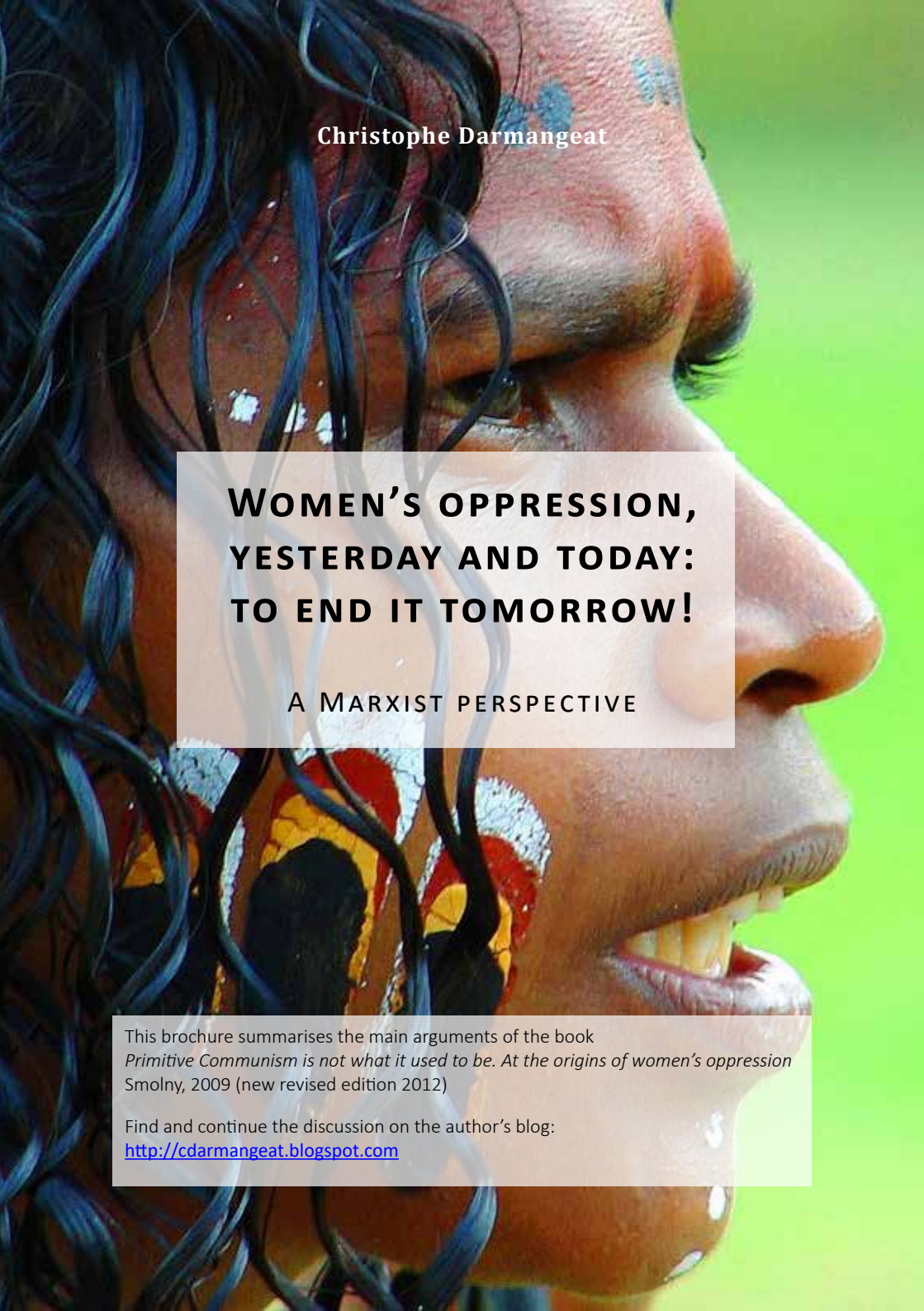
Christophe Darmangeat



Women's oppression, yesterday and today: to end it tomorrow!

A Marxist perspective

This brochure summarises the main arguments of the book
Primitive Communism is not what it used to be. At the origins of women's oppression
Smolny, 2009 (new revised edition 2012)

Find and continue the discussion on the author's blog:
http://cdarmangeat.blogspot.com

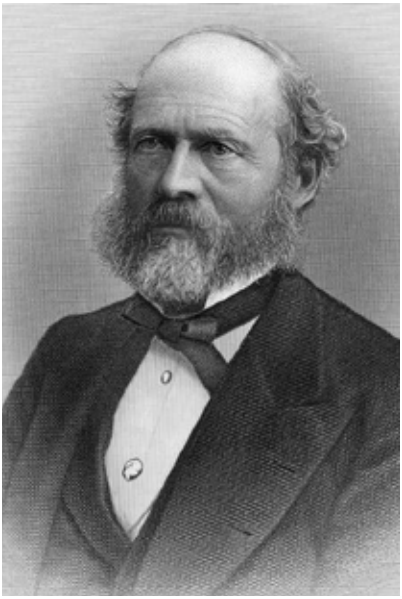
Taking an interest in the relationship between the sexes in prehistory and primitive societies, what a strange idea! As a friend once said to me when hearing the subject of my book: "Well, some people have time…". However, if at first glance this theme may seem far removed from today's problems and be reserved for a small cenacle of specialists, its interest goes far beyond the pleasure of knowledge for knowledge's sake. The oppression of women remains one of the defining features of our time – even if this characteristic was shared by many societies of the past. For all those who want to work to end this oppression, it is crucial to understand its roots and mechanisms, because only by understanding a phenomenon can it be fought efficiently. This was already the conviction of the founders of the socialist current, at a time when this word still meant the complete overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of an egalitarian society. A century and a half later, those who have not renounced transforming the world have no reason to abandon this sane attitude.

Marxism, anthropology and feminism

For many activists who in the nineteenth century claimed to be part of the socialist project, and especially for those who belonged to the Marxist movement, the women's issue was of extreme importance. For Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, working-class women had a special interest in the overthrow of capitalism, that is in ending the double oppression they suffered, both as women and as proletarians. On this issue, they had to confront, sometimes harshly, certain other socialist currents, such as the proudhonians, who believed that the place of women was in the home and that one of the crimes of capitalism was to destroy the traditional family.

