

## BOOK REVIEWS

REED, EVELYN, WOMAN'S EVOLUTION. New York: Pathfinder Press, 1975, 491 pages.

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*Woman's Evolution* is a truly monumental piece of scholarship and it is difficult to render it justice. It is a long book, a dense book. It represents a total rethinking of evolutionary (social) anthropology. It is, by far, Reed's best work in the area of the history of sexual inequality.

I will first present a summary of her main theses, if this is possible at all, as there are theses on every page. The basis of much of her discussion lies in the concepts of cannibalism, incest and sex taboos, classificatory kinship systems, and totemism. Because of the lay public's unfamiliarity with these concepts, many will never read the book in its entirety. And, as I will illustrate later, her blatant (although unwitting) disregard for the rules of scientific methodology will prevent academics from taking this book very seriously -- and this is quite unfortunate for her theses do deserve a thorough scrutiny in the light of more stringent canons of scientific inquiry.

The book is divided into three major sections: matriarchy, fratriarchy, and patriarchy. Matriarchy marked the first stage of human evolution and is defined by Reed as a "maternal clan system of social organization" in which both sexes enjoyed equality. Reed starts with the point that human survival depended upon the social control of the biological needs of sex and hunger. The incest taboos regulated both for they were concerned with sex and with food, as early humanity was going through a period of cannibalism. These taboos of avoidance originated as early humanity could not naturally distinguish between those people and animals they could eat and those they could not: they were thus directed against the perils of cannibalism in the hunting period. Totemism, not only checked cannibalism, but it also "tended to protect animal and plant life in general in a period when unregulated plunder of food supplies could have produced results almost as anti-social as cannibalism." (p. 36) In addition, totemism served to link various herds together in a more efficient tribal system.

Human motherhood was a biological advantage which served to humanize the species: women were the instigators of social cooperation, as contrasted to the inherent social disadvantage in male aggressiveness. However, contrarily to what is frequently believed, male domination was exerted only upon other males and not on females. Taboos protected in-group women from the use of masculine force from men of their own clan. Estrus served as a natural safe-

guard to females, and, once this safeguard was lost, the women were the ones who instituted rules that would exclude them from cannibalism and incest. Menstrual blood taboos were also initiated by women and their meaning was one of sacredness rather than one of pollution as they are frequently interpreted in anthropology. Women, as a birth spacing device, segregated themselves from men while caring for a child. They felt minimal sexual desire during these periods: thus, female sexuality moved in a direction opposite to that of men's. The family was a mother family, a maternal clan, and the mothers were self sufficient in terms of subsistence. And, here, Reed reiterates some of the themes of her earlier works: women were the first cultivators, inventors of containers, of basic cooking techniques, of medicine, of cordage, textile, leather, and the tapers of animals, as well as the discoverers of fire.

Her second section on fratriarchy or matriarchal brotherhood portrays the uncles as the first "fathers." That section successively examines the original meaning of rites of passage, the later invention of female initiation, and mother-in-law avoidance -- all from an entirely new perspective. But the main thrust of that section resides in her discussion of this new form of mating, that in marriage (consummated through food intercourse), as being in fundamental contradiction with the brothers-sisters clan system. The husbands were outsiders, attached by birth to their own matri-clans on the one hand, and for marriage purposes to their wives' matri-clans on the other; they did not even have rights over their children. Consequently, the custom of private dwellings was created because men of different villages were now thrown together through marriage to women of one village. Private dwellings served as a barrier against tensions between these men no longer related to each other through matri-clan totemism. And this new custom of private dwellings in turn led to a breakdown of communal property.

Her third and final section is on patriarchy. First, we see that "paternity began as a social relationship between a woman's husband and her child." (p. 341) Reed uses the couvade as the rite of passage expressing social paternity. With this came the transition from matrilineality to patrilineality: paternity further undermined the matri-family as the children were now divided between their fathers and their mothers' brothers. A time came when the first born male child was ritually sacrificed by the husband as a blood price to the mother's family. This sacrifice was later replaced upon the advent of private property: the husband could now pay his blood debt in kind and secure his wife's children as his own. Paternity was reinforced. Marriage gifts were then transformed into bride price, a transaction between men. This bride price was actually another device in obtaining possession of the wife's children. Thus, the advent of private property, the overthrow of mother's brother's right, and the consolidation of patriliney all contributed to the degradation of the women's position in society.

Reed concludes her tome with an interesting refutation of patriarchal interpretations of "incest" in the Egyptian royal dynasty and presents her own interpretation of the legends of Oedipus and Orestes along the lines of her theses. "The legend of Oedipus is not a story about incest but a reflection of the enormous difficulties involved in consolidating the father-family and the line of descent from fathers to sons." (p. 451) Similarly, the story of Orestes is the story of the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy.

