



# BOOK

## WOMAN'S EVOLUTION: FROM MATRIARCHAL CLAN TO PATRIARCHAL FAMILY

Evelyn Reed / Pathfinder Press (410 West Street, New York, NY 10014) / 492 pp. \$15 cloth. \$4.95 paper

*When men had begun to be plentiful on the earth, and daughters had been born to them, the sons of God, looking at the daughters of men, saw they were pleasing, so they married as many as they chose.*

—Genesis 6:1 [The Jerusalem Bible]

Imagination, not biology, is destiny; the limits of what can be imagined are the limits of what can be. Throughout centuries of patriarchal social organization, there is conspicuous evidence of a male-controlled media blitz which has circumscribed women's imaginations as to what kind of lives they may and may not live. And no notion in this campaign has proven so durable as the notion that the father-family has always existed, that from the beginning every son of God was entitled to own the body and labor of a pleasing daughter of men.

—Evelyn Reed's new book, *Woman's Evolution*, is a brilliant and fascinating refutation of patriarchy's favorite historical error. Subtitled *From Matriarchal Clan to Patriarchal Family*, the book "... affirms that the maternal clan system was the original form of social organization and explains why. It also traces the course of its development and the causes of its downfall." This evolutionary process and the different roles of women and men in it are revealed through a meticulous unfolding and interpretation of anthropological data, finally making sexual-political sense out of the pre-history of the human race.

Mary Daly has written in *Beyond God* transforming the collective imagination book helps to do that.

In scope, Evelyn Reed's study begins with the question Darwin left unanswered—How did human social life emerge out of the competitive and individualistic habits of the higher primates?—and concludes with a better answer to the question Engels tried to solve—What is the origin of private property, whence came the competitive and individualistic habits of the higher capitalists? It is somewhat ironic that at both ends of this evolutionary period, Evelyn Reed perceives a certain confusion in male minds between what is human and what is animal. At the beginning, she suggests, men the hunters could not distinguish very well between humans and animals as food (thus, the first taboo: against eating next-of-kin), and at the end, men the patriarchs did not distinguish very well between humans and animals as property (thus, the first commodity exchange: the purchase of a woman and her eventual children for so many head of cattle). *Woman's Evolution* details, persuasively, how it was the females of the pre-human species who first socialized (humanized) the males, and how, after an expenditure of collective and nurturant effort, a process which spanned millennia, those females were betrayed by those humanized males, who instituted the father-family and declared themselves divine.

This tragic tale begins in the epoch of cannibalism, a time when pre-human and omnivorous species evolved out of primate and herbivorous forms of life. In nature, male sexuality is characteristically anti-social, tending to violent struggle with other males. Evelyn Reed cites this fact as the first obstacle to the evolution of humanity. She writes: "So long as males remained hobbled by individualism, competition, and striving for dominance over other males, they could not respond to the need for group preservation. But the females, already equipped by nature with their highly developed maternal functions and, moreover, capable of cooperating with other females, could... take the measures necessary for survival. They instituted taboo." Evelyn Reed emphasizes the primitive connection, overlooked by most male anthropologists, between *food and sex taboos*. The earliest feminids, as she calls them, instituted food and sex taboos jointly in order to establish the boundaries within which hominids could not kill and eat each other and within which hominids were forbidden to fuck. The food taboo was essential for eradicating any possibility of cannibalism within the primal horde, the earliest social group which emerged from primate life (though males continued to hunt outside the horde, killing other hominids and animals rather indiscriminately. The sex taboo was essential for eradicating violent struggle among males over females within the horde, so males were enjoined from fucking except, again, outside the horde. Within these early hordes, a *maternal clan form of kinship* evolved. Females of the horde lived and ate separately from males, retaining an herbivorous diet. The males, whom they birthed, learned to regard them collectively as "the mothers" and to regard each other as "brothers." Evelyn Reed states that the feminids' purpose for instituting taboo (against eating or fucking kin) was to overcome the combativeness inherent in male sexuality, especially that animosity against other males of their own species, and to develop a social life form in which males could behave and labor cooperatively with one another and with the already-emergent collectivity of females. Eventually, it was these non-hunting "mothers" who through their collective lives together left an extraordinary record of production and invention (including medicine, weaving, tanning, pot-making, agriculture, architecture and engineering). But



their first invention, according to Evelyn Reed, was of a brotherhood-by-blood, the first result of taboo.