Morgan and *Ancient Society*

It is therefore not surprising that Marx and Engels were enthusiastic about the scientific work of the amrican lawyer and anthropologist Lewis H. Morgan (1818-1881), whose major book, *Ancient Society*, was published in 1877. Born the same year as Marx, Morgan was his perfect contemporary. He had devoted his life to studying the Iroquois Indians, a confederation of tribes living in the northeastern United States. Morgan, however, had not stopped there. On the basis of an immense survey that synthesized information gathered from all over the



Lewis H. Morgan (1818-1881)

world, he had set out to reconstruct the major stages in the evolution of human societies, on the material level, but also, and above all, on the one of social organization.

Morgan's work, in the eyes of Marx and Engels, was therefore of considerable interest. It shed light at once on millennia of social evolution that had preceded written history, about which little was known at the time. It made it possible to verify that the method they themselves had forged for understanding human societies applied just as well to those remote eras as it did to modern times. This method, historical materialism, consisted in searching for the deepest causes of the evolution of societies not in the ideas or mentalities of men, phenomena which themselves had to be explained, but in their material conditions of existence.

Morgan showed that many of the institutions that were considered "natural" in his time, i.e. universal and immutable, were in fact the result of evolution. This was particularly true of family forms, which he believed were linked to the terms used by different peoples to designate their parents – an important part of his work was precisely to classify and understand these designations. It was also true of the situation of women, which the Iroquois showed could be very different from what was generally imagined at the time.

A PRIMITIVE MATRIARCHY?

Until the mid-nineteenth century, it was generally thought that the situation of women had necessarily been all the less enviable as one looked back to the distant past. The ancient Greeks treated them as minors throughout their lives. The Jews of the Old Testament clearly did not hold a higher opinion. It was therefore natural to assume that the so-called "caveman" brought his wife back to the marriage bed by pulling her by the hair and, if need be, by giving her a good blow with a club.

Of course, it was already known that in some distant peoples things were quite different. In the seventeenth century, the Jesuit Joseph-François Lafitau (1681-1746) already described Iroquois society, which he knew from having lived there, as a "gynaecocracy", a "women's empire". Lafitau even deduced from this that the Iroquois were directly related to certain barbaric peoples of high antiquity, such as the Lycians of southern present-day Turkey, of whom several Greek authors reported the leading role played by women. But for more than a century, Lafitau's theories, which were highly speculative, had little influence.

An Iroquois, in a 17th century illustration

Things changed with the publication in 1861 of *Mother Right*, a book by the Swiss jurist Jakob Bachofen which had a considerable influence. Bachofen took up the idea that the Iroquois

Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815-1887)

were the living image of the distant past of other societies. Like the Iroquois, many barbarian peoples, from which the Greeks originated, recognised only female descent. Playing a crucial role as mothers, women found themselves in a position that was neither inferior nor demeaning. On the contrary, they were highly esteemed, both in society and in the pantheon – Bachofen was convinced of the existence of an ancient and universal religion of the "mother goddess". According to him, this preeminence of women had culminated in the form of the "Amazon stage", namely, their military domination over men. The men had then succeeded in reversing the roles and imposing the patriarchy from which Western societies had not yet escaped. In addition to the accounts of the Greek authors, Bachofen also drew on archaeological evidence (inscriptions on cemetery graves) and, above all, on the analysis of myths, which he was convinced necessarily contained some historical truth.

In his analysis of the situation of women, Morgan relied directly on Bachofen, generalising his findings to all societies around the world. Thus, according to the evolutionary scheme he proposed, each people had first gone through a stage where society was organised into kinship groups to which membership was transmitted only by women – what is referred to in modern terms as matrilinearity. Initially, therefore, women everywhere had enjoyed an enviable position. It was only in the metal age that economic developments had altered the balance of power

in favour of men, leading to the subordination of women in all societies where class and the state existed. For Morgan, therefore, male dominance was a relatively recent phenomenon in social evolution. Unknown throughout the "Savagery" (we would say today the Paleolithic) and in the early stages of "Barbarism" (the Neolithic), it only appeared at the end of the latter, at the dawn of "Civilisation". The reasons for this shift were the development of wealth, mainly cattle and slaves, which had accumulated in male hands. Men wishing to pass on their wealth to their sons (and not, as in the matrilineal regime, to their nephews) had overthrown matrilinearity and established patrilinearity, or filiation by men. And in order to be certain of their paternity from now on, they had deprived women of the freedom they had previously enjoyed, particularly in sexual matters.

Periods of prehistory and situation of women (Morgan – Engels)

SAVAGERY Palaeolithic		**BARBARY** Neolithic			**CIVILIZATION** historical times
Middle fire, fishing	**Upper** bow	**Lower** agriculture	**Middle** irrigation husbandry	**Upper** iron	writing cities State
Australians	Athapascans	Iroquois	Pueblos	Germans	
Matrilinearity ("Mother Right") – "supremacy" of women					
				Patrilinearity - patriarchy "historical defeat of the female sex"	

Engels had little reason to doubt this scenario, and he endorsed it in his 1884 book *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Initially, Marx himself wanted to

expose Morgan's discoveries to the working class and socialist public and had collected many notes to this effect. But death prevented him from doing so, and Engels took on this task. While he espoused many of Morgan's theses, Engels was cautious about Bachofen's more radical statements, and the term "matriarchy" is not used at any point in the text. It appears only once, in a preface written several years later, and is simply attributed to Bachofen.

On the situation of women, in addition to what Morgan said about the past, Engels added the reasoning that socialists could develop both on the present and on the conditions and paths of future emancipation. In particular, Engels insisted that this emancipation would require women's access to social production, i.e. their economic independence from men. The future liberation of women thus echoed, as if in a mirror image, the mechanisms that had led to their subordination a few millennia ago. Following Morgan, he could therefore write sentences such as: "Among all savages and all barbarians of the lower and middle stages, and to a certain extent of the upper stage also, the position of women is not only free, but honorable" [1], or that "the subjugation of one sex by the other, … [the] struggle of the two sexes [is] unknown … throughout the whole (…) prehistoric period" [2]. These statements were consistent with the ethnographic knowledge of the time, which remained quite sparse.

