

## Interview: Sergio Daniel López, Lydia Rodríguez Cuevas

Photos: Lydia Rodríguez Cuevas.



A photograph of Franz Boas posing in a Kwakiutl Ceremonial Dance and a copy of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights greets visitors in Sherry Beth Ortner's office in the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Professor Sherry Ortner received her Ph.D. from University of Chicago, and began her extensive fieldwork with the Sherpas in Nepal. In 1972, her article "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture" became one of the seminal works in feminist anthropology.

Ortner is currently a Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at UCLA, where she teaches courses on Critical Social Theory and Ethnographic Imagination. She has taught at Sarah Lawrence College, University of Michigan, University of California, Berkeley, and Columbia University.

In this interview we discuss Ortner's academic and personal life, from her initial fieldwork experiences to her current research on the Hollywood industry, including her interests in feminist anthropology and her work on capitalism and social change. We had the opportunity to meet both a brilliant anthropologist and a joyful person.

**During the seventies, you were one of the pioneer anthropologists who became interested in gender issues, playing a fundamental role in the institutionalization of academic feminism. However, your main work during your graduate education and your Dissertation had been with the Sherpas of Nepal. How did you get involved with the incipient movement of academic feminism in anthropology and how did you try to integrate gender theory with your previous work? What inspired you to write the famous "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?"**

Sherry Ortner (SO): As you have mentioned, gender was not my original focus in terms of my early work, and actually when I was in graduate school feminist anthropology did not exist. I was working on other kinds of things, my Dissertation and my first book was with the Sherpas and was about religion, and had nothing to do with gender at all. But it was about that time in the seventies, right after I finished my Dissertation and I got my Degree, and I was in my first job as Assistant Professor that feminism as a movement in the world started to happen. Michelle Rosaldo was a very good friend of mine, and she and Louise Lamphere had a panel at the AAA about women, culture and society, which became a book, and so they contacted a bunch of people including me, and I said: "I don't know anything about gender, I don't know anything about women, I've never studied this!". It was not what I was doing, but they said: "Nobody knows anything about gender!" Because at that time, it really was something that was not part of the academic curriculum at all. But then it became a much more serious and pressing academic and political question and we all had to come up with something for this panel. The panel was in 1972, and in those years Lévi-Strauss was still in the air, structuralism was still "hot". So I took Lévi-Strauss and De Beauvoir, I sat down at my typewriter, and I asked

myself: “what do I want to say?” I had no empirical data, so it had to be some kind of theoretical argument, and that is what came out: “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?”

I wrote it in almost one sitting, I sat down and I wrote it in a kind of fever actually, except for the middle section. This section develops the idea that it is not exactly that women are seen as nature in the pure sense, but really because women are the transformers, they are seen as the mediators between nature and culture, that is even more why (in the Lévi-Straussian framework) they have to be controlled, because they are controlling this tremendously important process, they are socializing babies, they are cooking, etcetera.

That was the beginning of my gender anthropology career. From that time I just more and more integrated gender into my work, whereas at the beginning, they were just two separate kinds of things that I used to do. First I did my research about the Sherpas, and it was not about gender, while at the same time I worked on gender issues theoretically and comparatively, but those were separate issues in my career. But slowly the two of them became more integrated, and I rarely write about gender separately anymore.

**“Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” has been included, probably since its early publication, in most syllabi of courses on gender. After more than thirty years, do you still stick with the main arguments developed in the article, or would you change some of the most controversial topics, such as the claim about the universalism of patriarchy?**

SO: Actually, I wrote a follow up <sup>1</sup>. There was a panel at the AAA that celebrated the 25th anniversary of the publication of the first two books about feminist anthropology: “Women, Culture, and Society”, edited by Rosaldo and Lamphere (where the article was published), and “Toward an Anthropology of Women”, edited by Rayna. For this big panel, I wrote a paper called: “So, *is* Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” Twenty five years later I thought that maybe I should try to answer the question, since I had posed it as a question in the first place. This second article was originally published in “Making Gender: the Politics and Erotics of Culture”. I think the 1974 article was always controversial, primarily because of the strong claim of universal male dominance. And then also the nature/culture connection, which looked like a universal as well. So there were two claims in that article: one was that male dominance was universal, and the second one was that because of the association between men and culture, it would be “natural” for men to control women. And in my second article I basically took back the universal claim. I think it was just too strong. In another article called “Gender Hegemonies”, I developed more fully the ways in which I think that we should and we should not think about universalism.