The maternal clan form of kinship lasted thousands and thousands of years, gradually becoming more elaborate. Early taboos made peaceful survival of each horde possible but did nothing to diminish predatory and savage violence between males of separate hords, who still perceived each other as non-kin and therefore, of course, food. So according to Evelyn Reed, there came a time when the women of two neighboring hords would institute an *intermating alliance* by adopting the same *totem* (usually a particular species of animal which they esteemed as a member of their kinship group and which was also off-limits to hunters). Anthropologists call such an intermating alliance and totemic interchange between two hords a *dual organization*. Evelyn Reed writes that the dual organization "arose out of the need to bring hostile groups of men into a fraternal alliance that would make possible peaceful mating relations between the men and women of both sides." Thus, human social organization began to expand, and cannibalism began to subside. Evelyn Reed accounts for the central role of women at this new stage of social evolution: "Women were not the hunters and warriors. Women were not suspicious and fearful of other women, even those who were not of their own kin. . . There is no indication that women had any difficulty communicating with stranger-women even in the most remote epoch of social evolution. From the record it appears that women always had the capacity to band together for mutual cooperation and protection." It is difficult to read back into this period of pre-history without taking along one's own patriarchal preconceptions, as the writings of male anthropologists amply demonstrate. Nothing like marriage existed; women and men of the clan continued to live and eat separately; biological paternity was unknown; coitus took place in the forest between allied clans, initiated only by the woman, in private so the man would not get killed; mothers raised children collectively; there was no such thing as rape. All that is difficult to imagine. The *matriarchy*—this evolving social organization based on the maternal, communal clan kinship system—was not an upside-down patriarchy; it was not a case of women victimizing men and reveling in supremacy. Rather, it appears to have been a case of women, collectively, developing strategies which would inhibit the violence men wreaked upon each other; admitting those reconstructed men whenever possible into the shared trust of their communal society; and teaching men to garden (and various other responsibilities) for the sake of the group's survival, to stop enmity and bloodshed.

"The mothers" of the clan raised their children together, in strict isolation from "the brothers." Men at that time could not be trusted to know the difference between human infants and little animals. But at a certain age, boys were turned over to "the brothers." How was this possible, without jeopardizing those boys' lives? What assurance was there that "the brothers" would let a younger male in? According to Evelyn Reed, women resolved this dilemma by evolving what she called the *fratriarchy*, another dimension of human pre-history which male anthropologists have not yet noticed. The fratriarchy was an offshoot of maternal kinship, with each man knowing his kinship identity as a particular woman's brother, within the maternal clan as a whole. Thus, a man's loyalty to "the brothers" of the clan and to "the mothers" of the clan encompassed by extension his loyalty to his uterine sister, the woman whom he honored because his mother also birthed her. Evelyn Reed's discovery and documentation of the fratriarchy is among the most astonishing insights of this book. And she infers from the anthropological data that the first purpose of this institution was to develop a male corollary of matrilinear kinship—*fratriliny*, in which each male would take specific nurturant responsibilities to his sister's male children—because those boys were his kin, because they were his sister's sons.

The fratriarchy paralled the matriarchy, within each maternal clan. Whatever ordering occurred among "the mothers" (according to age, experience, and mother-to-daughter descent) was mirrored among "the brothers." For example, the eldest mother's brother took primary responsibility for the kinship clan's protection, and each brother's rank in that defending army reflected his sister's position within the collective of "mothers." (Protection usually meant blood revenge against non-kin males, since death by natural causes was not understood at this time, and if any kin died, it was assumed that non-kin had killed. Only much later did these revenge murder-raids diminish, with the invention of forms of symbolic combat, which we might recognize as early sports and games.) With the institution of the fratriarchy, a new intimacy of kinship and trust was formalized between uterine sister and uterine brother, with an apparent reciprocity of commitment to one another's welfare. As Evelyn Reed points out, this alliance between sister and brother was to outlast the matriarchy itself. In addition, the fratriarchy sealed a new blood bond between a woman's brother and her son, or what we might call uncle and nephew, and this new blood bond between males was to contribute to the erosion of the matriarchy altogether.

Woman's Evolution is a major work of anthropological scholarship, but, because its sexual-political themes illuminate certain dark recesses of life today, there is a sense in which *Woman's Evolution* also reads like an epic tragedy, a trilogy of suspense and ineluctable doom. The reader already knows the ending; the ending is still going on: the domestic, procreative and coital servitude of women to men. Throughout the first and second sections of this book, which trace the evolution of the matriarchy and the patriarchy, the reader's mind churns in awful anticipation of how the outcome will come to be: Will the men revolt, out of jealousy or rage or vindictiveness toward women? (No, in fact, the change occurs very slowly. And it is only after patriarchy takes root that misogyny and sexual sadism flourish). Will patriarchy arise because men learn their role in conception? (Wrong again. The verb "to beget" means originally and literally to "get" a child from a wife, to receive the child in one's arms in a ritual that establishes a man socially as its owner. The relationship between fucking and pregnancy is not even speculated about until long after the owner-family, the father-family, originates.) How indeed then did patriarchy and the father-family develop? The third section of this book solves that mystery, and the explanation offered is as chilling as it is complex.

