
BOOK REVIEWS/REVUES DE LIVRES

Evelyn Reed. *SEXISM AND SCIENCE*. New York and Toronto: Pathfinder Press, 1978. 190 pp. Glossary, Bibliography. Index.

by FRANCES D. BURTON
Department of Anthropology
Scarborough College

Compiled, in the author's own words, as a 'sequel' and supplement to her major work, *Woman's Evolution*, these essays were originally written between 1970 and 1977. Unifying the collection are Reed's concern with: ushering in a new era of evolutionary analysis of humankind; of affirming the maternal clan at the origin of human sociality; of viewing humans as qualitatively distinct from animals and the transition from 'animality to humanity' dependent jointly on totemism and taboo; of accepting Morgan's three stages: savagery, barbarism and civilization; of viewing these as akin to the ontogenetic stages of maturation.

The first four essays are biologically oriented, dealing with specific reflections on the above issues from the vantage point of primatology and sociobiology. It is in these essays that her lack of knowledge about evolutionary theory is most patent. The basic tenets of variability and adaptation seem totally foreign to her. Her suggestion, for example that 'eating insects and defoliating twigs is only incidental and episodic in the life of an ape' (chimps, anyway) is without reference to the frequency of ingestion of these substances, the significance of them in the total diet, etc., etc.

Furthermore, the fact that chimps have such habits and traditions suggests a great deal more about their mode of adaptation; their reliance on social behaviour, tradition and the transmission of these. Yet Reed apparently fears accepting humans as part of the animal kingdom (p. 21). Attempting to restrict the use of the term 'society' to humans, she admits of 'prides' and 'herds' and 'troops' but fails to see that these terms share in the zoological concept of society: a set of members who live together and have continuity through the transmission of information genetically and behaviourally over time. V. Gordon Childe's definition of society, which she chooses to accept and promulgate as dogma, sees society as a unit 'producing the means to satisfy its needs'. So technologically limited a definition is very much on Reed's mind and technological sequences appear as the sum of evolution. Yet while material culture has always been of interest to the anthropologist, all anthropologists would admit that there is a great deal more to social life than technology. Her materialist view becomes mechanistic when she affirms Engels' view that labour is at the base of the transition from the ape to the human state; when non-human primates are viewed as merely reproducing automatons, and even human speech is seen to arise out of the need to communicate about things. It may well be, however, that human speech arose out of a need for humans to communicate the feelings and thoughts they had. Her desire to deny 'talking' to chimps is irrelevant. The significance of the series of researches she alludes to lies in the nature of the symbolic processes of which the chimps are capable; not merely in their training to communicate them to humans by means of human language forms.

Reed correctly assesses the danger in reductionist thinking and the application of biological determinism to humans: (p. 55) "Their method consists in obliterating the essential distinctions that separate humans from animals and identifying the behavior of both through gross exaggerations and misrepresentations of the part played by instincts in human life." Yet while she may not be wrong about the damage done to the image of humanity by "the school of vulgar biologism" she tends to fall into the school of vulgar marxist polemicism.

She is on firmer ground when she speaks of sexism qua sexism than in her forays into primatology. Her essays on Ardrey and his lot and on Tiger and his Men in Groups are generally good reviews which flirt with polemics but do not overly indulge. In the first of these two essays she reviews the critiques made by such well-known anthropologists as Sahlins, Holloway and Montagu, as well as touching on the major flaws of reason. Unfortunately, she does not attempt to support her criticisms with data, depending rather on labels such as 'social darwinism', 'racist', 'sexist', etc. in lieu. Yet her own definition of social darwinism is inaccurate (p. 75): "The fallacy that man is governed by the same behavior as animals is known as social darwinism." Wasn't it more than 'behavior' and a question of evolutionary process applied precisely to the higher stages of cultural evolution that was at question? Wasn't the 'survival of the fittest' exalted in the conquest by the 'civilized' states over those yet in the stages of 'savagery' and 'barbarism'? Perhaps her error here lies in her constant reiteration and affirmation of Morgan's stages: savagery, barbarism and civilization as the basis for the evolutionary analysis of culture.

It strikes me as odd that a feminist would so frequently refer to the human species as 'man' and 'he'. There are other options. The need to make the female superior seems unnecessary. An examination of primate societies suggests, and this becomes almost modern heresy, that the two sexes each contribute about 50% to society, and that the meaning of 'the permanent heterosexual unit' is a society whose members comprise male and female, young and old in a co-operating unit which benefits all members.