New findings, new controversies

The decades that followed were those of a paradox. Indeed, as ethnographic knowledge accumulated, more and more

1 Friedrich Engels, *The origin of the family, private property, and the state: in the light of the researches of Lewis H. Morgan*, New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972, p. 113.
2 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

doubts were cast on many of Morgan's arguments, not to mention those of Bachofen. By the end of the nineteenth century, and even more so thereafter, it became clear that some of the generalizations Morgan assumed he could make were too hasty. But while Morgan's theories were increasingly criticized in the academic world, they were defended ever more vigorously, sometimes to the smallest comma, by Marxist activists.

The two phenomena were, of course, connected; in fact, they fed off each other. In a way, as soon as they were published, Morgan's ideas had been annexed by Marxism. Criticizing Morgan was therefore an excellent way for anthropologists with conservative views of today's society (and there was no shortage of them) to indirectly target the Marxist current.

Alexandra Kollontaï (1872-1952)

Within this one, an atmosphere of free discussion continued to reign for a few years; hence, some of Morgan's theses and, as a consequence, Engels', began to be called into question. The Bolshevik leader Alexandra Kollontai, for example, did so in the early 1920s in her *Conferences on the Liberation of Women*. But the debate was soon stifled under the heavy blanket of Stalinism. To criticize Morgan was to criticize Engels; and if one could freely criticize Engels, why not Stalin and his regime? Thus, the privileged who usurped power in Russia proceeded with the writings of the founders of Marxism in the same way as they did with the mortal remains of Lenin: they mummified them to betray their spirit.

The revival of interest in feminist issues and, to a lesser extent, Marxist ideas in the 1970s provoked heated discussions about prehistory, the existence of a primitive matriarchy and the origin of women's oppression. Two major camps confronted each other. On one side were those who claimed that all societies, without exception, had experienced some form of male domination. This often led to the conclusion that the oppression of women could not be reduced to the question of class and exploitation, and that the social revolution of the future, contrary to what the Marxist current traditionally asserted, would therefore not automatically resolve the women's question. Facing this position were all those who supported the reality of a primitive matriarchy (sometimes giving the term very different meanings) and who denied that male domination had appeared in societies prior to the Metal Age. This current included, but was not limited to, those who held the traditional Marxist positions inherited from Morgan, with the American anthropologist Eleanor Leacock at the forefront.

While echoing the terms of the debate that took place at the end of the nineteenth century, the discussion nevertheless involved many new elements. In the meantime, the material from which one could reason about the history (and prehistory) of gender relations had been considerably enriched.

In addition to the arguments already present in Bachofen or Morgan, the proponents of one variant or another of the "primitive matriarchy" could thus invoke the considerable number of female representations, engravings and above all statuettes, left behind by the early ages of humanity. These statuettes, called "Venus" or "mother goddesses" depending on the context, were found both in Neolithic sites and throughout the Upper Paleolithic. Whether or not they were interpreted as the mark of a cult to a feminine deity – the most ardent advocate of this thesis was the archaeologist Marija Gimbutas (1921-1994)

– they were often seen as an indication of a high consideration for women and femininity. Moreover, advances in ethnology had confirmed that the Iroquois were no exception: other primitive societies had been observed in which women held a quite esteemed place.

The Willendorf "venus" (around -23 000)

On the other hand, testimonies had also accumulated on tribes, of cultivators, but also of hunter-gatherers, where women appeared to be very clearly dominated by men. This domination was expressed in particular by acts of physical or sexual violence, exercised in a ritual or secular context. It was often expressed at the religious level, through beliefs that proclaimed and organized the inferiority of women. In many cases, only adult men, after a long initiation, had access to certain rituals that allowed them to penetrate the secrets of the religion and to handle objects that women and children were forbidden to see or approach on pain of death.

These elements raised a significant challenge to the sequence of events reconstructed by Morgan and taken up by Engels. Thus, the proponents of traditional Marxist positions were led to disqualify them, either by denying the reality of male domination in those societies, or by acknowledging its existence, but attributing it to the effects of the contact of those peoples with the West.

In some cases, this argumentation was quite justified; however, this does not allow us to reject all of these observa-

tions, which form a considerable body of evidence. One cannot, at the risk of twisting the facts, deny the existence of sometimes very harsh forms of male domination even in certain economically egalitarian societies, which owed nothing to the influence of more advanced ones. Therefore, the correct attitude is not to defend an outdated scheme at all costs in the name of orthodoxy, but to reformulate the reasoning in order to try to explain, again using the Marxist method, these new elements.

Harvesting the facts

The first of the tasks is therefore to make an inventory of the facts, trying to rule out anything that may be due to an artifact – whether it be contact with developed societies, biases linked to the observer, or those related to the interpretation of these testimonies, all things that prove sometimes quite difficult.

This research nevertheless delivers a first result: at all stages of economic and social development, including for the most materially egalitarian societies, there are attestedexamples of male domination, sometimes informal, sometimes very explicit and organized.

Let us illustrate this with a few cases.

Nomadic hunter-gatherers

1. Inuits

There was no initiation religion among the Inuit, nor was there any general separate organization of men to justify and codify their domination over women. In a way, it can be said that among this people, male domination was informal. It was nonetheless palpable. Men, at least in certain domains (especially the sexual one), could impose their will on women without society finding anything objectionable about it. For example, in northern Alaska: "After puberty a girl is considered

fair game as a sexual object for any man who desires her. He grabs her by the belt as a sign of his intentions. If she is reluctant, he may cut off her trousers with a knife and proceed to force her into intercourse. Whether the girl consents or not, these transitory sexual encounters are regarded as matters of no particular importance among the Eskimo…. Physical and verbal aggression among men is frowned on, but sexual aggression against women in the form of abduction or sexual violence is common"[3].

Atanarjuat, inuit hero of the A. Kunuk movie (2001)

The only limit to one man's actions was to encroach on another man's prerogatives: conflicts over women were the main reason for conflicts, not rarely resulting in the death of one of the protagonists.