Throughout the evolution of the matriarchy and the patriarchy, the obstacle to social progress had been strife and violence between males. Similarly, at a time when woman of a clan began to adopt "husbandmen"—literally, gardeners working for the woman's kin—there remained a deep strain of enmity between those "husbands" and the women's "brothers." In the woman's clan, her "husband" was but a visitor, and his survival on visits was perilous, because if anyone died there (including an infant in childbirth), the woman's "brothers" just might kill him. A new system of peace offerings or *gift interchange* between the "brothers" of allied clans served to offset these tensions somewhat. Still, the man's loyalties were irreconcilably divided between his own maternal kin and his "wife's" maternal kin: of social necessity, he tended two separate gardens, one for his kin and one for hers. But worse: Any son born to a woman became naturally her brother's nephew (according to the fratrilinear kinship system described above). Built into the maternal clan kinship system was an interminable scenario of male-male blood revenge, for there was nothing to deter a woman's son, acting as her brother's nephew, from justifiable homicide of her visiting "husband." Evelyn Reed describes how that male thirst for blood revenge was temporarily assuaged. She traces the evolution of the system of gift interchange between "brothers" of separate clans, first as it became a system of purchasing the loyalty of non-kin male children (child price), and then as it became a system of purchasing a non-kin woman's body altogether (bride price). Thus the father-family emerged—and with it male supremacy. "The basis of woman's downfall," Evelyn Reed asserts, "lies in the evolution of private property." The woman, as breeder, became chattel, property; the man, as owner, became her lord.

\* \* \* \* \*

In her introduction, Evelyn Reed states that she does not advocate "any return to a 'lost paradise' of the matriarchy," but that she believes "a correct understanding of the remote past can help us see ahead and move forward more surely." Evelyn Reed, according to a biographical note, is "an active participant in the women's movement and a veteran socialist." And clearly, although the book does not contain her own proposals for political change, it can be read as an eloquent and important argument for socialist revolution, for abolishing

private property, and for the liberation of women from economic dependence upon men.

As I read the book, however, I was struck by the recurrent theme of the biological propensity of human males toward violence, as Evelyn Reed delineates it in the pre-historical era. (Both the matriarchy and the patriarchy evolved in direct reaction to that propensity, to inhibit it by establishing kinship ties, according to this book. And the father-family also evolved to delimit that propensity toward violence which existed between males of different maternal clans.) What struck me was that violence still characterizes normal American male sexuality. True, cannibalism is gone; there is no longer murder in revenge for death by natural causes; and today, there are more sophisticated curbs on violence between males—a system of alliances based on the phallus as a totem—lending most civilized relationships between males the character of an armed truce. But in the vast majority of post-pubescent American males—across all lines of class, race, and so-called sexual orientation—there is a deep *eroticization of violence*, so deep that those males can scarcely experience any erotic sensation at all without some component of violence and aggression. If ever there was a time when male violence was determined by male biology, that time, I believe, has passed. But male violence seems now to have evolved into a cultural pathology, learned first in most father-families, next from the culture, and ultimately manifesting itself in racism, genocide, ecocide, capitalism and imperialism and in nearly every erotic encounter between, ostensibly, two human beings. Never before has the violence of man generated more oppression, terrorism, destruction, and human misery.

A socialist revolution might advance the project that women started when they evolved the matriarchy/fratriarchy and that men took over when they instituted the father-family: the project of quashing violence between males. A socialist economy is probably the best invention yet devised for creating more armed truces between more and more men. *But there is no reason to believe, is there, that truces between men end violence against women?*

—John Stoltenberg

Copyright © 1975 by John Stoltenberg.

---

Women Workers CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6.

equally difficult for women since in many cases priority must be given to a woman's orientation either as a Trade Unionist or a feminist.

Negative attitudes toward working women are not accidental. While revolutionary, less developed countries, desperately needing workpower, have found it necessary to overcome sex-role stereotyping as a matter of official policy, the capitalist system depends in large part for its survival upon the exploitation of not just one class by another but of one sex by another.

The increasing tendency of workers to permit themselves to be separated along racial, ethnic, sex and occupational lines cannot but prove to be destructive to all workers. Only by uniting in true solidarity can we survive the looming tragedy which stalks thousands of working women who, in this country as in others, hold up half the sky.