

The overthrow of mother-right (matriarchy) was the world historical defeat of the female sex. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude, she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children.

(Engels, p. 50)

# Matriarchy: of Economic &

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*Le matriarcat est un mythe patriarcal qui soutient l'hypothèse selon laquelle la dominance mâle et le patriarcat seraient un progrès après une époque de dominance féminine. L'auteure suggère que le féminisme peut être mieux servi par un nouveau mythe qui se baserait sur des faits, tel que le vrai égalitarisme.*

Was there ever a matriarchy? This question, economic, social, psychological, cultural and mythic, has vexed feminists now for years. Most scholars today state categorically that there never was a matriarchy. But feminists for whom matriarchy is a political and emotional issue look back to the birth of anthropology in the Nineteenth Century for support of their belief in mother-right.

Such writers as J.J. Bachofen (*Das Mutterrecht*, 1861) and Lewis Henry Morgan (*Ancient Society*, 1871) sparked off a controversy that lasted well into the Twentieth Century. The main source of Bachofen's ideas is myth and mythology. Morgan's book is essentially a study of the matrilineal Iroquois. In 1884, Frederick Engels, an associate of Karl Marx, used both (and the work of other writers) to do an economic analysis of the development of family, private property and the state.

In the preface to the first edition of *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Engels argues that 'the social organization under which the people of a particular . . . epoch and . . . country live is determined by ('the production and reproduction of the immediate essentials of life'): by the stage of development of labour on the one hand and of the family on the other.' (p. 5) After outlining Morgan's division of 'the history of primitive man' into 'three main epochs — savagery, barbarism, and civilization,' Engels states that 'the development of the family takes a parallel course.' (p. 19)

During the 'savage' stage, people were foragers (gatherer-hunters) living in harmony with Nature and they practised sexual promiscuity in a form of group marriage. Barbarism began with early farming and ended with plough agriculture; according to Engels, this period, which saw a variety of simple family structures, was one of female supremacy, of matriarchy. Finally, civilization brought with it not only human control of Nature but patriarchy, the monogamous family and private property.

Engels, Bachofen, and Morgan were all male, as were most of the other writers who engaged in the 'Matriarchy Controversy' during

the last century. Further, most of them believed in progress; that is, they argued for a matriarchal stage in human development in order to maintain that the move to patriarchy was progressive. Matriarchy, then, existed as an intermediate stage between promiscuous savagery and monogamous patriarchy. So these writers who argued for the prior existence of matriarchy did so to demonstrate the superiority of patriarchy.

In turn, the mythic evidence on which many of these writers based their arguments was, almost all of it, recorded in written materials produced in patriarchal cities by (almost certainly) male writers. Literary documents like *The Babylonian Genesis* and Aeschylus's *Oresteia* do seem to record a shift from mother-right to father-right, from matriarchy to patriarchy, but before accepting this evidence at face value, we should perhaps ask ourselves whether there might not be another explanation.

Modern anthropologists like Martin and Voorhies (*Female of the Species*) have pretty conclusively demonstrated that foraging cultures tend to egalitarianism, as much as their environment will allow. That is, when food is reasonably available, sexual division of labour, though evident, is not absolute and

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women tend to have high status. In primitive farming communities also, egalitarianism and high status for women tend to be the rule. Indeed, patriarchy seems to develop with plough agriculture (and also with pastoralism, the herding of animals for a living). Further, Martin and Voorhies state that 'matriarchy — actual rule by women (is) not to be found in the primitive world.' (p. 157)

So why would it be important for early urban documents to stress the overthrow of matriarchy? Why would Nineteenth Century male scholars maintain that matriarchy was a universal stage in human cultural development?

Early city development was firmly based in plough agriculture, and, as we have seen, patriarchy enters farming communities with the plough. Plough agriculturalists, even more than earlier farmers, would have had a sense of ownership of land, if only because of their work investment. Children become valuable as workers and inheritors and wives as producers of children, not anybody's children but children of clear paternity. Consequently, it seems possible that plough agriculturalists would seek to limit the autonomy, sexual and otherwise, of women and children. What better way to do it than to create a story of

a dreadful, backward time when women ruled, a time when men were oppressed, at the mercy of women's irrationality and lack of control?

In the Nineteenth Century, feminism was on the move again. Darwin had made evolution a burning issue. What better way to put down uppity feminists than to present matriarchy as an evolutionary stage in culture, a time of barbarism, an improvement over promiscuous savagery, but not a patch on patriarchal civilization?

'Matriarchy is a patriarchal myth.' (Rosemary Ruether) Patriarchal progressivists of the Nineteenth Century created this myth, not necessarily consciously, out of fear, perhaps, that if women ever got any power, they would behave as men have done under patriarchy — oppress their oppressors.

Myth, as Elizabeth Janeway so persuasively argues in *Man's World, Woman's Place*, gets its power from the fact that it is emotionally charged wish and belief. The 'Adam and Eve' story in the Bible not only describes the belief of the dominant patriarchal culture but presents that belief as law and pattern for behaviour. So it is with the myth of matriarchy: matriarchy was a primitive and barbaric stage and society would be regressing to return to it.

Today, many feminists are using the concept of matriarchy to show that life could be different, and they are determined to make it so. However, matriarchy is a myth which presents a male-created and distorted account of early times. Early humans were probably as egalitarian as their ecological niche allowed; they certainly valued both women and men and revered the Goddess and the Nature She likely represented. It is this situation that the patriarchal myth of matriarchy deflects us from.

Surely we would better serve the cause of women's liberation by spreading our own myth of an egalitarian society, one in which social and, above all, economic oppression would not exist.

## Suggested Readings:

Engels, F., *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. N.Y.: New World pb., 1971

Bachofen, J.J., *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right*, Tr. R. Mannheim. Princeton, N.J.: Bollingen pb., 1973

Martin & Voorhies, *Female of the Species*. N.Y.: Columbia pb., 1975

Janeway, E., *Man's World, Woman's Place: A Study in Social Mythology*. N.Y.: Delta pb., 1971