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Woman's creation: sexual evolution and the shaping of society; toward an anthropology of women

Douglas, Carol. Off Our Backs 10.4 (Apr 30, 1980): 16.

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Abstract

She criticizes the use of the term "patriarchy" as synonymous with male dominance: patriarchy is a specific form of male dominance. ([Gail Rubin] prefers the term sex/gender system as the ordering of sex roles in a society.) She points out that the power of males in a number of societies is not based on their roles as fathers or as patriarchs but on "their collective adult maleness, embodied in secret cults, men's houses, warfare, exchange networks, ritual knowledge and various initiation procedures." (One could go on endlessly about Rubin's essay -- there are many other aspects of it.)

One of the points that struck me most turned up repeatedly in both Towards an Anthropology of Women and Woman's Creation: the male-female couple developed before paternity was known. A man, in effect, already had a woman and her children before he knew they were his children. As Kathleen Gough says in her essay, "The Origin of the Family," "the bond of social fatherhood is recognized among people who do not know about the male role in procreation." Societies today that do not recognize paternity have marriage, and had marriage long before they came into contact with other societies. Needless to say, I do not see this as an argument for the naturalness of the institution of marriage but for the universality of male dominance. Perhaps children were a form of property themselves before men had other property for them to inherit.

Sally Slocum's essay, "[Woman the Gatherer](#): Male Bias in Anthropology" points out the slanted focus of many male anthropologists who see "Man the Hunter" as the creator of civilization and assume that language and tools were developed exclusively by hunters rather than by women the gatherers.

Full Text

woman's creation: sexual evolution and the shaping of society; toward an anthropology of women

In Woman's Creation, Elizabeth Fisher, former editor of the feminist literary magazine Aphra, asks whether women have always been oppressed by men and how the oppression of women began. Fisher clearly does not think that males are inherently more aggressive.

Castrated male animals lose their spirit, she says, but so do females. Injecting testosterone makes a female more aggressive, but so, she says, does injecting estrogen. Very large doses of testosterone make animals of both sexes very passive. Hominid pre-human females may have chosen the most cooperative males for their mates rather than the most aggressive, Fisher says. In fact, she sees women becoming a class 5,000 years ago in Sumer (Mesopotamia) and other cultures based on large cities.

garden of eden

Fisher sees sexuality in foraging societies as being relatively free (freely heterosexual, that is -- which apparently seems free to her): the Garden of Eden was a reality. She sees women's sensual attachment to their children as being a major aspect of the development of the human species, as a factor permitting long, slow intellectual development.

women or cows?

She believes that force did not enter much into human relations until after the domestication of animals: the cow, not woman, is the prototype of the oppressed. Through breeding animals, she says, human beings were brutalized and men learned both about paternity and about their relatively inessential place in the purely biological scheme of things: farmers do not need large numbers of bulls or roosters. The men became both more insecure and more controlling. They began to see women, too, as breeders, as instruments for producing children. Prostitution, far from being the oldest profession, developed only as cities developed and women were seen as breeders, performing functions.

While it may be true that some of the African and Australian tribes that are foragers today are not violent to women, I think Fisher is stretching that data a bit when she maintains that therefore rape and violence were not a significant part of the treatment of women in any early societies. The near universality of heterosexual exclusivity even among tribes that do not know about paternity could hardly be the result of free, random choice.

Fisher maintains that depiction of women in a violent way was not a feature of early cave art. Although she probably is right that male sociobiologists who emphasized "man the hunter" are stretching a point when they claim that the wounds and arrows on paintings of buffaloes represent vaginas and penises, I am not completely convinced when she maintains that what art historians have called pictures of weapons or phalluses are really feathers or branches. Fisher sees differences in male-female body size as perhaps a comparatively recent development, or a development that has been accelerated by "civilization." In Sumer, she points out, records show that adult female workers were given half as much food as adult male workers; such distribution would make it difficult for large women to survive and reproduce.

Fisher shows a connection between the oppression of women and the development of slavery: the first known word for slave, "geme" in ancient Sumerian, meant "mountain woman." Apparently males were killed rather than taken captive, so the first slaves were women.

Fisher feels that Puritanism, dominance, materialism and sadism are all linked. She would like to turn the world's resources to developing agriculture and education. She offers no

tactics, but says there is hope for humanity because, she feels, patriarchy, sadism and fighting are not inherent in human nature.

early harmony

As Paula Webster has pointed out in her essay in *Towards an Anthropology of Women*, our theories of origins tend to be affected by our political views. Socialist feminists tend to see early woman-man relations as basically harmonious; radical feminists tend to see women as always having been oppressed by men; others may see men as always having been more violent than women, but somewhat paradoxically suggest that there was a period of literal matriarchy. Fisher definitely leans toward the "everything was harmonious" socialist school: she even maintains that the hierarchal state preceded the patriarchal family, rather than being based on it: families imitated states, instead of vice versa. I find it a little hard to believe that human beings developed up to the complexity of a large state without oppressive hierarchies and then modified all of their smaller units such as the family to a hierarchal form to imitate the state.

