“Before Class”

Chris Harman, 2008

Linked to this [agriculture] was the absence of male supremacy over women. There was almost always a *division of labor* between the sexes, with the men doing most of the hunting and the women most of the gathering. This was because a woman who was pregnant or breastfeeding a child could only take part in the hunt by exposing it to dangers, and thus threatening the reproduction of the band. But this division did not amount to male dominance as we know it. Both women and men would take part in making key decisions, such as when to move camp or whether to leave one band and join another. The conjugal unit [marriage relationship] itself was loosely structured. Spouses could separate without suddenly jeopardizing their own livelihood or that of their children. Missing was the male supremacism which is too often assumed to be part of ‘human nature’.

Finally, there could not have been the obsession with private property that we take for granted today. The normal *size* of foraging bands was always restricted by the need to find enough food each day in the area of the camp. Within that area, the individual members were continually moving from one source of plant food to another, or in pursuit of animals, while the band as a whole had to move on every so often as the food supplies in a locality were used up. Such continual movement precluded any accumulation of wealth by any band member, since everything had to be carried easily. At most an individual may have had a spear or bow and arrow, a carrying bag or a few trinkets. There would be no concept of the accumulation of personal wealth.

On the one hand, there is the cumulative increase in humanity’s ability to extract a livelihood from nature, the overcoming of the primitive material conditions which were part of ‘primitive communism’. On the other, there is the rise of successive forms of organization of society that oppress and exploit the majority of people to the benefit of a small, privileged minority.

**The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race**

**Jared Diamond, May 1987**

Farming may have encouraged inequality between the sexes, as well. Freed from the need to transport their babies during a nomadic existence, and under pressure to

produce more hands to till the fields, farming women tended to have more frequent pregnancies than their hunter-gatherer counterparts–with consequent drains on

their health.

Women in agricultural societies were sometimes made beasts of burden. In New Guinea farming communities today I often see women staggering under loads of vegetables and firewood while the men walk empty handed. Once while on a field trip there studying birds, I offered to pay some villagers to carry supplies from an airstrip to my mountain camp. The heaviest item was a 110-pound bag of rice, which I lashed to a pole and assigned to a team of four men to shoulder together. When I eventually caught up with the villagers, the men were carrying light loads, while one small woman weighing less than the bag of rice was bent under it, supporting its weight by a cord across her temples.

**“The Women Warriors”, by LAWRENCE OSBORN, 1997**

ACCORDING to some, patriarchy is less a male conspiracy **[secret plot]** to keep women down than a necessary by-product of a society in which progress increasingly depends on mobility and brute strength. Teenage girls and nursing mothers were simply impractical candidates for the heavy lifting required to build an infrastructure. Despite its political appeal to some--neither sex is to blame for men having more power today--the gradualist model is still very much a working hypothesis, one that sounds plausible but that the historical record has yet to verify.

In fact, it may be easier to test this theory against the future than against the past. After all, if revolutions in technology once made dominance by men--and thus patriarchy--inevitable, it follows that when machines replace bodies altogether, as they have arguably begun to do today, patriarchy may well disappear. Indeed, this is exactly what Ortner, among others, predicts. "Just as technological evolution created patriarchy," she says, "so technology now has the power to cancel it out because it obviates **[removes the need for]** physical strength and equalizes the sexes."

Echoing Ortner, Barber views the division of labor and gender as "an inevitable evil once subsistence farming had been left behind." She adds: "The communal, non-hierarchical model only worked in small, relatively poor Stone Age societies. As soon as people want and need commodities which they can't grow in their back yard, it breaks down irrevocably."

**The Creation of Patriarchy   
Gerda Lerner  
Oxford University Press, 1986**

Women's reproductive capacity is first recognized as a tribal resource, then, as ruling elites develop, it is acquired as the property of a particular group. This occurs with the development of agriculture. The material conditions of grain agriculture demand group cohesiveness and continuity over time, thus strengthening household structure. In order to produce a harvest, workers of one production cycle are indebted for food and seeds to workers of a previous production cycle. Since the amount of food depends on the availability of labor, production becomes the chief concern. This has two consequences: it strengthens the influence of older males and it increases the tribes' incentive for acquiring more women. In the fully developed society based on plow agriculture, women and children are indispensable to the production process, which is cyclical and labor intensive. Children have now become an economic asset. At this stage tribes seek to acquire the reproductive potential of women, rather than women themselves. Men do not produce babies directly; thus it is women, not men, who are exchanged.

The Code of Hammurabi marks the beginning of the institutionalization of the patriarchal family as an aspect of state power. It reflects a class society in which women's status depended on the male family head's social status and property. The wife of an impoverished burgher could by a change of his status, without her volition or action, be turned from a respectable woman into a debt slave or a prostitute. On the other hand, a married woman's sexual behavior, such as adultery or an unmarried woman's loss of chastity, could declass her in a way in which no man could be declassed by his sexual activity. Women's class status is always differently defined than that of men of their class from that period on to the present.

      From the Old Babylonian period to the time when the husband has power of life or death over the adulterous wife there have been great changes also in the authority of kings and ruler over the lives of men and women. The patriarchal head of the family at the time of Hammurabi was still somewhat restrained in his power over his wife by kinship obligations to the male head of the wife's family. By the time of the Middle Assyrian laws he is restrained mostly by the power of the state. Fathers, empowered to treat the virginity of their daughters as a family property asset, represent an authority as absolute as that of the king. Children reared and socialized within such authority will grow into the kinds of citizens needed in an absolute kingship. The king's power was secured by men as absolutely dependent on and subservient to him as their families were dependent on and subservient to them. The archaic state was shaped and developed in the form of patriarchy.

Aim: How did economics impact society before and after the Neolithic Revolution?

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|  | Economic Aspect | Impact on Society |
| Harman, Chris  “Before Class” |  |  |
| Diamond, Jared  “Worst Mistake…” |  |  |
| “The Women Warriors” |  |  |
| “Origin of the Patriarchy” |  |  |