

Anthropology: Reclaiming the dragon

What was primitive communism?

Lionel Sims

2013

Contents

Science of myth	3
Lévi-Strauss's great insight into the structure of myth.	3
What is a dragon?	4
European myths, a mace.	4
Original communism	5
Sex strike	8
Matrilineal system	9
Neolithic counterrevolution	9

According to Genesis, chapter 2, god “created Heaven, host and Earth and all plants of the field”. He “created man from the dust of the Earth and breathed the breath of life into his nostrils, and Man became a living soul”. God placed man in Eden and commanded him to “tend the garden that he had made”, and directed that “he may eat of all except the tree of knowledge of good and evil”. God provided “every good beast of the land and fowl of the air” and “from his rib made woman”.

But amongst the creatures was a serpent that was “more subtle than all the beasts of the field” and the serpent persuaded the woman, Eve, that the fruit of all the trees could be eaten. She ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil and persuaded the man, Adam, to do the same.

“Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they knew that they were naked.” They sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves. God asked how they knew that they were naked: “Have you eaten from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat?” And god condemned the serpent to crawl on its belly forever.

To Adam he said, “Cursed is the ground because of you.” It will now produce “thorns and thistles” and you will be forced to eat “by the sweat of your brow”.

Science of myth

In certain quarters Marxism is reduced to a base/superstructure model, in which the economic base generates everything above it: the superstructure, ideology, social relations - everything derives from economics. According to this method, we would expect to find very different superstructures in line with the different modes of production that have existed.

But, as an anthropologist, I know that every culture in the world has a dragon (or serpent) as part of its origin myth: the Mesoamerican quetzalcoatl, the rainbow serpent of African hunter-gatherers, the dragon of Pharaonic Egypt or Chinese or Welsh culture ... All these belonged to societies with different modes of production, yet they all have dragons.

The story of Eden is an origin myth, and it is important to ask what Marxism allows us to say about origin myths. Can we have a science of myth? Well, we in the Radical Anthropology Group, because we promote anthropology as a science, champion in particular the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, which gives us a method - structuralism - with which to interpret and understand myths.

Lévi-Strauss has been massively misunderstood, especially by the left, because he identifies two dimensions within myth. There are a set of ‘grammatical rules’, of syntax, which are invariant. They never change. Irrespective of the historical era, the mode of production, the syntax will always be the same. However, the political meaning within the myth - how it is appropriated at any one time and place - can vary enormously. Even though the same rules are being used, the political message will change. These syntactical rules are the formal structure - the external form, around which the myth is woven. This was

Lévi-Strauss’s great insight into the structure of myth.

So if every culture has a dragon in its origin myth, and it is an invariant rule that these dragons wield enormous magical power, we must ask what is in that myth that is common to every society? In my opinion, Lévi-Strauss was unable to explain the origins of the system of invariant

rules of which dragons are one part. He seemed to prefer the argument that the human brain was structured to deal with syntactical oppositions and that when a myth is being told it is the human brain communing with itself.

However, in the fourth volume of his *Mythologiques* on the analysis of a thousand Amerindian myths, he mentions in a footnote another possible reason for these origin myths. According to the Soviet formalist, Vladimir Propp, behind all the magical tales of the world's cultures lies the original culture, which generated the origin myths that we find all round the world today. We find them in Papua New Guinea, North America, South America, even in Europe in the Greek myths. They are in fact male matriarchy myths, because they all blame the loss of heaven, or Eden, on women.

Within Marxism, of course, we always argue that content determines form. For example, capitalism grew and penetrated the social forms around it and changed them to conform with their new, capitalist, content. Therefore, if a dragon is an example of an invariant form, if we are to be consistent with Marxism, and link Marxism and anthropology and Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, we can only come to one conclusion: there must have been in the past a society whose content drove a form to generate male matriarchy myths, which for some reason feature dragons; the form which came from that original society has been carried on in all later modes of production.

So how can we make this argument work? First, there must be something in our society which still makes us engage with a creature, the dragon, that has never existed. There must be something within capitalism that provides a basis for this form to continue.

What is a dragon?

In his *Structural anthropology*, Lévi-Strauss took on the racists who argued that, because peoples in traditional societies have no abstract concepts or words for them, their minds were not as evolved as ours. Lévi-Strauss said that the 'savage mind' does not work like that. It takes two dissimilar things - say, a human and a lion - and it puts them together to make a lion-headed human. In the combination of these two aspects, the power of the lion is invested in the man: 'He has the power of a lion' or 'He hunts like a lion'. An abstract idea is created by combining two things that do not normally go together.