3 E. Friedl, *Women and Men, an Anthropologist's View*, electronic edition, Part 1, Illustrative cultures, 1975.

Another ethnologist notes the particular role played by older women, who served as a kind of relay for male domination among the younger ones – a widespread fact, which some have often seized upon in an attempt to minimize the extent of women's inferiority: "The young woman was in fact submissive to the man and the older women until she had grown children and could in turn control her daughters-in-law. Polygyny, much more common than polyandry, the exchange of wives, usually organized by men, and the greater extramarital sexual freedom of men were other expressions of male domination."[4]

2. Selk'Nam (or Ona)

A salient feature of the Selk'Nam, a tribe of hunter-gatherers who lived in Tierra del Fuego, was their initiation religion, open only to adult males. The latter wailed to incarnate spirits that, during ceremonies, came to terrorize women and children.

To a British sailor who was astonished that the Selk'Nam did not possess any kind of chief, one of them, who spoke a few words of English, replied: "Yes, Señor, we, Ona, have many chiefs. The men are all captains" before adding: "and all the women are sailors"[5].

The founding myth of the Selk'nam was telling: it said that women once ruled society and that one day their dominance was overthrown by an uprising of men. They murdered all women except infants and founded a religion that would keep them forever in subordination. It goes without saying that, contrary to Bachofen's thinking, it would be very unwise to

4 Mitiarjuk, 1966, p. 540, quoted by B. Saladin d'Anglure, "Mythe de la femme et pouvoir de l'homme chez les Inuit de l'Arctique central (Canada)", *Anthropologie et sociétés*, vol. 1, n°3, 1977, p. 80.
5 Lucas Bridges, *Uttermost part of the earth*, Century, 1987 (1948), p. 216.

Selk'Nam men in ceremonial paintings

take such stories at face value; such accounts in no way support the authenticity of the early matriarchy. Rather, they clearly serve to justify the existing order, both toward dominant men and dominated women.

Nevertheless, things are full of subtleties. The social inferiority of Selk'nam women, proclaimed and claimed by men, the fact that they could legitimately be beaten or pierced with arrows in case of infidelity or flight, in no way implied that the ideal woman's behavior was that of a wife who was in every way submissive. To be accomplished, the wedding night had to be eventful: "It was not considered proper for a new wife, whether a young girl or a mature woman, to give herself away too cheaply. On the contrary, she would often put up a good fight, and on his next appearance, the bridegroom might have a badly scratched face and maybe a black eye as well. I remember one man asking me to attend to a really nasty bite inflicted on

his forearm by his bride, a strong, determined woman of considerable experience"[6].

3. Australia

For the study of gender relations in primitive societies, this continent holds a particular value.

First of all, because it is the only part of the planet where, at the time of contact, an immense territory, as vast as today's United States, was inhabited only by nomadic hunter-gatherers who had very limited connection with more advanced societies. Everywhere else in fact, their counterparts had been relegated to the least hospitable environments: on the ice of the Far North, in the subarctic tundras, in arid deserts or in thick equatorial forests. The inhabitants of Australia, where agriculture was never invented nor imported, occupied environments with a very diverse climate and topology. To this particularity, already remarkable in itself, was added a technical originality: they were in fact the only hunter-gatherers ever observed to have been unaware of the bow, and whose only thrusting device was the spear-thrower.

Australia thus represented a set of societies of crucial importance for understanding the social structures of egalitarian hunter-gatherers. Gender relations have been the subject of numerous studies, and have undoubtedly generated more controversy there than anywhere else. In the nineteenth century, the first testimonies – which were very numerous – invariably concluded that Australian women were awfully subjugated, most often characterized as slaves, strictly speaking or barely figuratively.

As among the Selk'Nam, the Australian religion reserved its most intimate secrets for adult men, punishing with death

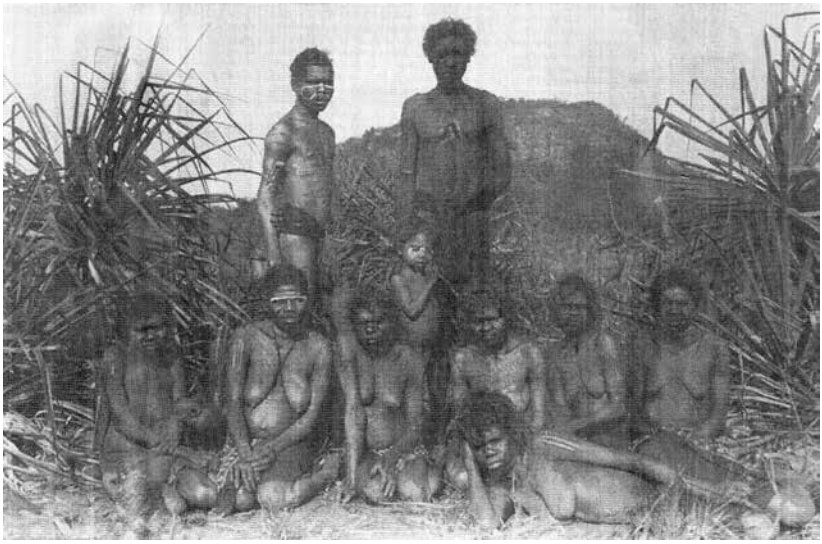
6 Lucas Bridges, *op. cit.*, p. 359-360.

An Aborigine hunting with a spear-thrower

any woman or child who had a view of the sacred objects. But in many tribes, and even more so than the Selk'Nam, women were victims of physical violence by men, whether in the family or when captured by force in neighboring groups. It was also not uncommon for Australian men to lend their wives to each other to seal friendships, or to rape them collectively, either ritually or criminally. Most tribes practiced widespread polygamy, which in some areas could reach record levels - one Aboriginal man was reported to have had 29 spouses during his lifetime.

In the course of the 20th century, some scholars – it would probably be better to say: some women scholars – carried out studies that greatly nuanced this impression. Far from being toys in the hands of men, women had their own strategies, their own networks of influence and, often, their own religious rites. Many representatives of this movement did not hesitate to conclude that male domination was merely an optical illusion.

