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Patriarchy, Civilization, And The Origins Of Gender

John Zerzan

Civilization, very fundamentally, is the history of the domination of nature and of women. Patriarchy means rule over women and nature. Are the two institutions at base synonymous?

Philosophy has mainly ignored the vast realm of suffering that has unfolded since it began, in division of labor, its long course. Hélène Cixous calls the history of philosophy a “chain of fathers.” Women are as absent from it as suffering, and are certainly the closest of kin.

Camille Paglia, anti-feminist literary theorist, meditates thusly on civilization and women:

“When I see a giant crane passing on a flatbed truck, I pause in awe and reverence, as one would for a church procession. What power of conception: what grandiosity: these cranes tie us to ancient Egypt, where monumental architecture was first imagined and achieved. If civilization had been left in female hands, we would still be living in grass huts.”¹

¹ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1990), p. 38.

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The “glories” of civilization and women’s disinterest in them. To some of us the “grass huts” represent not taking the wrong path, that of oppression and destructiveness. In light of the globally metastasizing death-drive of technological civilization, if only we still lived in grass huts!

Women and nature are universally devalued by the dominant paradigm and who cannot see what this has wrought? Ursula Le Guin gives us a healthy corrective to Paglia’s dismissal of both:

“Civilized Man says: I am Self, I am Master, all the rest is other — outside, below, underneath, subservient. I own, I use, I explore, I exploit, I control. What I do is what matters. What I want is what matter is for. I am that I am, and the rest is women and wilderness, to be used as I see fit.”²

There are certainly many who believe that early civilizations existed that were matriarchal. But no anthropologists or archaeologists, feminists included, have found evidence of such societies. “The search for a genuinely egalitarian, let alone matriarchal, culture has proved fruitless,” concludes Sherry Ortner.³

There was, however, a long span of time when women were generally less subject to men, before male-defined culture became fixed or universal. Since the 1970s anthropologists such as Adrienne Zihlman, Nancy Tanner and Frances Dahlberg⁴ have corrected the earlier focus or stereotype of prehistoric

² Ursula Le Guin, “Women/Wildness,” in Judith Plant, ed., *Healing the Wounds* (New Society: Philadelphia, 1989), p. 45.

³ Sherry B. Ortner, *Making Gender: the Politics and Erotics of Culture* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1996), p. 24. See also Cynthia Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won’t Give Women a Future* (Beacon Press: Boston, 2000).

⁴ For example, Adrienne L. Zihlman and Nancy Tanner, “Gathering and Hominid Adaptation,” in Lionel Tiger and Heather Fowler, eds., *Female Hierarchies* (Beresford: Chicago, 1978); Adrienne L. Zihlman, “Women in Evolution,” *Signs* 4 (1978); Frances Dahlberg, *Woman the Gatherer* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1981); Elizabeth Fisher, *Woman’s Creation: Sexual*

with ubiquitous technology. But patriarchy, too, is everywhere, and once again the inferiority of nature is presumed. Fortunately, “many feminists,” says Carol Stabile, hold that “a rejection of technology is fundamentally identical to a rejection of patriarchy.”²⁹

There are other feminists who claim a part of the technological enterprise, which posits a virtual, cyborg “escape from the body” and its gendered history of subjugation. But this flight is illusory, a forgetting of the whole train and logic of oppressive institutions that make up patriarchy. The dis-embodied high-tech future can only be more of the same destructive course.

Freud considered taking one’s place as a gendered subject to be foundational, both culturally and psychologically. But his theories assume an already present gendered subjectivity, and thus beg many questions. Various considerations remain un-addressed, such as gender as an expression of power relations, and the fact that we enter this world as bisexual creatures.

Carla Freeman poses a pertinent question with her essay titled, “Is Local: Global as Feminine: Masculine? Rethinking the Gender of Globalization”.³⁰

The general crisis of modernity has its roots in the imposition of gender. Separation and inequality begin here at the period when symbolic culture itself emerges, soon becoming definitive as domestication and civilization: patriarchy. The hierarchy of gender can no more be reformed than the class system or globalization. Without a deeply radical women’s liberation we are consigned to the deadly swindle and mutilation now dealing out a fearful toll everywhere. The wholeness of original genderlessness may be a prescription for our redemption.

²⁹ Carol A. Stabile, *Feminism and the Technological Fix* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1994), p. 5.

³⁰ Carla Freeman, “Is Local:Global as Feminine:Masculine? Rethinking the Gender of Globalization,” *Signs* 26 (2001).

feminine, the abode of Calypso, of Circe, of the Sirens who tempted Odysseus to abandon civilization's labors. Both land and women are again subjects of domination. But this imperialism betrays traces of guilty conscience, as in the punishments for those associated with domestication and technology, in the tales of Prometheus and Sisyphus. The project of agriculture was felt, in some areas more than others, as a violation; hence, the incidence of rape in the stories of Demeter. Over time as the losses mount, the great mother-daughter relationships of Greek myth — — Demeter-Kore, Clytemnestra-Iphigenia, Jocasta-Antigone, for example — — disappear.