No doubt acquisition of increasing material possessions and their use as dowries and bride prices made marriage less flexible and more oppressive for women, but are we certain the women were not possessions even before they were paid for?

selling women

In her essay, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex" in the Reiter book, anthropologist Gail Rubin discusses Claude Levi-Strauss' idea that women are the medium of exchange between men: the gift/sale/sharing of women is what creates the bonds between men in virtually all cultures. Women are the first currency as well as the first possession. (Does that mean, I wonder, that the acquisition of possessions has an underlying sexual element, reinforces feelings of sexual dominance?)

Rubin also emphasizes Levi-Strauss' idea that there are many different divisions of labor between men and women in different societies. It doesn't matter who tends the fields or builds the houses: the main function of the division of labor is to differentiate men and women, which makes men and women dependent on each other and reinforces compulsory heterosexuality. The point is "to insure the union of men and women by making the smallest viable economic unit one man and one woman."

"The division of labor by sex," Rubin writes, "can therefore be seen as a taboo: a taboo against the sameness of men and women." She writes about the universal system of thought that sees two groups belonging to the same species (women and men) as more different from each other than anything else, although clearly they are more similar to each other than to any other species or thing.

Rubin sees the oppression of women as universal, specifically stating that it is not merely a side effect of capitalism. She points out that no analysis of the reproduction of labor power can explain footbinding or chastity belts. Nor are pre-agricultural societies exempt from blatant oppression of women. "In the Amazon valley and the New Guinea highlands, women are frequently intimidated by gang rape when the ordinary mechanisms of masculine intimidation prove insufficient."

She criticizes the use of the term "patriarchy" as synonymous with male dominance: patriarchy is a specific form of male dominance. (Rubin prefers the term sex/gender system as the ordering of sex roles in a society.) She points out that the power of males in a number of societies is not based on their roles as fathers or as patriarchs but on "their collective adult maleness, embodied in secret cults, men's houses, warfare, exchange networks, ritual knowledge and various initiation procedures." (One could go on endlessly about Rubin's essay -- there are many other aspects of it.)

fathers who don't know

One of the points that struck me most turned up repeatedly in both *Towards an Anthropology of Women* and *Woman's Creation*: the male-female couple developed before paternity was known. A man, in effect, already had a woman and her children before he knew they were his children. As Kathleen Gough says in her essay, "The Origin of the Family," "the bond of social fatherhood is recognized among people who do not know about the male role in procreation." Societies today that do not recognize paternity have marriage, and had marriage long before they came into contact with other societies. Needless to say, I do not see this as an argument for the naturalness of the institution of marriage but for the universality of male dominance. Perhaps children were a form of property themselves before men had other property for them to inherit.

Toward an Anthropology of Women is an invaluable essential book for anyone interested in considering the origins of women's oppression. It includes several essays on various feminist theories of "origins" and a wide variety of essays on different societies. It is difficult to do justice to the breadth of the book.

Sally Slocum's essay, "**Woman the Gatherer**: Male Bias in Anthropology" points out the slanted focus of many male anthropologists who see "Man the Hunter" as the creator of civilization and assume that language and tools were developed exclusively by hunters rather than by women the gatherers.

Some authors such as Kathleen Gough see no class division between women and men in hunting societies because women have control over their own means of production (food gathering), but she acknowledges that many of these societies practice female infanticide. The articles in this book do not deal much with the subject of matriarchy. Most seem to assume that a literal matriarchy did not exist. Paula Webster's article, "Matriarchy: A Vision of Power," maintains that discussing the possible existence of matriarchies is not a waste of time but sees the idea of matriarchy more as a possibly useful myth than as a provable historical era.

doors bring beating

Patricia Draper's essay on the !Kung Bushman women of Southern Africa maintains that the oppression of women is connected with the establishment of permanent dwellings and sedentary lifestyles. The women of !Kung groups who are still foraging, she maintains, have more freedom and a more equal role than those in groups that no longer forage. The !Kung women speak of another tribe whose women are beaten because there are walls around the huts: they are glad that their own enclosures are open to the village. If wife beating begins as

soon as people develop closed doors, the problem is pretty basic!

Some of the articles take different views on the same peoples: for example, several see the practice of the same New Guinea tribes as indicating different degrees of male dominance. If menstrual blood and contact with it are taboo, or possibly threatening to health, does that mean that women are necessarily despised or oppressed? If semen and a man who has just ejaculated are also taboo, does that equalize the situation at all? Do the existence of such institutions as isolated menstrual huts or sexsegregated living situations indicate that women are feared, hated and kept in their place, or that women want some sex segregation and have contributed to instituting these practices? The different authors have different answers. Although the Reiter book provides a wider overview of various theories and the Fisher book offers a specific theory, both are valuable, stimulating books.

Photo (Rock carving of woman)

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