Of course, it is not possible here to discuss in detail the arguments of each side. Let us simply say that the reality lay somewhere between the two positions. While it would be caricatural to portray the situation of Australian women as that of quasi-slaves, and while things varied considerably from tribe to tribe, male domination was general, as two specialists who can hardly be suspected of antipathy towards Indigenous Australians write: "Overall, a man has more rights over his wife than she has over him. He can reject her or leave her if he wishes without giving any grounds excepot his own inclination. She (...) can leave him finally only by elopment, in other words, by entering another union; but if she does this, he is quite entitled to proceed against her and her lover. The new union is not regarded as a valid marriage until the first man relinquishes his rights in her or accepts compensation (...) Firther, a man has the right to dispose of his wife's sexual favors as he pleases, with or without her consent (...) She can not, however, do the



An Australian from a northern tribe, photographed in the 1930s with his six wives and seven daughters

same where he is concerned. Formally speaking, 'wife-lending' has no counterpart in 'husband-lending'. (...) In summary, the status of women, taken as a whole, is not equal to the status of men, taken as a whole"[7].

This judgment is not due, as one might suspect, to the fact that the observers were strangers to the societies they were studying. In his autobiography, the Aboriginal Waipuldanya could thus write of his mother: "She was entirely subservient to her husband, my father Barnabas – a chattel, an incubator for his sons, her role ordered for her by the dictatorship of the tribe according to the inflexible sociological pattern"[8].

Cultivators and herders

In the case of peoples whose livelihood came at least in part from agriculture and livestock farming, there are also glaring examples of male domination – even, and this must be emphasized, among those where material inequalities between individuals had not yet developed.

One of the most famous examples is that of the Baruya of New Guinea, studied by the anthropologist Maurice Godelier[8]. This people offers the image of a meticulous organization of the domination of one sex by the other through a set of magico-religious beliefs. Men maintained in a thousand ways an ideology of superiority over women. The religious initiation of young males required that they be carefully separated from girls and women throughout their adolescence. Until they were married, they lived together in a special house, learning to fear

7 Catherine & Ronald Berndt, *The world of the first Australians,* Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press 1992 [1964], p. 208.
8 Douglas Lockwood, *I, the Aboriginal*, Adelaide: Rigby, 1974, p. 11-12.

the female gender and to protect themselves from its harmful influences.

In Baruya society, the superiority of men was marked on all sides: in kinship denominations as well as in geography, in the valorization of economic activities as well as in religious secrets. Thus a young boy was automatically considered the eldest of all his sisters, even those born before him. In the same spirit, all the paths that meandered through the villages were doubled, one a few meters below the other; naturally, the highest was reserved for men. Whenever women crossed the men's path, they looked away and hid their faces under their cloaks, while they passed by ignoring them. Among other things, women were not allowed to inherit the land, bear arms, or manufacture salt blocks. They were also forbidden to use tools to clear the forest and to make their own digging sticks. As for sacred objects, flutes and bullroarers, they were pro-

A gathering of Baruya fighters

tected from the eyes of the uninitiated, children and women by the threat of death penalty. And while a man could at any time repudiate his wife or give her to whomever he wished, she could not leave her husband without exposing herself to the most severe punishment [9].

If they represent an extreme case, the Baruya are by no means an exception. The entire of New Guinea, beyond the sometimes very important differences from one people to another, was marked by a very assertive male domination. Some of these societies, contrary to the Baruya, were characterized by wealth inequalities. But on the technical level, all these peoples were more or less at the same stage as the Iroquois, practising simple forms of agriculture and breeding and using stone tools.

Not only did men in economically unequal societies not generally oppress their women any more than those in societies that had remained egalitarian, but it was even the latter that displayed the most open forms of male domination, especially with the initiations of young boys raised in fear and horror of women.

The Amazon basin, where wealth inequalities were virtually unknown, has much in common with New Guinea. Here too, whether we consider societies of pure hunter-gatherers or partly farmers, women were generally dominated by men. Again, men often practiced a religion whose secrets they alone held, and regularly and legitimately used sexual and physical violence against women. Among the Amahuaca, "in general men exert considerable authority over women (...) Once married, a man beat [his wife] on the shoulders, arms, legs, buttocks or back with a special hardwood club that has a flat blade with sharp edges. A beating with such a club may be so

9 cf. Maurice Godelier, *La production des grands hommes*, Flammarion, 1982.

Mundurucú Indian

severe that the woman is barely able to walk for a few days afterwards. A woman may be beaten for annoying her husband in a variety of ways, such as not preparing food when he wants it or putting too much salt (a recently acquired trade item) in his food"[10]. As for the Mundurucú, in what was meant to be a humorous remark, one of them once alluded to the collective rapes by which they punished recalcitrant women by telling an ethnologist: "We tame our women with the banana"[11].

An universal male domination?

All these examples come from societies that stand at the first stages of technical progress. They prove that male domination is compatible with a social structure devoid of classes

10 Gertrude E. Dole, "The marriages of Pacho: a woman's life among the Amahuaca" in *Many sisters*, C. Matthiason (ed.), London: Free Press, 1974, p. 12-13.

11 Robert F. Murphy, "Matrilocality and Patrilineality in Mundurucú Society", *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 58, n°3, 1956, p. 433.

A San woman with her child

or even of mere economic inequalities. This fact alone makes it necessary to revise the scheme inherited from Morgan: on the one hand, in these societies at least, male domination must be explained in ways other than by men's supposed willingness to pass on their possessions to their offspring; on the other hand, these observations suggest (even if they do not in themselves prove it) that male domination dates back to a very distant time.

However, male domination cannot be considered a trait shared equally by all such societies. The Iroquois are not an exception. Among both egalitarian hunter-gatherers and farmers, other peoples have been identified where gender relations were more balanced, and where the subordination of women appeared tenuous, if not non-existent.

Among the hunter-gatherers we can mention the San (Bushmen) of the deserts of southern Africa, made famous a few years ago by the film *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. We learn, for example, that among one of their groups, the Nharo, "there

seems to be almost complete sexual equality in the opposite-sex sibling relationship and possibly even a slight female dominance in the husband/wife relationship" [12].