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<sup>1</sup> The Spanish translated article may be consulted in this current volume.

**Currently, Queer Theory is shaking some of the basic assumptions of Gender Theory. What is your opinion about the importance of Queer Theory, and its impact on Gender Theory?**

SO: This is something I am actually quite interested in. If I were going to write a new paper on feminist theory today, I would be interested in it. There are two kinds of developments in feminist theory that are having an impact on changing the agenda of western feminism. Queer Theory is one, the other one is Third World Feminism. And although they are different movements, in both cases what is taken off the table for discussion is patriarchy. Queer Theory is not interested in patriarchy, Third World Feminism does not want to talk about patriarchy. And this way, the original core question of feminist theory, which is male dominance and patriarchy, is not on the table anymore, I think. And I think that is the problem. So if I were going to sit down and write a paper tomorrow, that is the paper I would like to write. I think that whether it is going to be possible to get it back on the table or not, it seems an interesting question, but at the moment, it is seen as kind of retrograde, or just uninteresting from the point of view of queer theory. But I think the question is even more contested on the side of Third World Feminism. There you have more of a range of positions on whether patriarchy should be an issue or not. So, if I were trying to get it back on the table, which I think it should be, I would be interested in looking at other voices in Third World Feminism, because I think there is actually a kind of range of possible answers and positions on the debate. However, I think that all of these voices are part of one picture, actually. And if I were teaching a gender course now, I would structure it around these theories, trying to think about the relationship between them. I think some of the most interesting work now that tries to get out of the Western Feminist framework, is this kind of more global, comparative feminism. But there is a lot of hostility, and then there is still the feeling that American feminism is defining the agenda, and it is telling non Western feminists what to do.



**Another interesting movement in your academic career is the shift from doing an “outwardly” oriented ethnography, like in the case of the Sherpas, to a more “inwardly” oriented ethnography, as doing anthropology “at home”, in the same place where you live. What motivated you to study your own culture?**

SO: The decision to move from the Sherpas to the US was a big decision. I have three books on the Sherpas. The third one was still in progress when I was started to do the research for my first American book. I had been thinking for a long time that I wanted to say something about my own society, my own culture; I thought I wanted to make some contribution, a critique. And second of all, I thought that after a certain point my thinking about the Sherpas was not fresh anymore. I had done the kind of things I wanted to do; I very much enjoyed writing my last book on the Sherpas, I enjoyed the research with the mountain climbing and so on. I could think of more Sherpas' projects, but I thought

three books was enough, and the last time I came back to Nepal with the Sherpas I found that I was not taking notes anymore. They were my friends, I had just become to the point where it was hard to make myself be an anthropologist; I just moved in a gradual sense away from that and at the same time I begun to think about a critical research project in the United States. If I am honest, I think I have to admit that in my earlier fieldwork I was very much “the anthropologist” and they were “the Sherpas”. And I think that gradually changed over time, and I begun to feel “relaxed”. I did not have that kind of drive anymore to be “the anthropologist”, and I felt that I was coming to the moment of stopping.

**That was the moment in which you started to work on your first book about the American culture: *New Jersey Dreaming: Capital, Culture, and the Class of '58*. Could you tell us about the origin of this research?**

SO: It was my first and at the moment my only project in the US. I started this research in 1989. This is basically a study of my High School graduating class, and what happened to them, and how does it link up with changes in the larger culture. They were a very successful cohort, successful meaning mostly “money”. Among them there were many doctors, lawyers and businessmen -not so many College Professors-, people who make a lot of money in the US. And there were a lot of changes for the women as well. I actually had chosen this group partly because I had good access to them, and partly because I knew that I shared their history, I knew the world they came from, because I came from the same world, so I tracked them down all over the country and I interviewed them, the form of free-form life histories. And then I tried to link up how they talked about their lives and their experiences to the larger social changes in the United States since the time we graduated from High School in 1958.