Bearing this in mind, let us ask ourselves again, what is a dragon? A dragon lives in a cave, in a hole, under water, in the underworld or on a mountain top. It can climb trees or swim. It is wet and slimy and breathes fire. It has noxious breath and a poisonous sting, but it guards a beautiful maiden, a treasure or secret. It is a snake, the lowest of creatures, and it has wings and can also be the highest. It can shape-shift, it is species-ambiguous - the sphinx is an example. It can switch gender. It has multiple heads and is all-powerful. It can only be killed by a magical weapon (usually conferred by a maiden or crone), fire or, in the north-western

European myths, a mace.

Notice that these properties are a unity of oppositions - the most abstract creature of all the origin myths of the world combines the highest number of oppositions. As the traditional peoples would say, this end result, the dragon, is something like all of these properties; it can metamorphose across different dimensions of being.

Lévi-Strauss gives us another rule: there is no such thing as one true myth. No one myth is more true than another. That, he says, is not the right way to consider myths. A myth includes all its variants - each adds to the myth, following the same syntax within a changing political narrative. By bringing the variants together, one finds the meta-myth behind them all.

If we use these techniques and go back to the Eden myth, we should be able to disentangle the invariant rules and discover the political narrative that is embedded within it. So what can we identify in Genesis, chapter 2?

First, in Eden there is abundance - that comes through very strongly. The first animals that god makes are cattle: not lions, snakes or elephants, but cattle. Another thing: males monopolise reproduction; as Eve came from Adam's rib, then men make women. Also, there is monogamy, and when in Eden there is no sexual shame. There is a serpent which talks and is highly persuasive. 'Serpent' is interchangeable with 'dragon' here - it means the same thing. The woman is close to the serpent: she listens to it and is persuaded. They are bracketed together in the myth.

The woman's act of unity with the serpent brings shame. Prior to this the serpent lived in Eden and was above cattle; it could walk and enjoy friendship with the woman - there is the implication it may have even have had sex with her. When god gets angry because the woman has listened to the serpent - and the man has listened to the woman, who listened to the serpent - then sex is now sorrowful, children are born in pain, there is enslavement to the husband and there is compulsive marriage. Adam listened to Eve in Eden, where there had been not only abundance, but men who listened to their womenfolk. Eden signified abundance and women respecting men in the company of the serpent, and a vengeful, patriarchal god changed everything.

There are two components to this myth. First, there is the invariant syntax - the serpent (dragon), shared by all origin myths. These myths are about the making of the cosmos - they feature some hero who always names the parts of the cosmos, and they feature a dragon, which is always connected to women. In every origin myth around the world these are invariant.

Second we have a variant political component. For example, cattle are not the original beasts. They indicate an origin myth from a particular moment in history: the beginning of agro-pastoral society, the Neolithic. This is a story for the origin of the Neolithic, and you know this as soon as cattle are named as the primary beast.

The expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden represents a political and economic reversal: women are enslaved in monogamy - which begins with this agro-pastoral myth. On the other hand, men are enslaved through agricultural labour under a patriarchal god. Eden had been a place of abundance for hunter-gatherers, before agro-pastoralism. It was a place of equality - in particular of gender equality - in which women were equal to men.

But did primitive communism exist in the sense it does in the Eden and other origin myths? Was there abundance?

Original communism

To be frank, Marx and Engels were ambiguous about abundance in primitive communism. Engels wobbles badly in *The origin of the family, private property and the state*. That is fair enough - it is the 1880s and anthropology has only just got off the ground as a discipline; there is no palaeoanthropology, no molecular biology. A revolution has occurred over the last 30 years in

the life sciences that has seen massive advances in the science of our pre-history. So now we can start overcoming these ambiguities.

It is true that modern social anthropology, particularly in Britain, has dumped the study of origins. Nevertheless, much good work has been done in the study of extant hunter-gatherer societies. And the evidence that we have from those hunter-gatherers that have survived into modern times is available to us.

The problem is that we are ill-equipped to understand what we encounter with a modern hunter-gatherer. We think in terms of material well-being - technology, machines, consumer goods. Yet when a traditional Aboriginal Australian, who to our eyes has nothing, looks at you he will regard you as a savage. He will think, this western person has no discipline, knows nothing, is ignorant. The Aboriginal Australian has a completely different mindset from ours.

In anthropology we have to try and enter the mind of the other in order to understand ourselves, through their perspective. That might be difficult, but when people become friends with the Aboriginals and start to learn from them, what they find is really interesting. They do not find any possessiveness, accumulation or storage. When they get food, they eat it immediately with their friends. Now, we would be thinking, what about tomorrow? What about next week? But they immediately consume the food they find and to us it appears that these people cannot plan, are not prepared for the future. They act in a way that we would find alarming. And that is because we are part of the post-Neolithic revolution. We are a part of a system that believes in amassing property and we look at this world completely differently.

