

A Million Years of Matriarchy

By Pam McAllister

WOMAN'S EVOLUTION: FROM MATRIARCHAL CLAN TO PATRIARCHAL FAMILY by Evelyn Reed. *Pathfinder*, 410 West St., New York, N.Y. 10014. New York, 1975. \$15, paper \$4.95.

Evelyn Reed, controversial feminist, Marxist, anthropologist, leaned forward, reassuring me with a wink of her bright blue eyes. "You're just one of my grandchildren," she said as we settled into the interview. This was exactly the personal perspective of history one might expect from the author of *Woman's Evolution: From Matriarchal Clan to*

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Patriarchal Family. After 25 years of research, the book was published on March 8, 1975 (International Women's Day), and is already in its second printing.

Reed sees her book as the first challenge in sixty years to male-dominated anthropology and biology, and hopes the fervor created by her book will open the way to fresh debate on previously ignored evidence. "They've locked off savage time," the first million years of human life on earth, and have used their twisted theories to convince women that male dominance has been the natural order since the beginning of time. Now, Reed believes, it is time for women to reclaim their buried history, arm themselves with well-documented studies, and, with heightened self-confidence, join the debate.

Reed recognizes that "if it were not for the women's movement, the

anthropologists would completely ignore my book... drop it into the ocean like a stone," and she almost sympathetically adds that it is humiliating for male anthropologists to see new evidence. Nevertheless, Reed is relentless in her defense of the thesis that women were the bearers of civilization: "Far from being 'drudgery,' woman's work was supremely creative; it created nothing less than the human species." In stronger wording, Reed is quoted as saying "the female sex brought the male sex out of animality into humanity and brought humankind to the threshold of civilization."

Woman's Evolution spells out the long process in clear step-by-step terms. Society began with the maternal clan, because women, equipped by nature with their highly developed maternal functions, were capable of cooperating with one another in the interest of group survival. "Precisely because women were not the roaming hunters and warriors, they could become the settlement-makers, cultivating the soil, producing useful articles, domesticating animals and men."

One of Reed's most significant contributions is her reconstruction of the "incest taboo," more appropriately viewed, she believes, as a taboo against cannibalism. Primitive men did not distinguish between humans and other animals, and easily adapted as hunters and flesh-eaters. Women, however, retained the vegetarian diet of their non-carnivorous primate forbears. In a reversal of the male anthropologists' interpretation that women gave the best food (meat) to the men, Reed proposes that women "excluded themselves from having anything to do with a food that repelled them."

In another lovely turnabout, Reed challenges the male interpretation of the "rules of avoidance," traditionally regarded as an effort to control the weakening influence of women and the terrible contamination which resulted from female contact. Reed claims that it was the women who demanded that they were not to be approached by men who were engaged in the contaminating occupation of killing. "In the epoch of savagery it was not the mothers but the hunters and eaters of flesh who represented the 'contaminating' sex, as evidenced by the purification rituals they were obliged to perform. This was turned into its opposite after the patriarchal takeover."

As women imposed restrictions on male "animal" behavior and taught men the wisdom of cooperation, the patriarchy was established. The relationship between the sexes was social and economic, not sexual, and kinship was traced from the mothers, as there was no concept of biological fatherhood. During the million years of the matriarchy, society was communal and egalitarian.

When society progressed to the agricultural-stock-raising period, the first food surpluses were established, and with them the concept of private



property. This then led to the rise of male dominance and class society.

During the interview with *Majority Report*, Reed persistently stressed the socialist aspect of her life. When asked if writing this book had changed her own self-image in any way, Reed replied that she had once accepted (with skepticism) the social posture of women and had worn high heels and fancy hats, but that now she knows this acceptance is just one aspect of the hypocritical, immoral society summed up by the word "capitalism."

She believes that "man-haters" in the women's movement are only looking at one symptom of the capitalist society and that men would not have this system of domination in a classless society. "Man-hating is just the reverse alienation that is so deeply entrenched in our society. We must get rid of the society that breeds these alienations."

Contrary to some feminists' disregard for male attitude change (we're tired of leading them by the hand, let them work at their own liberation), Reed's belief is that women must exercise their function as "social mothers." Women created the first social system, and it is our duty to help create another social system now. To isolate ourselves from the human (male and female) struggle is to be escapist and pessimistic, and leads to the "do-nothingness and despair that is so valuable to the capitalist system. It lets them (the capitalists) get away with a lot."

When asked how she felt about those in the women's movement who

are struggling to get a "bigger piece of the existing pie" Reed surprisingly replied that she believed in affirmative action because of the long history of injustice to women, but, characteristically, she concluded that these women will eventually come to the conclusion that the condition of life will still be unsatisfactory until the whole capitalist system is challenged.

Reed's stress on socialism rather than radical feminism seems ironic when one considers that her book is strong on the clear documentation of women as bearers of civilization and quite weak on the evolutionary shift to private property and class society.

When asked if primitive women (who supposedly demanded long periods of separation from males and who had no understanding of the procreative significance of sexual intercourse) may have expressed their physical and emotional affection for one another as women, Reed claimed there was no evidence of this possibility. She added, however, that she believes homosexuality is on a high evolutionary scale and is attractive now because humans are no longer sexually trapped by the animal-based function of procreation.