For example, there was a small group of African-American people in my class, twenty people out of three hundred, and I was able to interview them and find at least some of them, and many of them did well, and I link it in part to the Civil Rights Movement. The women in the class went through all kind of changes, and I link it in part to the feminist movement. And the success of the class as a whole, which is very heavily Jewish, I link it to an earlier period: between our parents and our generation, that was the period when anti-Semitism in the US started to go down, and opportunities started to open up for the Jewish people. So many of my classmates went to colleges and universities, where our parents could not get into. Most of them went to college, which most of our parents did not. So the success of the class, I link it to the anti-antisemitism movement that was actually starting to have some effect by the time we graduated from High School. In the last chapter I link the present class and what is happening to them now to late capitalism, and especially to the changing class structure of the United States. I try to cover everything, race, gender, ethnicity, but my real interest is in social class, because it is one of these hidden themes in American culture that I wanted to bring up. In a sense that was the cultural critique aspect of the book, I tried to bring up the underlying class dynamics that people do not talk about, do not think about, and which I try to show were operating on their lives.

**Can you tell us about your current research on Hollywood, and how do you link that with your previous work on American culture, the New Jersey project?**

SO: The New Jersey project was actually very hard. Maybe I found it so difficult because I was “too close” to it. It was not only my own culture as general theme, but my actual High School graduating class. But also from a methodological perspective, when I finished with it I found that I had a bunch of life histories, and then I had to figure out how do you make that into something significant. The writing took a lot more time than doing the fieldwork. It was an interview based project, and I did not like that, because I missed the participant observation that I had done with the Sherpas. The other thing about this book is that it is very sociological. It is not cultural, it does not feel very anthropological. And I wanted to do something with American culture in a sense, I was interested in the changes that may or may not be taking place at the cultural level. So that is why I became interested in the Hollywood project. I wanted to go into the “culture industry”, and the “machines” that are making and shaping American culture. I do not think it all comes “from the top”, from Hollywood, but I think that what Hollywood does is take what is out there, the newspapers, everything, it takes that out of the everyday life and articulates it into a product, and then brings it back to Americans. So they really shape in various ways what is already there, but converted into something else.

But I am right the middle of it, I am interviewing people, writers, producers, entertainment lawyers, and some directors. It is hard in terms of getting access to people. I am not trying to get to Steven Spielberg or Martin Scorsese, that is not going to happen! And I am not trying to get to actors and actresses, I am not that interested in the stars. They are very important in terms of selling Hollywood movies, but they are not going to tell me much for the kinds of questions I have about relationship between Hollywood products and the larger culture.

I also wrote an article that was a link between the Hollywood project and the previous project. The children of my High School graduating class are now in their late thirties or early forties, and when I did the High School project I thought it was going to be a multigenerational study, so I did actually interview some of the grown children of the class of 58, some of whom were in Hollywood. Five of them were involved in what they call here “the industry”. Those children of my classmates are technically, in terms of demographics, what is called “Generation X”. There is a whole cultural thing in the US about Generation X, about who are they, about whether they are culturally different from the previous generation, the “baby boomers”. There is often some ideology about generational cultures in the US, which you may probably know something about, although it does not translate very well cross nationally. So the preceding generation was called “the baby boomers” and they went through several cultural changes, but they were the ones who were born between 1945 and 1965, in that long twenty year period where the birth rate rise. In 1965 it started going down again, and it kept going down until 1976, when it starts to come up again. And this generation (1965-1976) is the one which is coming into the executive control in Hollywood. So I wrote an article about the children of my classmates in the mid 90’s. But since they never got into the New Jersey book, I decided to focus the Hollywood study in part on this generation. And the fact that this generation is now coming into significant

positions in Hollywood and making films, that reflects presumably a new sensibility, and so I am primarily but not exclusively interviewing people of that generation in different levels in the industry. But that also helps because actually these younger people are not so well known yet and I can get better access to them. Again, getting access to Hollywood is really hard and I really wasted much time on it, on trying find people who would talk to me.

Broadly speaking, the main question of the project is the relationship between Hollywood films and the larger cultural changes. The other main theme is this question about generational change. Finally, I am also interested in independent films, the ones made outside the studio, and they do not have stars, they are creatively financed, not by the studios and of course they have much more creative control on what they do, and they obviously do not make much money. But they are often much better than the big Hollywood films.