

Margaret Mead: Where Are You Now?

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Featured image: Margaret Mead

"I have spent most of my life studying the lives of other peoples — faraway peoples — so that Americans might better understand themselves." Margaret Mead.

The famed anthropologist's insights were in demand during the volatile 1960s when so many social norms were discarded. She regularly appeared on television, called on to help steer forlorn parents into the modern era of social excesses- drugs, free sex, self-determination -and a perceived decline of the nuclear family.

[Mead](#) gained recognition for her kindly accounts of male-female relations and child rearing among Samoans and Balinese Islanders in the 1920s and 1930s. Those field studies demonstrated how gender roles differed from one society to another depending as much on culture as on biology. A clear thinker and gifted writer, Mead's books gained her worldwide fame.

Later, breaking with academic tradition, the noted anthropologist applied findings from those exotic field studies of Pacific Islanders to contemporary America behavior. And why not? Doesn't one expect cross cultural studies to identify universals and suggest ways one people's solutions may solve problems elsewhere. Thus my question: where are today's anthropologists to help us address, and redress, ugly truths about our highly advanced (sic) culture? This appeal stems from the newly recognized (cultural) problem of unchecked predatory behavior by men, mainly against women; and about women's habitual silence in the face of sexual harassment.

While daily revelations continue, many commentators are joining the debate over how misogynist our society is. How can we explain the bad habits of so many powerful men? Noted classicist [Mary Beard](#)'s *Women and Power, a Manifesto*, a book based on earlier lectures, draws on Greek and Roman antiquity to explain the 'silence' of women in the sphere of speechmaking. Although written before today's revelations, one reviewer finds Beard's argument a "dreadfully convincing" explanation of how sexual harassment persists.

"Mute women; brutal men; shame as a mechanism for control... all ring too loudly for comfort", concludes Rachel Cooke.

From another perspective, [masculinity as portrayed in film](#), author Nancy Schoenberger examines how director John Ford, working with John Wayne early in the actor's career, fashioned the American icon of masculinity.

[According to one reviewer](#), Schoenberger suggests that

“when masculinity no longer has an obvious function, as men become less socially relevant... (become) recognition-starved... ‘being a man’ expresses itself most primitively, as violence”.

Then, journalist [Barbara Ehrenreich](#), known for her well-researched exposés on women and work, reminds us how “class-skewed our current view of sexual harassment is”. She turns the lens away from film stars to point to widespread sexual abuse of women working as housemaids, waiters and factory employees.

[Steven Rosen](#) puts sexual misconduct in a historical context, with a look at the rise of sex crimes, how they are defined and how they at times served as morality tales to shame and punish perpetrators. Drawing on the 2017 U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics report, he offers some sobering facts—e.g. incidents of sex crimes in the U.S. rose 37% between 2005 and 2014”. The number of jailed sex offenders in the country is already staggering, and likely to rise with convictions expected to emerge from this season’s public accusations.

Peter Montague citing [A Sexual Profile of Men in Power](#) by Samuel and Cynthia Janus, reminds us how deeply rooted this problem is. Conducted between 1969 and 1976, the Janus’ research demonstrates how what we are learning in today’s news headlines about men in power was known and documented half a century ago.

Back to anthropology and what it might offer: one anthropologist whom we might consider a contemporary Margaret Mead is [Helen Fisher](#). An expert in love and sexuality in our time, she is now a Fellow at the Kinsey Institute and a professor of anthropology at Rutgers University. Her 1982 *The Sex Contract* was followed by *Anatomy of Love* in 1992, establishing her authority in the natural history of love and the sex drive.

Unlike Mead, a cultural anthropologist whose conclusions are based on outwardly observable behavior, oral accounts and attitudes, Fisher is a biological anthropologist. She represents the rise of socio-biology in the 1980s which views behavior as more chemically and hormonally driven, and thereby quantitatively measurable. (Cultural anthropologists maintain their more qualitative approach.) Fisher’s generation of socio-biologists flourished with the application of sophisticated methods of measuring human chemistry and identifying genetic coding.

Cultural anthropologists, especially women researchers, meanwhile turned attention to a subject they had overlooked—women. Students of Margaret Mead were taught how we were ‘honorary men’ with easy and wide access to our subject society. Awakened by the feminist movement, we realized our predecessors had largely ignored women, so, starting in the early 1990s, we set out to undertake a more balanced view of human society. Many earlier interpretations of human history were overturned as a result of our research. We gained new perspectives of women’s role in society. There was new attention to girls’ puberty rights (boys’ rituals of manhood were well documented), to marriage and motherhood, goddesses, food preparation and symbolism, and to women’s work in general.



Margaret Mead at work

Sexual perversion—I categorize the kind of predatory behavior we are witnessing today as perversion—generally by men in power vis-à-vis women, never attracted much attention in cross-cultural studies. Which may explain why we find almost no anthropologist, not even Fisher, joining the fray to help explain predatory sex.

How universal is it, and how do other societies address it? I have no doubt that doctoral theses are being designed as we speak: What about public masturbation among the ‘fierce’ Yanomamo? Do polyandrous Tibetan women use their sexual dominance to harass others, men or women? Can Tuvan shamans drive the demons out of their sexual predators? Is non-consensual sex acceptable in Inuit society? What about the matriarchal Native Americans; they may have some insights on sexual harassment. And how do San Bushmen of Central Kalahari treat sexual miscreants like Weinstein, Sandusky, and Stacey?

It will be a decade before studies of that kind can bear fruit. Meanwhile, our desperate and embarrassed public have immediate, doable solutions: make way for more women to move into positions of power—in journalism, film-making, management, sports, and government; women need help to toughen up and call men out; we can create an environment to speak out not as victims belatedly but as feisty, shameless advocates; ensure human resource offices are proactive and will streamline how they handle complaints.

So very many people—men and women—and institutions are affected, we can be confident that whatever sexual harassment we experience, it is never personal.

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