Reed shows the popularist's typical disregard for accuracy while giving the appurtenances of scholarship. Really way-out statements receive no reference: "According to some primatologists, old females are the actual leaders of the troop whether or not some males are in a peripheral position ahead of them." Yet when it suits her purpose, the date of publication is given (e.g. Eaton, 1976) (p. 32). Interestingly, where the date is given, it is because the article is recent. Where only the title is given (e.g. Jay, *Primate Social Behaviour*) (p. 32), the publication is at least ten years old. Some statements are simply

not correct: (p. 49): "Females in nature, like males, are promiscuous. This includes the higher apes." A general primer in zoology might have been of some value to Reed, as it would have pointed out that some animals, particularly amongst the birds, mate for life; that sexuality for some animals, including some primates, is year round although for others it is seasonal; that birthing of offspring is not necessarily related to copulation, i.e. that non-reproductive sexual behaviour does occur; that copulations are difficult to witness in forest; that the birth rate just may be ecologically influenced.

In her critique of E.O. Wilson and Sociobiology, Reed fails to note that unless taken from the viewpoint of religious doctrine, evolution is not about perfection, nor about orthogonal progress. It is about transmission of genes in its quintessence. Hence, it is worse than ludicrous to speak of greater perfection in insect societies, or movement towards perfection, etc.

Yet movement towards perfection is what is involved in Morgan's stages and forwarded, reiterated, thrust upon the reader by Reed. While it may indeed be true, as Reed suggests (p. 103) that evolutionism has been suppressed because academe is in cahoots with the ruling classes in stamping out revolutionary thinking, it may also be true that Morgan's terminology and unilinear thinking is prejudicial and even racist as well as being inaccurate. Were Reed to actually read some evolutionary writers, from Dobzhansky (whom she cites but to whom there is no reference in the 'Bibliography') to Brown and Williams, the notion of variability and adaptation might affect her desperate clinging to antiquated dogma. That she is unaware of the racism inherent in Morgan's stages is apparent in the following, particularly symptomatic quote (p. 119): "Primitive peoples were ignorant of the most elementary biological facts of life, including how babies are conceived and the inevitability of death. How, then, could they have understood the concept of incest, which presupposes a very high degree of scientific knowledge? Genetics, for example, is only as old as this century." It isn't true. It simply isn't true. The vast pharmacopia of non-westernized peoples, their knowledge of anatomy and natural science in general, is sufficient proof. And while genetics is only as old as this century, knowledge of animal breeding and inheritance is as much part of the repertoire of the hunter as it is of the farmer. Why, even Darwin knew about inheritance way back in 1859!

Reed views "survivals" (p. 104): kinship terminology, customs, etc. as relics of a former time, and proof of evolution. Like hands? or teeth? She fails to note that the fact that patterns transmitted over great time hold, in the contemporary context, as much significance, meaning or function as they will have done in times past.

Her review of the present state of Anthropology (pp. 117-119) is valuable. She excels in historical reviews of literature and theory, at least when she divests such summaries of those strenuous affirmations which are always unsupported by evidence. She notes the pessimistic view, expressed by some anthropologists, that the discipline is bankrupt. Her solution to reinvigorate the field, however, is an echo of Wertheim's call to 'get back to evolution' (p. 110). Yet she derides E.O. Wilson's formulation of Sociobiology, whose purpose is just that.

Nowhere is her lack of comprehension of evolutionary theory more patent than in her attempt to discredit Lévi-Strauss. Failing to understand variability or adaptation, she rejects Lévi-Strauss' acceptance of the fundamental structures of the human mind, which unites the human species in time and space. Her insistence on stages, likened to a child's development, would leave, once again, our contemporary "primitives" (her term) children of the developed, mature, advanced groups. And she has the hybris to despise social darwinists?

While totally rejecting the "erroneous incest theory" (p. 155) and the significance Lévi-Strauss has given it in human culture, Reed reiterates her view that the 'original' 'primitive' taboo was dual: against cannibalism and 'animal sexual violence' (p. 155). Needless to say she lacks documentation for either of these phenomena in the past or contemporaneously. The few cases of cannibalism recorded in non-human primates occurred in situations of stress rather than as part of the typical protein gathering pattern.

The lack of documentation, the poor referencing (see above), the fact that some references do not appear in the (misnamed) bibliography - e.g. Dahlberg, 1947; Dobzhansky, 1963; Jay, "The Female Primate in the Potential of Woman" (p. 29) - are unnecessary.

It is unfortunate that a topic of such importance as sexism and science should have been given such short shrift. I think Germaine Greer's evaluation cited on p. 91 of the text, sums the effort well: the work is "couched in typical marxist doctrinaire terminology, buttressed by phony anthropology and poor scholarship."