In Genesis, the Bible's first book, woman is born from the body of man. The Fall from Eden represents the demise of hunter-gatherer life, the expulsion into agriculture and hard labor. It is blamed on Eve, of course, who bears the stigma of the Fall.²⁷ Quite an irony, in that domestication is the fear and refusal of nature and woman, while the Garden myth blames the chief victim of its scenario, in reality.

Agriculture is a conquest that fulfills what began with gender formation and development. Despite the presence of goddess figures, wedded to the touchstone of fertility, in general Neolithic culture is very concerned with virility. From the emotional dimensions of this masculinism, as Cauvin sees it, animal domestication must have been principally a male initiative.²⁸ The distancing and power emphasis have been with us ever since; frontier expansion, for instance, as male energy subduing female nature, one frontier after another.

This trajectory has reached overwhelming proportions, and we are told on all sides that we cannot avoid our engagement

²⁷ The Etoro people of Papua New Guinea have a very similar myth in which Nowali, known for her hunting prowess, bears responsibility for the Etoros' fall from a state of well-being. Raymond C. Kelly, *Constructing Inequality* (University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, 1993), p. 524.

²⁸ Jacques Cauvin, *The Birth of the Gods and the Origins of Nature* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2000), p. 133.

“Man the Hunter” to that of “Woman the Gatherer.” Key here is the datum that as a general average, pre-agricultural band societies received about 80 percent of their sustenance from gathering and 20 percent from hunting. It is possible to overstate the hunting/gathering distinction and to overlook those groups in which, to significant degrees, women have hunted and men have gathered.⁵ But women's autonomy in foraging societies is rooted in the fact that material resources for subsistence are equally available to women and men in their respective spheres of activity.

In the context of the generally egalitarian ethos of hunter-gatherer or foraging societies, anthropologists like Eleanor Leacock, Patricia Draper and Mina Caulfield have described a generally equal relationship between men and women.⁶ In such settings where the person who procures something also distributes it and where women procure about 80 percent of the sustenance, it is largely women who determine band society movements and camp locations. Similarly, evidence indicates that both women and men made the stone tools used by pre-agricultural peoples.⁷

Evolution and the Shaping of Society (Anchor/ Doubleday: Garden City NY, 1979).

⁵ James Steele and Stephan Shennan, eds., *The Archaeology of Human Ancestry* (Routledge: New York, 1995), p. 349. Also, M. Kay Martin and Barbara Voorhies, *Female of the Species* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1975), pp 210–211, for example.

⁶ Leacock is among the most insistent, claiming that whatever male domination exists in surviving societies of this kind is due to the effects of colonial domination. See Eleanor Burke Leacock, “Women's Status in Egalitarian Society,” *Current Anthropology* 19 (1978); and her *Myths of Male Dominance* (Monthly Review Press: New York, 1981). See also S. and G. Cafferty, “Powerful Women and the Myth of Male Dominance in Aztec Society,” *Archaeology from Cambridge* 7 (1988).

⁷ Joan Gero and Margaret W. Conkey, eds., *Engendering Archaeology* (Blackwell: Cambridge MA, 1991); C.F.M. Bird, “Woman the Toolmaker,” in *Women in Archaeology* (Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies: Canberra, 1993).

With the matrilineal Pueblo, Iroquois, Crow, and other American Indian groups, women could terminate a marital relationship at any time. Overall, males and females in band society move freely and peacefully from one band to another as well as into or out of relationships.⁸ According to Rosalind Miles, the men not only do not command or exploit women's labor, "they exert little or no control over women's bodies or those of their children, making no fetish of virginity or chastity, and making no demands of women's sexual exclusivity."⁹ Zubeeda Banu Quraishy provides an African example: "Mbuti gender associations were characterized by harmony and cooperation."¹⁰

And yet, one wonders, was the situation really ever quite this rosy? Given an apparently universal devaluation of women, which varies in its forms but not in its essence, the question of when and how it was basically otherwise persists. There is a fundamental division of social existence according to gender, and an obvious hierarchy to this divide. For philosopher Jane Flax, the most deep-seated dualisms, even including those of subject-object and mind-body, are a reflection of gender disunity.¹¹

Gender is not the same as the natural/physiological distinction between the sexes. It is a cultural categorization and ranking grounded in a sexual division of labor that may be the single cultural form of greatest significance. If gender introduces and legitimates inequality and domination, what could be more

⁸ Claude Meillasoux, *Maidens, Meal and Money* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1981), p. 16.