Hunter-gatherers survive from the local landscape and they are mobile. This allows them to live in permanent abundance. The idea of storage based in a particular locality is ridiculous to a hunter-gatherer. If they exhaust a locality's food, and try to live by whatever they have stored, then they will quickly starve. So they just move on. British anthropologist Colin Turnbull wrote a beautiful book, *The Forest People*, about how the Mbuti people of the Ituri forest of the Congo went about their business. They would say, 'We're going to break camp and move off', and he would pack his bags and go along with them. But they would quickly come across bushes of fruiting berries and they would stop for hours to eat them. Turnbull would say, 'Come on, we've got to get moving', but they would reply, 'Why? Here is food.'

So the attitude of hunter-gatherers is entirely different from the idea that we must store up food and other possessions or else we will be heading for a crisis. They live in abundance that keeps them together, and that is what they want to protect. There is a pride in not owning things - a sign of confidence that they know how to negotiate their environment. In order to live in abundance, these hunter-gatherers work one, two, maybe three days a week - in terms of labour-time they are way more advanced than we are.

So even in the present, hunter-gatherers lead a life that must be considered affluent by the measure of the necessary labour-time required to secure subsistence. Yet, while hunter-gatherers live in abundance, in the modern world 25,000 people die of hunger every day - despite the massive technological advance we see around us. So why is it that we use technology as a measure of civilisation? In the hunter-gatherer world no-one dies of hunger - 'A poor man shames us all,' they say.

There is no lack of ingenuity, intelligence or intellectualism amongst hunter-gatherers. For example, there are animal traps made by the Kung people in the basement of the British Museum that no-one can reassemble because they are so complicated. A low level of technology does not mean simple technology. Tools used by hunter-gatherers are an extension of their power, whereas

ours are anti-human: they undermine, invade and dominate us - they are under the control of the capitalists, who own the means of production.

If you ask a Kung man, 'What do you fantasise about?', he will say, 'Sitting in a vat of fatty meat'. The Kung had been dislocated from their traditional hunting grounds, displaced by Iron Age tribesmen from west Africa and forced into the Kalahari desert, which was not their natural, preferred environment. Yet even in the middle of the Kalahari we still find them living in abundance.

But the fantasy about fatty meat betrays an obsession. Marshall Sahlins, who wrote *The original affluent society*, calls this a "decapitated culture". There appears to be something missing in such a culture.

Contrarily anthropology has recorded other traditional societies still living in abundance which undermine all our ideas about 'primitive' culture and 'savagery'. These were societies with an elaborated superstructure, intense ritual and a full ceremonial life. We could call their way of living 'primitive communism', but there is nothing primitive about it - the richness of their ritual life is an example. The Kung have lost most of this because of all the disruption they have gone through. They exhibit an exhausted, undernourished ritual life - like many hunter-gatherer societies still remaining, the superstructure has been eroded.

All of humanity were hunter-gatherers in the Palaeolithic, which came to an end 10,000 years ago. We now know that anatomically modern humans had evolved in Africa by around 200,000 years ago. Those ancestors spread from Africa for the first time around 80,000 years ago, reaching Australia 60,000 years ago and Europe 40,000 years ago.

Can we reconstruct the culture of the hunter-gatherers of the Palaeolithic? Can we go right back to our origins? Notice that there is a problem in Marxism for this. If you roll back the wheel of history right to our point of origin, then where is the base? Where is the superstructure? We can see why some Marxists have become singularly ill-equipped to deal with the question of human and cultural origins.

But Engels gives us a clue in *The origins of the family, private property and the state*, where he did something that we struggle to do today on the left: he discussed animal social systems and those of apes in particular. Because, of course, we follow Darwin in accepting our evolution from common ancestry with the apes. Engels argues that our ancestors in some way overthrew the dynamics of the primate social system - male jealousy and the attempt to monopolise females.

Christopher Boehm's *Hierarchy in the forest* is a study of chimpanzee and ape social systems, where he points out that chimpanzees in particular combine a desire to dominate with an ability to submit and defer to a dominator. But chimpanzees alternate between these two extremes in an ambiguous way. At certain times they will try to be dominant, while at others they will submit to an alpha male.

Boehm points out that there is an ambiguous aspect to the structure of ape society. He argues that climatic and ecological changes that took place at the point of our origins, in the early Palaeolithic, would have made certain groups of apes vulnerable. If domination by alpha males is not going to ensure the group's survival, then he says subordinates can establish a system of 'reverse domination', in which the collective can dominate the single or few dominators and establish a system of egalitarianism - a form of cooperation.