The same was true of the indigenous people of the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal. One of the firsts ethnologists who observed them in the nineteenth century reported in a sentence full of Victorian morality that "one of the most striking features of their social relations is the marked equality and affection which subsists between husband and wife (...) the consideration and respect with which women are treated might with advantage be emulated by certain classes in our own land" [13].

One can also mention the Mbuti Pygmies of the African equatorial forest, in whom "a woman is in no way inferior to a man" [14].

This pattern is also found among many farming and herding peoples. In addition to the Iroquois, let us mention the Khasi of India, the Minangkabau of Sumatra, the Ngada of the island of Florès or the Na (also called Mosuo) of China, a people who socially recognize neither marriage nor paternity – something probably unique in the world.

It would be improper to call all these societies matriarchies. This term, in the strict sense, means "women's power". However, in no known society do women have power, that is, power

12 Alan Barnard, "Sex Roles among the Nharo Bushmen of Botswana", *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 50, No. 2, 1980, p. 119.

13 Edward Horace Man, "On the Aboriginal Inhabitants of the Andaman Islands (Part I, II, III)", *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 12, 1883, p. 327.

14 Colin M. Turnbull, *Wayward servants: the two worlds of the African pygmies*, Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1965, p. 271.

over men – whereas in patriarchal societies, men do have power over women.

Na (Mosuo) women in 1926

In some, however, one finds the "mother right" that Bachofen spoke of: individuals are divided into kinship groups, clans or lineages, where membership is transmitted only in the female line. But contrary to what Bachofen, Morgan or Engels might have believed, matrilineal clans are not necessarily synonymous with a high status for women. The Nharo, Andamanese or Mbuti have no clans at all, and therefore no matrilinearity. This does not prevent women from occupying a favorable position. Conversely, New Guinea, Australia or the Amazon have many matrilineal societies in which women are nevertheless very clearly inferior.

These peoples, where women compete on a more or less equal footing with men, are therefore not, if words have any meaning, matriarchies. But it would be just as misleading to speak of "sex equality" in their regard, for the relations between the sexes are far from the equality we conceive of in our modern world.

Travelling back in time...

The facts we have just presented concern only societies on which we possess direct observations, and which were therefore still alive in the last few centuries. To what extent can they be considered to give a true picture of the past, as if these

societies had somehow remained frozen at an earlier stage? Morgan and Engels took precisely this approach, assuming that the Iroquois case was generalizable and represented the universal model of the "domestic communist economy" typical of "lower barbarism". But things are clearly not that simple, especially as ethnology has shown that, on the same technical and economic basis, certain social relationships are liable to vary considerably - as is the case with those prevailing between the sexes. Conversely, it would be absurd to reject on principle any analogy between the societies observed in ethnology and those that may have existed in the past. We can therefore only adopt a cautious attitude, endeavouring to identify as closely as possible which elements can be extrapolated, and with what degree of confidence.

As far as male domination is concerned, let's repeat that its presence, to varying degrees, in the vast majority of these societies clearly undermines the idea that it would be incompatible with economic egalitarianism, and that it would necessarily have emerged at a late stage, with the emergence of social classes. But while it can be asserted that such domination certainly existed in the Neolithic or Paleolithic past, it is much more difficult to demonstrate formally that this was indeed the case. There are, however, three arguments to support this view.

The first is that, if we reject the idea that male domination is rooted deep in the past, we need to explain when and why it appeared in such societies all over the planet, at a time that is necessarily recent and therefore in an unrelated way. Speaking only of hunter-gatherers, when and why did men begin to dominate women among the Inuit, in Tierra del Fuego, in Australia, etc., whereas they didn't do so a few millennia ago? No one has ventured to answer this question, and with good reason: any such answer would require some very weighty and risky hypotheses - much more so, in any case, than simply

admitting that, since the same causes produce the same effects, male domination, in all its many nuances, already existed in most prehistoric societies from time immemorial.

The second argument concerns the gendered division of labor which, as we'll see in the next section, is a fundamental dimension of unequal gender relations. Under certain conditions, this gendered division of labor can leave its mark on people's bodies and be identified by archaeological traces. For the Neolithic period, all studies confirm its existence and its conformity with ethnological observations - in particular, the close association between men and weapons. The remains of the Palaeolithic period, however, are far more sparse. Burials are very rare and skeletons are often in poor condition, making it very difficult to establish any certainties. The only available evidence, recently discovered, reveals a mark on the right elbows of some males – and of them alone – which would be compatible with the repetition of the throwing gesture[15] and the oldest of which dates back 25,000 years. On this point, it should be added that, although there has been a proliferation of thunderous announcements about women hunters in recent years, the echo given to these findings is inversely proportional to their solidity, as in the case of an emblematic study published in 2020 about a Peruvian skeleton in particular, and Paleolithic America in general. In fact, beyond such and such an archaeological case, the idea of the absence of a gendered division of labor in the Paleolithic litterally fascinates progressive circles today, as if this idea in any way constituted support for current feminist aspirations[16].

15 Sébastien Villotte, Christopher J. Knüsel, 2014, "'I sing of arms and of a man…': medial epicondylosis and the sexual division of labour in prehistoric Europe", *Journal of Archaeological Science*, vol. 43, p. 168-74.
16 For a presentation of this study and a critique of its conclusions, see on my blog *La Hutte des classes*, the post "Les femmes et la chasse au

Finally, in recent years, a third category of clues has been provided by renewed approaches in the study of myths. Some scholars have applied to their constituent elements ("mythemes") the methods forged to reconstitute the family tree of living species from their DNA. The trees that can be constructed in this way for myths are remarkably consistent with what we know about human migrations. They enable us to situate the time and place of birth of certain narratives; for example, the one according to which humanity appeared on Earth by emerging from a subterranean world, or the one that recounts how it was once almost entirely exterminated by a flood. As far as the relationship between men and women is concerned, a number of myths tell of a primitive matriarchy that led to chaos and was overthrown, thus establishing and justifying the current male-led world order. While such stories are by no means conclusive as to the reality of the bygone matriarchies they describe, they are reliable indicators of male domination in the societies that recount and transmit them. The reconstruction carried out by scientists shows that such narratives probably go back at least to the time when sapiens left Africa, over 60,000 years ago[17].