⁹ Rosalind Miles, *The Women's History of the World* (Michael Joseph: London, 1986), p. 16.

¹⁰ Zubeeda Banu Quraishy, "Gender Politics in the Socio-Economic Organization of Contemporary Foragers," in Ian Keen and Takako Yamada, eds., *Identity and Gender in Hunting and Gathering Societies* (National Museum of Ethnology: Osaka, 2000), p. 196.

¹¹ Jane Flax, "Political Philosophy and the Patriarchal Unconscious," in Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka, eds., *Discovering Reality* (Reidel: Dordrecht, 1983), pp 269–270.

The locus of the transformation of the wild to the cultural is the domicile, as women become progressively limited to its horizons. Domestication is grounded here (etymologically as well, from the Latin *domus*, or household): drudge work, less robusticity than with foraging, many more children, and a lower life expectancy than males are among the features of agricultural existence for women.²⁶ Here another dichotomy appears, the distinction between work and non-work, which for so many, many generations did not exist. From the gendered production site and its constant extension come further foundations of our culture and mentality.

Confined, if not fully pacified, women are defined as passive. Like nature, of value as something to be made to produce; awaiting fertilization, activation from outside herself/itself. Women experience the move from autonomy and relative equality in small, mobile anarchic groups to controlled status in large, complex governed settlements.

Mythology and religion, compensations of divided society, testify to the reduced position of women. In Homer's Greece, fallow land (not domesticated by grain culture) was considered

²⁶ The production of maize, one of North America's contributions to domestication, "had a tremendous effect on women's work and women's health." Women's status "was definitely subordinate to that of males in most of the horticultural societies of [what is now] the eastern United States" by the time of first European contact. The reference is from Karen Olsen Bruhns and Karen E. Stothert, *Women in Ancient America* (University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 1999), p. 88. Also, for example, Gilda A. Morelli, "Growing Up Female in a Farmer Community and a Forager Community," in Mary Ellen Mabeck, Alison Galloway and Adrienne Zihlman, eds., *The Evolving Female* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1997): "Young Efe [Zaire] forager children are growing up in a community where the relationship between men and women is far more egalitarian than is the relationship between farmer men and women" (p. 219). See also Catherine Panter-Brick and Tessa M. Pollard, "Work and Hormonal Variation in Subsistence and Industrial Contexts," in C. Panter-Brick and C.M. Worthman, eds., *Hormones, Health, and Behavior* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1999), in terms of how much more work is done, compared to men, by women who farm vs. those who forage.

opment and extension is a response to tensions and inequalities that they incarnate; both are dialectically interconnected to earliest, artificial division of labor.

On the heels, relatively speaking, of the gender/symbolic alteration came another Great Leap Forward, into agriculture and civilization. This is the definitive “rising above nature,” overriding the previous two million years of non-dominating intelligence and intimacy with nature. This change was decisive as a consolidation and intensification of the division of labor. Meillasoux reminds us of its beginnings:

Nothing in nature explains the sexual division of labor, nor such institutions as marriage, conjugality or paternal filiation. All are imposed on women by constraint, all are therefore facts of civilization which must be explained, not used as explanations.²³

Kelkar and Nathan, for example, did not find very much gender specialization among hunter-gatherers in western India, compared to agriculturalists there.²⁴ The transition from foraging to food production brought similar radical changes in societies everywhere. It is instructive, to cite another example closer to the present, that the Muskogee people of the American Southeast upheld the intrinsic value of the untamed, undomesticated forest; colonial civilizers attacked this stance by trying to replace Muskogee matrilineal tradition with patrilineal relations.²⁵

²³ Meillasoux, op.cit., pp 20–21.

²⁴ Cited by Indra Munshi, “Women and Forest: A Study of the Warlis of Western India,” in Govind Kelkar, Dev Nathan and Pierre Walter, eds., *Gender Relations in Forest Societies in Asia: Patriarchy at Odds* (Sage: New Delhi, 2003), p. 268.

²⁵ Joel W. Martin, *Sacred Revolt: The Muskogees’ Struggle for a New World* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1991), pp 99, 143.

important to put into question? So in terms of origins — and in terms of our future — the question of human society without gender presents itself.

We know that division of labor led to domestication and civilization and drives the globalized system of domination today. It also appears that artificially imposed sexual division of labor was its earliest form and was also, in effect, the formation of gender.

Sharing food has long been recognized as a hallmark of the foraging life-way. Sharing the responsibility for the care of offspring, too, which can still be seen among the few remaining hunter-gatherer societies, in contrast to privatized, isolated family life in civilization. What we think of as the family is not an eternal institution, any more than exclusively female mothering was inevitable in human evolution.¹²

Society is integrated via the division of labor and the family is integrated via the sexual division of labor. The need for integration bespeaks a tension, a split that calls for a basis for cohesion or solidarity. In this sense Testart is right: “Inherent in kinship is hierarchy.”¹³ And with their basis in division of labor, the relations of kinship become relations of production. “Gender is inherent in the very nature of kinship,” as Cucchiari points out, “which could not exist without it.”¹⁴ It is in this area that the root of the domination of nature as well as of women may be explored.