Sex strike

The main thing missing in Boehm's book is any discussion of gender or sex. And this is inexcusable, because sex is the main division in the primate social system - 'economics' as well as politics are at work here. It is not just males competing to monopolise females: it is the females who do the economics - they forage. The males just follow the females, because they know that they can get two things if they do so: food and sex. They can forage for themselves where the females have found the food, or steal it from the females, and they can compete to have sex with them.

Basically that is the primate social system: the economic base is characterised by female work, while the political superstructure is male. Robin Dunbar described all this in *Primate social systems*. So if we argue, as Boehm does, that there is reverse domination and that the group can get together to undermine the previous political system, then that means that the group must also be undermining the sexual economics underpinning these relations.

And this is where the Radical Anthropology Group comes in, thanks to the work of Chris Knight on the sex-strike theory. According to this argument, the alpha male will not innovate, because he wishes to retain his position as king. The subordinate males will not innovate, because they wish to become the alpha male. Therefore innovation within a primate social system must come from the females, because it is they who will pay the highest cost for a failure to innovate when climatic and ecological conditions change (during the Ice Age the forests were disappearing from central Africa). This abstract model of cultural origins suggests that the females collectivised themselves, secluding themselves from sexual availability to males.

This would have motivated the males to become economically useful - or rather those males who were willing to do that. The subordinate males would be drawn into a sexual system, whereas before they were excluded by the alpha male. The female coalition organises, through seclusion rituals, a system whereby males are motivated to hunt and provide food. The best time to hunt as a vulnerable hominid is during the full moon: its light permits hunting at a time when the larger carnivores, who only hunt during the dark, are not posing a danger.

According to this argument, female seclusion begins at dark moon. The females separate from their one-time husbands and can call on support from their brothers when necessary. That way there is a blood unity in a matrilineal clan between brothers and sisters. When, at full moon, the males return with meat there is a period of temporary marriage characterised by meat-rich feasting and heterosexual party time - until dark moon comes round and the cycle starts again.

This is sex-strike theory - an abstract model based on a lunar template, through which human culture comes into being. This human revolution was female-led, drawing in all their sisters and brothers in order to domesticate the males and make them economically useful. Marriage is all about the economics which is a precondition for sexual rights.

The Marxist argument is that everything else evolved out of that revolutionary act of female seclusion. Not just the hunting-gathering mode of production, but all human culture evolved out of it. That act had to happen for human culture to begin.

Matrilineal system

Let us remind ourselves that this is not about technology. We are not saying that it was the invention of the bow and arrow that triggered hunter-gathering. But we have to ask what the conditions were in the Palaeolithic. What were the game animals? There are clues from palaeoanthropology and archaeology.

In the Americas there were giant ground sloths. When humans first arrived about 13,000 years ago, these slow-moving animals would have been roaming the Americas and our ancestors just needed fire-and-flint technology and solidarity to kill them. They were wiped out in the thousand years following the arrival of the humans. When the Aborigines arrived in Australia 60,000 years ago, there were marsupial rhinoceroses, but within a short span they too disappeared.

We are all familiar with the fate of the woolly mammoth. Russian anthropologists have reconstructed the huts used by our ancestors on the Russian steppe during the Palaeolithic. Now, it is not too warm in those parts of Russia in winter today, so you can imagine the conditions during the Palaeolithic, when there was an ice sheet a mile thick over Moscow. But our hunter-gatherer ancestors thrived in the areas south of these glaciers. Their huts were constructed from mammoth bones, hides and clay, with five tons of material used in the construction of each hut.

All of these mega-fauna had died out by 10,000 years ago at the hands of our ancestors and their extremely effective game drives using fire, flint and solidarity. The solidarity element is key, so let us examine this further.

When people on the left hear of the sex-strike theory many do not like it, as it sounds like a model for the 'little woman at home'. But that is an incorrect interpretation based on the bourgeois conditioning of our patriarchal society.

Lewis Henry Morgan studied the long-house system amongst the Iroquois and Seneca. The women - sisters, mothers and daughters - stay together. The mothers have sons and these sons are brothers to all the women. This is a matrilineal system, in which there are just two family groups: the women in one group have husbands in the other group, and these men's sisters are in turn another group of women. A woman will therefore always have brothers and they will always support her in her dealings with other men from the other clan. They will never let her down, since this is the basis for the clan's existence.

