

BOOK REVIEW

Sexism and Science

BY EVELYN REED

Reviewed by: Eve Zaremba

Sexism & Science is a collection of eight articles (five of which appeared previously in the *International Socialist Review*) which Reed says “can be regarded as a sequel and supplement” to her major work, *Woman’s Evolution*. The title implies more than is delivered since the “science” covers only biology and anthropology plus their recent derivatives, sociobiology and primatology. The book contains a brief glossary and two useful bibliographies on these areas of science.

The stated purpose of the book is to show the infiltration of pseudoscientific notions and the influence of male and capitalistic bias which have distorted the facts and obscured the truth in these various fields. While this objective is amply documented the real subject of the book is a defence of Reed’s theory of matriarchy.

Neither the subject itself nor Reed’s treatment of it lend themselves to “objective” discussion. Many will claim that anthropology and sociobiology are pseudosciences in themselves since findings derived from them are not susceptible to scientific proof. We will probably never know for sure whether the present 10,000 years of patriarchy were indeed universally preceded by a matriarchal epoch which lasted 10 times as long, as Reed (and others) claim. There is a wealth of material to support this view but the question is fundamentally a non-scientific one, i.e. science cannot answer it either pro or con. What passes for scientific answers are political and ideological positions expressed in scientific terms. Neither the matriarchal school exemplified by Reed nor the more orthodox anti-matriarchal school will settle for the Scottish verdict of not-proven and each accuses the other of pseudoscience, of bias, of vested interest. On the evidence provided in this book both sides are right in this respect.

I wish that it were possible to leave them to their academic wrangling. Unfortunately this is not possible. The matriarchal/anti-matriarchal debate has ramifications far outside the groves of academe. It has come to subsume two opposing views on what it means to be human, on what constitutes human nature, on the role of aggression in human history, on inherent gender characteristics and their consequences. The polarization is real and necessary but the way it has come to be defined is totally wrong-headed. In essence Reed’s position that — *BECAUSE primitive societies were universally collectivist, egalitarian and matriarchal; women occupied positions of leadership in productive and social life, THEREFORE women’s present inferior status is not inherent and can be changed (by a socialist revolution)*. The other side, while disclaiming all such “universalist” theories in fact contends — *BECAUSE matriarchy never existed; patriarchal arrangements are eternal; women are an inferior sex due to childbearing, lack of aggression and other biological disabilities, THEREFORE male supremacy is inherent and cannot be abolished*. What this kind of specious logic does is to equate the possibility of change in status and role of women in present and/or future society with the existence of

universal matriarchy over 10,000 years ago. If it existed, there is a precedent and we have a chance; if not, we may as well give up, it can never happen. Whatever women's liberation is dependent on, it's not the existence of anything millenia ago.

Since this is a book review in a professional journal I had better say something about its usefulness for libraries. *Sexism & Science* of course, belongs on the shelf next to *Women's Evolution*. It is relevant to any discussion of trends and ideas in anthropology and contains instructive material on such "isms" as evolutionism, diffusionism, functionalism, structuralism...all quite clear and readily understandable to any literate person. The book provides a useful antidote to obscurantist nonsense perpetuated by Ardrey, Morris and their friendly neighbourhood misogynist Lionel Tiger a propos whose "trivial and insignificant" book *Men in Groups* Dorothy Smith said, "if men like to dwell on their likeness to baboons, they are welcome to." Amen.