As combined group foraging in band societies gave way to specialized roles, kinship structures formed the infrastructure

¹² See Patricia Elliott, *From Mastery to Analysis: Theories of Gender in Psychoanalytic Feminism* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1991), e.g. p. 105.

¹³ Alain Testart, “Aboriginal Social Inequality and Reciprocity,” *Oceania* 60 (1989), p. 5.

¹⁴ Salvatore Cucchiari, “The Gender Revolution and the Transition from Bisexual Horde to Patrilocal Band,” in Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead, eds., *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge UK, 1984), p. 36. This essay is of great importance.

of relationships that developed in the direction of inequality and power differentials. Women typically became immobilized by a privatizing child care role; this pattern deepened later on, beyond the supposed requirements of that gender role. This gender-based separation and division of labor began to occur around the transition from the Middle to Upper Paleolithic eras.¹⁵

Gender and the kinship system are cultural constructs set over and against the biological subjects involved, “above all a symbolic organization of behavior,” according to Juliet Mitchell.¹⁶ It may be more telling to look at symbolic culture itself as required by gendered society, by “the need to mediate symbolically a severely dichotomized cosmos.”¹⁷ The which-came-first question introduces itself and is difficult to resolve. It is clear, however, that there is no evidence of symbolic activity (e.g. cave paintings) until the gender system, based on sexual division of labor, was apparently under way.¹⁸

By the Upper Paleolithic, that epoch immediately prior to the Neolithic Revolution of domestication and civilization, the gender revolution had won the day. Masculine and feminine signs are present in the first cave art, about 35,000 years ago. Gender consciousness arises as an all-encompassing ensemble of dualities, a specter of divided society. In the new polarization activity becomes gender-related, gender-defined. The role of hunter, for example, develops into association with males, its requirements attributed to the male gender as desired traits.

¹⁵ Olga Soffer, “Social Transformations at the Middle to Upper Paleolithic Transition,” in Günter Brauer and Fred H. Smith, eds., *Replacement: Controversies in Homo Sapiens Evolution* (A.A. Balkema: Rotterdam 1992), p. 254.

¹⁶ Juliet Mitchell, *Women: The Longest Revolution* (Virago Press: London, 1984), p. 83.

¹⁷ Cucchiari, op.cit., p. 62.

¹⁸ Robert Briffault, *The Mothers: the Matriarchal Theory of Social Origins* (Macmillan: New York, 1931), p. 159.

That which had been far more unitary or generalized, such as group foraging or communal responsibility for child tending, had now become the separated spheres in which sexual jealousy and possessiveness appear. At the same time, the symbolic emerges as a separate sphere or reality. This is revealing in terms of the content of art, as well as ritual and its practice. It is hazardous to extrapolate from the present to the remote past, yet surviving non-industrialized cultures may shed some light. The Bimin-Kushusmin of Papua New Guinea, for example, experience the masculine-feminine split as fundamental and defining. The masculine “essence,” called *finiik*, not only signifies powerful, warlike qualities but also those of ritual and control. The feminine “essence,” or *khaapkhabuurien*, is wild, impulsive, sensuous, and ignorant of ritual.¹⁹ Similarly, the Mansi of northwestern Siberia place severe restrictions on women’s involvement in their ritual practices.²⁰ With band societies, it is no exaggeration to say that the presence or absence of ritual is crucial to the question of the subordination of women.²¹ Gayle Rubin concludes that the “world-historical defeat of women occurred with the origins of culture and is a prerequisite of culture.”²²

The simultaneous rise of symbolic culture and gendered life is not a coincidence. Each of them involves a basic shift from non-separated, non-hierarchized life. The logic of their devel-

¹⁹ Theodore Lidz and Ruth Williams Lidz, *Oedipus in the Stone Age* (International Universities Press: Madison CT, 1988), p. 123.

²⁰ Elena G. Fedorova, “The Role of Women in Mansi Society,” in Peter P. Schweitzer, Megan Biesele and Robert K. Hitchcock, eds., *Hunters and Gatherers in the Modern World* (Berghahn Books: New York, 2000), p. 396.

²¹ Steven Harrall, *Human Families* (Westview Press: Boulder CO, 1997), p. 89. “Examples of the link between ritual and inequality in forager societies are widespread,” according to Stephan Shennan, “Social Inequality and the Transmission of Cultural Traditions in Forager Societies,” in Steele and Shennan, op.cit., p. 369.

²² Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women,” *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (Monthly Review Press: New York, 1979), p. 176.