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Debate Article

Kinship: politics and practice

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If I were writing my original debate piece (Brück 2021) again, I would start at a rather different point. The tenor of my argument is that kinship is understood in fundamentally different ways in other cultural contexts. This, however, runs the risk of exoticising the unfamiliar, when, in fact, what is required is to turn the lens of critical reflection on how particular forms of kinship are naturalised in the contemporary Western world. This, of course, is exactly what the other contributors to this debate so eloquently achieve. In the recent history of Europe and North America, sexual relations have been central to the definition of rights over roles and resources (e.g. Rifkin 2011; Haraway 2016; Hamilton 2019). By controlling women and identifying certain types of intimate relations as immoral, the transmission of wealth could be regulated, class boundaries maintained and certain forms of labour—notably, reproductive labour—obscured and appropriated. In a colonial context, as Frieman (2021) and Crellin (2021) observe, the distinction between culture and nature—and the positioning of women and Indigenous peoples as part of the latter—legitimised the seizure of land and defined land, animals and women as property. The imposition of patriarchal, heteronormative and monogamous family structures onto Indigenous groups was a key element of that process. It is little wonder, therefore, that the family of the Euro-American imagination has so often been experienced as a locus of violence and repression, for it is intimately bound up with the appropriations of capitalism and colonialism.

Among many Indigenous communities, it is not sexual relations that determine rights over resources. Rather, it is relations with non-human others, such as animals or the land itself, that are central to the constitution of kinship (e.g. Sissons 2013): abiding, emotional attachments to place are a key component of kinship in many cultural contexts. Indigenous ontologies indicate that trees, or mountains, or animals are not *like* kin but rather *are* kin. As Ensor (2021) rightly indicates, the anthropological term 'fictive kin' is therefore highly problematic. I briefly reference these perspectives in my debate piece, but they deserve to be articulated more strongly. Western concepts of kinship consider it possible for kin relations to exist only between humans. This is due to the distinctions that are drawn between culture and nature, self and other, and humans and animals—distinctions that serve particular ideological purposes and that have been cogently critiqued, as Crellin (2021) points out, by posthumanist scholars, among others. By stripping the non-human world of agency, Western forms of kinship foreground and legitimise extractive, rather than meaningful, social relations between humans and non-human others. A similar conceptual framework underpins much of the classic, early and mid twentieth-century anthropological literature on kinship, which focused solely on relations between people; animals were viewed not as kin but rather as mere totems or symbols of human relationships (e.g. Lévi-Strauss 1963). In contrast, as Frieman (2021)

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describes, Indigenous academics and activists today are developing expansive definitions of kinship that encompass relations beyond those centred on procreation, ownership and control. These perspectives underscore the ties of mutual care and interdependency between humans and non-humans that must be nurtured in order to ensure a sustainable future (e.g. Kimmerer 2013; TallBear & Willey 2019)—the types of different futures that Furholt (2021) argues are impossible to imagine while we naturalise the present by imposing it on the past.

In my debate piece (Brück 2021), I examine archaeological evidence of relationality primarily in the choreography of Bronze Age bodies in mortuary contexts, but this approach runs the risk of rooting kinship in the body, and inadvertently reproducing elements of Western concepts of kinship in the past. Now, instead, I would follow Johnston (2020), who sees the formulation of Bronze Age kinship in the myriad practices that created enduring reciprocal ties, and that facilitated the sharing of substance—a process he refers to as 'kin-making'. Given our disciplinary focus on materiality, archaeologists are particularly well-placed to explore technologies of kinship in the past. Kin were *made* when people brought baskets of coloured clays from significant places in the landscape to add to the barrows that covered their dead; when they shared food and herded cattle together; when they built drystone walls that incorporated eye-catching natural features or existing burial monuments; when animals, artefacts and people flowed in acts of gifting and exchange (Brück 2019). Ensor (2021) cautions against reducing kinship to ideology. By paying attention to such practices, it becomes possible to explore how kinship was central to the lived experience and social worlds of prehistoric communities. This does not, of course, require us to reject aDNA evidence out of hand. As Furholt (2021) and Ensor (2021) argue, studies of aDNA, in tandem with other archaeological evidence, can provide insights into the character of intimate relations in the past (as I and colleagues attempt elsewhere: see Booth *et al.* in press), but interpretations of the data must be informed by a critical perspective on our own experience of kinship in the present.

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