surprises.

In order to account for this complexity, we have decided to adopt a format that highlights *controversy* as a technique of collective reflection and publication: the protagonists of this controversy are no longer human authors, but avatars, each of whom embodies a particular theoretical perspective, different from and complementary to those of the other avatars, with whom s/he enters into debate.

The avatar debate was launched by the simple question "Can we study kinship without thinking about procreation?" to which each avatar responded with a brief theoretical motion. After several stages – including a physical meeting at the first *Atelier d'Analyse Anonyme*

(AAA) in Paris in 2018 – the debate resulted in a series of articles, each defended by an avatar, all of which propose a renewed approach to the anthropology of kinship.

Animated by 26 anthropologists (all members or corresponding members of the *Equipe Parenté* of the *Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale*), a total of eight avatars participated in the debate.

HOMINIDAE argues that human kinship is best understood in the light of the forms of sociality and reproductive strategies of other animal species, especially hominids. Inspired by both primatological research and Indigenous Peoples' conceptions of kinship, she proposes to decompartmentalize kinship studies through multi-species comparison in order to consider the emotional, bodily and cognitive grounds of kinship relations.

PARATIO understands kinship relations to incorporate both genealogical relations among individuals and kin term relations identified through the kin terms a speaker uses in reference to other individuals. In her view, the connection between procreation and kinship relations is ontologically multi-threaded, leading from patterned behavior at the phenomenal level to abstract terminological systems at the ideational level. Procreation, Paratio suggests, provides a common foundation for the construction of variable conceptual systems of kinship relations.

GENERATIO explores what brings together and distinguishes different institutions of human kinship from those of other animal species. She shows that phenomena of *cultural emergence* are so radical in our species that they sometimes go so far as to completely reinvent the field concerned. Taking the phenomenon of cultural emergence into account leads her to substitute the concept of *procreation*, specific to the entire animal realm, with that of *generation*, more specific to our humanity.

KINGEN argues that kinship, and more specifically procreation, is a means of philosophizing about gender and of naturalizing binary systems, dividing people up into two mutually exclusive categories, male and female. S/he holds that this normalisation process is further entrenched by the constitution of gender complementarity that serves to obscure the underlying asymmetries this process involves. Awareness of this process is facilitated by a transition from an ontology envisaging two sexes to one centered on gender unfettered by dualism.

CORRELATIONNEL sees the core of kinship in the relational capacities of bodies as products and producers of other bodies. These capacities include procreation, but also food, sexuality, or ritual. For Correlationnel, this body capable of altering – and being altered by – other bodies constitutes the primary filter of our experience in the world and the basic material of symbolic systems. S/he considers ideas pertaining to this mutual influence of bodies as the proper sphere of *kinship*, whatever its articulation with the politico-jural sphere of *descent* may be.

SEXUS NEXUS questions the foundations of kinship beyond procreation in order to better grasp what constitutes human relatedness as such, and what determines and motivates it in various forms in different parts of the world. He argues that a series of mutual sharings emerged in the course of hominine evolution due to new collaborations that their mode of procreation implies within the framework of a social division of labor subjected to the political contingencies of historical time.

ANTHROPOÏKOS proposes a theoretical model in which kinship relations are the result of interactions between bodies in motion. At the center of these interactions he places residence, which he understands as an extension of individual bodies. With houses as a primary support that allows the passage from subjective perceptions of space to intersubjective con-

structions of social space, AnthropOikos considers the spatio-corporeal processes of *integration* and *separation* as the principal operators that translate spatial configurations into a kinship system.

For COMPARATOR, kinship is an exemplary object for a fruitful comparative anthropology, provided one refuses to consider procreation to be its universal anchor. Conversely, his open and iterative understanding of comparison, whose starting point is challenged by the introduction of new ethnographic data – especially non-procreative forms of kinship and the modalities whereby relational responsibilities are transmitted – questions the idea of a single basis for kinship and interrogates its distinctiveness with regard to other relationships.

In order to moderate the debate between these eight incarnated theoretical viewpoints, the *Equipe Parenté* herself became a neutral avatar, PIETRA PENEQUE, who is the virtual editor of this collective work and whose introduction situates the debate in the context of a century of kinship controversies in anthropology.

Resulting from long-term teamwork, this project reverses the usual formula of collective books: instead of treating different subjects from a shared perspective, it aims to treat the same subject from several different points of view in order to exploit the potential of each. In this manner, it hopes to restore to the debate on kinship all the complexity that makes this subject so fascinating and fruitful.

The results of the project – programmatic motions, oral debates, reciprocal letters, and finally, seven articles – have been published:

- As a book *Anthropologie de la parenté – Le débat des avatars*, Nanterre: Société d'Ethnologie, 2022, 294 p.
- As a special issue of the journal *Terrain*, « Lectures et débats » section, openly accessible online at <https://journals.openedition.org/terrain/15912>.