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The Spokeswoman

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Woman's Evolution, by Evelyn Reed. (New York, Pathfinder Press [410 West Street 10014], 1975. Paper, \$4.95).

I don't know very much about anthropology as it is being practiced now — just enough to guess that Margaret Mead is not an oracle in good standing, and that Levi-Strauss is far from superficial. I can guess, too, that hardworking anthropologists may justly resent the charge that patriarchal bias blinds them to evidence and interpretations that are strikingly obvious to an enthusiastic amateur. I don't like the adjective "human" used as a noun, or circular argument in which pronoun references grow fuzzy; and nothing grates on my ear like the assertion that something is "clearly" the case, which the author is trying to prove. In all these matters Evelyn Reed has raised my doubts; now let me say that *Woman's Evolution* is persuasive, exciting, highly readable: I am happy to recommend it.

The notion of a "primal matriarchy" is currently out of favor, not only with establishment types but also with sympathetic popularizers like Vern and Bonnie Bullough (*The Subordinate Sex*, 1973). Reed knows this — nothing daunted, she sets out to show that civilization is very likely the invention of women. Her sources fill a nine-page bibliography and her arguments are manifold and complex. But the general pattern can be set out, briefly, without doing the book too much violence.

Men are more aggressive and belligerent than women — but they are not, for that very reason, the better suited to lead. In fact, while men were hunting animals and each other for food, women were gathering herbs, guarding the secrets of fire, and developing a rudimentary agriculture which allowed them some control over food supply. Men did not dominate women by superior strength; they were brought into the collective circle because the society of women was so much nicer than the law of the jungle. Totem, taboo, exogamy, endogamy, ceremonies of exchange, were devised by women to help men overcome their blood lust. Reed's argument differs importantly from that offered by George Gilder and other "sexual suicidists" who hold that men were constrained from savage wandering by the delightful burdens of submissive wives and dependents. Reed shows that women (like females in other species) took care of themselves and their children, gathering their own food, moving in their own groups — indeed, living much of their lives apart from aggressive and dangerous males. The first family comprised women and children, including brothers, but no fathers. In this primal group there was no property, no individual parenthood, no dominating sex, and no marriage. The advantages of group living were emotional as well as material. A man

alone might as well be an animal: a man among his kind, released from the struggle for dominance, can enjoy the life-sustaining ties of brotherhood. Women helped men to achieve fraternity and cooperative behavior by imposing restrictions on sexual unions and the amenities of the hearth — marrying (or, more properly, mating) out of the tribe was one. Both men and women sought sexual partners from otherwise hostile groups, who then became in-laws. Children remained with the mother's group, and men became through women not fathers, but brothers. Indeed these "marriages" were fleeting, with mothers living apart for nursing periods of up to ten years. Within a clan, even in the later stages, parallel and distinct cultures existed for men and women. The matriarchy was not, then, the rule of women over men, but the complex of relations between children and their mothers' relatives — blood family and totem family. A child's nearest male relative was its mother's brother, not its father. In matrilinear society women were held in high esteem for their power to heal and nurture, to make things — pots, fires, baskets, babies — where those things had not been before. The apex of their prestige and influence was reached about 8,000 years ago, at the beginning of the neolithic period. It is ironic that by their enterprise women created food surpluses, the first wealth, for wealth became property, and property in the hands of men brought about women's downfall. The long, slow descent from exchange to bride purchase to the patriarchal institution of the dowry was, however, a tragedy for men as well as women. Civilization has come to such a pass that we hardly know how women (and other dispossessed classes) can be fully re-integrated into productive society without serious confrontation and disruption.

Woman's Evolution is an engrossing book, and its theory linking oppression to property is immeasurably more satisfying than theories linking oppression to childbearing. Whether we want to have children or not, it is a low blow indeed to call this capacity a disability, and blame our status on our physiology. If we accept such a connection, how can we help but be torn by self-loathing? The most satisfying theory, of course, cannot solve our present problems: but it can, at least, suggest criteria for successful solutions.

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