In our culture you lose your brother when he gets married. Our system of families divides us all up. But in a matrilineal clan that never happens. Your first identity is with your brothers and your sisters, and your common line of mothers, who all live in a group. Men as husbands move between the two groups, visiting the women of the other group before returning to their own long house when the seclusion ritual starts and temporary marriage is dissolved.

Imagine the man visiting his wife in the other clan and standing alongside her are all her sisters, all her mothers and all her brothers. You will be under pressure from all of them. So the matrilineal clan is a non-sexual union of economically and politically participating blood kin, and it works through enormously high levels of solidarity. It is a form of communist solidarity.

Neolithic counterrevolution

It was cattle that finally spelled the end of all that. Once cattle are domesticated, there is no need for hunter-gathering, whereby hunted meat earned sexual rights. A hunter-gatherer worked

all his life under a system of bride service, but a cattle-owner could buy a woman. By conservatively continuing the practice of handing over meat to another clan - not now serially, as hunted game, but as domesticated cattle - a man now gained a woman in 'wedlock'. Her own blood kin, the mothers and brothers who once always stood in solidarity with her, now had an interest in disowning her to keep the cattle.

As soon as there is cattle domestication, there is a reversal in sexual politics - the Neolithic counterrevolution. This was, as Engels called it, the "world-historic defeat of the female sex", with cattle used to barter women from their blood kin and institute compulsive marriage. Modern anthropology can prove all of that.

This is exactly where the Eden myth begins - with cattle and monogamy. It is the political expression of the Neolithic counterrevolution, for which the Old testament provides a script. In Eden there was abundance - a society without monogamy or shame. But what about the serpent, the dragon with which I began? The dragon, which could walk, talk and shape-shift?

A myth consists of all its variants. Eve was not Adam's first wife - that was Lilith. Lilith thought Adam was a bore. She would not listen to Adam when he spoke. She insisted on being on top when she lay with Adam. And Lilith left and flew away over the Red Sea. This myth is recounted in many variants, but Lilith is only mentioned once in the Bible because her presence is an inconvenience. She is the opposite of Eve, who is compliant. Lilith is dangerous: she refuses to be oppressed.

In depictions of Lilith we find that she is often shown with an owl's talons on her feet, with serpents for hair, with two owls and two lions at her feet. She has wings on her back and is holding what look like symbols of office - a sort of circle on a straight rod. Lilith is a dragon.

And in mediaeval pictures, including in the Sistine Chapel, the story of Adam and Eve from Genesis depicts the serpent as a woman with a serpent's or dragon's tail. This serpent who could talk so persuasively was another woman - it was Lilith, Adam's first wife. She said, 'Eat the fruit. Don't listen to god: you shall become a god yourself, by eating the fruit of the tree of life in the garden of Eden.'

To understand this biblical myth, Lilith should be looked at from the point of view of a jealous husband - how will he feel when she starts secluding herself at dark moon and tells him to become economically useful? The wife who was once compliant and is now in rebellion is characterised by the patriarchal man as a dragon, covered in blood. She is seen by him as all-powerful because she is surrounded by her kin, all her brothers and sisters.

So sex-strike theory argues that womanhood has two aspects, just like culture itself. The powerful, secluding, menstrually synchronous woman began culture. Archaeologists have found evidence for dragons all over the world, in every culture, but it is not seen as respectable to talk about them. Sex-strike theory allows us to understand how 'primitive' communism worked through the dragon - the fighting collective of women and their brothers. Today, however, women's oppression continues across all modes of production. It takes the form of monogamous family relationships, and this organisation of the family underpins the idea of enmity between men and women.

At Stonehenge there was a mace. The mace has no known function except a ceremonial one and, amusingly enough, archaeologists say they have found the biggest stash of large-sized axes from the Neolithic on the Shetland Islands. The problem is that there were no trees on the Shetlands! These 'axes', these maces, exist for no other purpose than to kill the dragon by intimidating women. Such symbols remain in the elite institutions of society today - parliament cannot sit unless this traditional anti-dragon weapon is present.

But for us the dragon represents the power of primitive communism to bring us all together. The Eden myth, I would argue, is a distorted memory of a communist society, which has been taken over by cattle-owning elites. They introduced women's oppression and wealth inequality, and they were at war with the dragon. They continually had to kill the dragon symbolically at their monuments, because the dragon represented the power of the matrilineal clan, which would have shared the cattle.

So the question is, whose dragon do you want? Theirs or ours?

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Lionel Sims
Anthropology: Reclaiming the dragon
What was primitive communism?
2013

<http://libcom.org/history/anthropology-reclaiming-dragon-what-was-primitive-communism>

theanarchistlibrary.org