Male domination - with all its local variations - is therefore probably an extremely ancient phenomenon, although it is very difficult to be more precise about its antiquity. However, the possibility cannot be ruled out that it is rooted in biology, and that humanity has inherited it from the branch of primates from which it descends: our robust chimpanzee cousins, unlike our other bonobo chimpanzee cousins, are marked by very pronounced male dominance. Needless to say, even if this hypo-

Paléolithique : une récente découverte bouleverse-t-elle la science ?" of November 20, 2020 (in French).

17 Julien D'Huy, 2019, "Matriarchy and Prehistory: A Statistical Method for Testing an Old Theory", *Les Cahiers de l'AARS*, n° 19, p. 159-70.

thesis were confirmed, the feminist agenda would in no way be weakened. Homo sapiens is characterized by its cultural evolution, i.e. by its ability to produce forms of social organization (and moral values) independent of its biological heritage. On a different theme, if Marxists strive for the reorganization of human society on a collectivist and internationalist basis, it's because they see it as a necessity in the light of economic and social development, and not because it corresponds to some indeterminate human nature. The same applies to relations between the sexes.

In any event, and symmetrically, the idea put forward by Bachofen and taken up by Engels of a "historical defeat of the female sex" that would have occurred at the dawn of the formation of social classes and the State seems highly debatable, for at least two reasons. The first is that male domination, as we have seen, has been observed in societies far removed from this stage, and was clearly already present well before it. The second is that it's not so certain that the situation of women systematically deteriorated with the emergence of wealth, and then of social classes. At least, such a deterioration is far from clearly apparent from an examination of the available data. In some cases, as in New Guinea, the trend seems to be the opposite: women are most directly and cruelly oppressed by men in the most economically egalitarian societies (such as the Baruya). As for the unfavorable changes for women that occurred with the emergence of "civilization", these are probably due less to the deepening of economic inequalities in general than to a combination of factors, including, for example, the introduction of plow culture. In Antiquity, relations between the sexes varied significantly from one state to another and, as far as we know, the situation of Egyptian women seems to have been much less unfavorable than that of the Greeks, Romans or Chinese.

The sexual division of society

Which "Sex equality"?

The vocabulary that designates social realities is often more misleading than enlightening, and the term "sex equality", although consecrated by usage, makes no exception to this rule.

It is easy to realize that what is meant here by "equality" is actually identity – and there is more than a nuance here; for two things can be equal while remaining different. Yet, to speak only of equality in rights, no feminist, for example, would think of calling for the rights of men and women to be "different but equal". Such a claim would be meaningless, if only because it is absolutely impossible to say how different rights should be measured to determine whether they are equal. What feminists have always called for, and what anti-feminists have always fought against, is gender identity; not, needless to say, an identity from a biological point of view, but an identity from a social point of view. It is the fact that men and women have, to begin with, not "equal" rights, but the same rights.

It has long been known – Engels explained this quite clearly – that legal "equality" (so misnamed) is not real equality (also misnamed): it is only the necessary condition for it. Thus, this real "equality" will be synonymous with a complete social identity of the sexes or, to use a more modern vocabulary, with the disappearance of genders: in society, men and women will

not only have identical rights, but they will occupy, in fact, an identical place. Both sexes will carry out the same types of studies, the same jobs and the same type of unpaid work. There will no longer be any "male" and "female" interests, occupations, places or attitudes. This is why some have rightly said that the modern ideal of gender equality is that of an asexual society.

All primitive societies, however, whether men oppress women or both sexes occupy more balanced positions, stand at the antipodes of this conception. Although they do not always assign a different value to the roles and occupations of each sex, they are nevertheless marked by a profound separation between the sexes, which makes them conceive of men and women as two completely different entities, which it is unthinkable that they could play the same social role. In other words, although not all of these societies may have been male-dominated, all of them were sexist, just as a society that assigns its members to certain tasks, places and behaviors according to their skin color is a racist society.

The sexual division of labor

All the testimonies agree: even if its intensity may vary from one people to another, primitive societies are all characterized by a marked sexual division of labor, and, more generally, by a marked sexual division of social life.

Things sometimes went so far that it has been written, for example, that the tribes of Western Australia "can better be understood as two separate systems. The instruments of labour, the techniques used, the organization of the work, the means of redistribution of the product, and the ideology governing these activities is notably different for men and women (…) The only point of intersection between men's and women's economic

activities is within consumption"[18]. And throughout Australia, men and women were metaphorically referred to by their main tool: they were literally "spears" and "digging-sticks".

Sexual segregation was sometimes extreme, as among the Huli of New Guinea: "Men and women (...) live in independent houses, scattered in the gardens, and single men (...) often live separately from married men. (...) With the exception of little boys, no person of one sex enters the house of the opposite sex. Huli gardens are equally divided into male and female subdivisions, and a wife caught on her husband's land will be severely beaten. As a result, men and women harvest their own sweet potatoes separately and cook their meals separately in their own homes. Both sexes eat food cooked in the same earthen oven only at communal meals"[19].

This separation is noticeable even among peoples deprived of strong male dominance. Concerning the Iroquois, Morgan said: "Indian habits and modes of life divided the people socially into two great classes, male and female. The male sought the conversation and society of the male, and they went forth together for amusement, or for the severer duties of life. In the same manner the female sought the companionship of her own sex. Between the sexes there was but little sociality, as this term is understood in polished society"[20].

The sexual division of labor, and therefore of social life, is all the more salient in these societies because they are often unaware of any other form of division of labor except that of

18 Annette Hamilton, "Dual Social Systems: Technology, Labour and Women's Secret Rites in the eastern Western Desert of Australia", *Oceania*, n°51, 1980, p. 12.
19 Robert Glasse, « Huli of Papua; A Cognatic Descent System », *Cahiers de l'Homme*, nouvelle série VIII, 1968.
20 Lewis Henry Morgan, *League of the Iroquois*, Sage & Brothers, Rochester, 1851, p. 323.

The Huli of New Guina:
champions of corporal décoration... and of sexual segregation

age. Among these peoples, there are no professional priests, soldiers, civil servants or merchants. The first genuinely specialized craftsmen appear only with metallurgy. All men, and all women, perform all the work necessary to satisfy their needs, the only division, usually very strict, being that between the sexes.