Reed is a highly original thinker and her theses would merit serious consideration by the academic community. However, although her global scheme is quite arresting, one should nevertheless recognize that Reed sins against all canons of scientific inquiry in the fields she is investigating. Space not permitting, I will not attempt to refute her numerous errors of interpretation of material, but will focus on the manner in which she uses her material (and which material she uses) in order to draw her conclusions.

First, she frequently makes direct assumptions about human nature on the basis of animal nature, thus undermining the validity of the theses she builds upon these very assumptions. Moreover, the animals she uses as a basis of comparison for humans randomly span the entire spectrum from rodents to monkeys: there is no scientific rationale in her choice of animal models.

Second, she commits a parallel error in her choice of human models: she uses contemporary tribes and non industrialized societies as models from which she draws infallible conclusions about our ancestors and the beginning of cultural and social life, thus a leap of a few million years. Let me enumerate some of the reasons why such an approach is simply biased. First, it should be recognized that contemporary hunting-gathering societies have all undergone a long process of evolution (as we all have) so that they cannot be considered the equivalent of the societies of our ancestors. Second, contemporary groups are also far removed from early humanity in terms of physical development, a very important factor to keep in mind when one studies the origin of sex roles since the latter depends to a great extent on biology. Third, nearly all current hunting-gathering societies have had contacts with more advanced societies and have thus been changed in the process. And, finally, these societies have been pushed into marginal and less productive areas of the world and this factor has contributed to change their lifestyle. For these reasons, these societies are not comparable to those of our ancestors, and we cannot draw full-fledge conclusions about the beginning of humanity on that basis.

Reed's work is further marred by two additional methodological biases. First, her examples of societies, like her animal examples, are drawn from all over the world in a seemingly random fashion. And, worse of all, she uses these examples of current societies in any way that suits her ongoing discussion although I am certain that she is not conscious of this aspect of her methodology. She will thus support two opposite arguments with the same material. For example, for several pages, she draws conclusions about the holiness of the menstrual taboo from a given set of material, and, then, from that very same literature, she will find an example to show how women have since become unclean. (Or she will suddenly decide that a part of an example is really an exception and represents a later development in history.) There is thus a lack of rationality and order in her comparisons. It should be added that too many of her references are, at any rate, outdated. Or, still, she bases her conclusions on two or three antiquated authors, and her discussion is thus carried out without the benefit of more recent scientific discoveries. This lacuna is especially obvious in her treatment of primatology and ethology.

Another problem resides in her gynocentric treatment of evolution, however laudable this is from an ideological point of view. In other words, she is doing for women exactly what androcentric anthropologists have done for men in the past, thus once more leading us down the path of a one-sided anthropology. She, like the others she so aptly refutes, too frequently tends to dichotomize the contribution of each sex in our evolution. While the orthodox anthropologists explain our development through the mighty male hunter, thus leaving women as passive spectators of our own evolution, she turns the table and this time, attributes to women the main role. As a woman, I am delighted -- especially since she is often right in her interpretations. But, as a scientist, I see a problem in that, such an approach, carried to its extreme (and Reed, to her credit, does not carry it to an unacceptable extreme), is equally misleading as evolution is not an either-or: it involved both sexes. Evolution took place as a consequence of several human activities carried out by the two sexes. Indeed, our ancestors did not live by the hunt alone as anthropologists seemed to think, but by gathering, by child care, by water fetching, by defense against predators, by tool making, and so on. (Nor, on the other hand, did they live by nothering alone.) Anyone of these activities taken in isolation to explain our evolution is merely a convenient and erroneous abstraction -- and so is any one sex. Our task is to build an evolutionary scheme in which both sexes are described as members of the same human species.

#### REVIEW OF PUBLICATIONS ON WOMEN IN QUEBEC\*

by Marie Lavigne, Université du Québec à Montréal, and  
Jennifer Stoddart, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec.

- BOOKS:** CARISSE, C. and J. DUBAZEDIER. LES FEMMES INNOVATRICES. PROBLEMES POST-INDUSTRIELS D'UNE AMERIQUE FRANCOPHONE. Paris: Seuil, 1975, 283 pages.
- ARTICLES:** LAURIN-FRENETTE, NICOLE. "LA LIBERATION DES FEMMES" in SOCIALISME QUEBECOIS, No. 24, 1974.
- TROFIMENKOFF, SUSAN MANN. "HENRI BOURASSA AND 'THE WOMAN QUESTION'" in JOURNAL OF CANADIAN STUDIES, November, 1975.

\*This is the second part of an article published in the October issue of the Newsletter (Volume IV, Number 3) dealing with the recent literature on women in Quebec. The review does not pretend to be exhaustive but does cover the most important French-language publications of general interest.