The sexual division of labor is not only universal in human societies; it is also a characteristic peculiar to our species. In no other primate, males and females thus engage in different activities while systematically providing the other sex with a part of their product. Its rigor, as well as its modalities, could vary from one people to another: weaving, pottery, building of houses, such or such agricultural activity were devolved to

men in some societies and to women in others. But, beyond these variations, the sexual division of labor displays certain remarkable regularities.

At the source of male power

In fact, there is a general rule that has played a crucial role in shaping relations between the sexes. In all societies observed in ethnology and, as far as archaeological records can tell us, in all those of the past, a gendered division of labor prevailed which, more or less exclusively, attributed to men the great hunt, and especially the killing of big game, and the handling of the most lethal weapons, spearthrowers and bows.

Contrary to popular belief, it is not so easy to explain why this is so. All the "natural" reasons that are generally invoked (reduced mobility due to maternity, the need to protect women because of their importance for the reproduction of the group)

Australian warriors. There as elsewhere, in such gatherings, women are quite rare!

are in fact unsatisfactory. While they may explain why women are temporarily excluded from certain forms of hunting (as would a sick or wounded man), they do not explain why, in all known societies, it is the simple fact of being a woman that forbids, for life, to approach a sharp weapon and to go hunting big game. Moreover, no people explains the prohibitions against women by practical considerations. All invoke magical-religious beliefs.

Painting of the Spanish Levant (- 5000 ?) All the archaeological traces confirm the hold of the men on the weapons.

Without putting forward a definitive answer to this question, which remains largely unresolved for the time being, one can be assured that the male monopoly on hunting and weapons has everywhere given men a position of strength over women. The sex that held this monopoly also exercised a monopoly on what can be called "foreign policy", that is, the management of relations, whether peaceful or belligerent, with the surrounding groups. For most primitive societies, however, this question was as omnipresent as it was vital. Deprived of the weapons that would have given them the means to defend themselves, women everywhere tended to be reduced to the role of instruments in men's strategies.

What could be more common, in fact, than to exchange women in order to seal an alliance, or to offer, temporarily or permanently, a wife as a sign of good will? Among the Inuit, as among many other peoples, the rules of hospitality required that, in addition to board and lodging, the host provide a

woman, usually his own wife, to his guest. In Australia, a group that saw a small, hostile troop arriving had the recourse of sending a few women over to meet them, who were responsible for offering their sexual favors. Acceptance of this offering by the aggressors meant that the quarrel was now ended.

The Jivaro (Achuar) are a striking illustration of this general law: "The strategic locus of male power is located [...] outside the production process. The achuar men exercise an absolute monopoly on the conduct of 'external relations' (...) Correlatively, they exercise a right of guardianship over their wives, sisters and daughters (...) and they are therefore the only decision-makers in the general process of the circulation of women, either in the form of pacific exchange with allies, or in the bellicose form of abduction from enemies"[21].

Men's universal monopoly on weapons and hunting thus explains their monopoly on war and political functions – for it is also a universal law that men hold the majority, if not all, of political functions. Everywhere, it is men who are the spokesmen, and the official decision-makers; everywhere, it is men who hold council on behalf of the community. And even in the few societies where women are allowed to deliberate, their voices hardly ever carry the same weight as those of their male counterparts.

This explains why, despite the great diversity of gender relations, no genuine matriarchy has ever been observed. The sphere of war and politics has been a fortress for men that women have never conquered. Women, among the Iroquois or other peoples, sometimes held certain powers that could

21 Philippe Descola, « Le Jardin de Colibri. Procès de travail et catégorisations sexuelles chez les Achuar de l'Équateur », *L'Homme*, vol. 23, n° 1, p. 81.

challenge those of men. But, unlike men in many societies, women have never been able to concentrate all the powers.

The economy, a female counter-power

It is therefore because men have everywhere reigned over weapons that matriarchy has not existed anywhere. But it is because women's autonomy and power, especially in economic matters, have sometimes been considerable, that women have sometimes been in a position to counterbalance, partially or totally, the powers of men.

It is striking, in fact, that in all primitive societies where women interacted with men on a more or less equal footing, they did so on the basis of their economic influence. Once

Minangkabau women. Among this people of the island of Sumatra, although Islamized for several centuries, they were the ones who owned the houses, the fields and even the cattle!

again, the Iroquois represent an exemplary case. Iroquois women owned the fields and houses. They managed the crops and grain stocks. This was the fulcrum that allowed them to stand up to an improper or lazy husband – and, if necessary, to kick him out without further ado. Collectively, it was this same fulcrum that gave women the opportunity to oppose certain decisions made by men. The threat of refusing to deliver grain, for example, was very effective in making impossible a war voted by a tribal council where only men were eligible.

For women in primitive societies, therefore, economic positions were a guarantee of a more favorable social position. However, these economic positions did not automatically result from their participation in productive work. In all these societies, women contributed to production, often providing the majority of the food supply. However, it was only in some of them that they enjoyed extensive or even exclusive rights to the product of their labor. Elsewhere, this contribution did not necessarily protect them from the domination of men, as in all the tribes of New Guinea where the pigs were raised by the women, but traded by the men for their own account. In these societies, which are not organized on the basis of the anonymous market, the participation of women in productive work is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for them to have their product and at the same time to benefit from the corresponding social influence.

The male monopoly on hunting and weapons therefore explains what is universal in gender relations, namely the absence of matriarchy. The great diversity of women's prerogatives in economic matters explains to a large extent why here women have been able to out-compete men, while here they have been subordinated to them to one degree or another.

In any case, the depth and importance of the sexual division of labor in these societies also explains why everywhere gender equality in its modern sense has remained, literally, unthinkable. Ethnology books are full of acts or attitudes of resistance by women to their oppression, such as the young Australian women who ran away with their lovers at the risk of their lives, or the neo-Guinean mothers who killed their children at birth so as not to give offspring to their hated husbands. But if individual reactions are not lacking, we do not know a single example where, before contact with the West, women challenged the very principle of the sexual division of society, where they imagined they could possess the same rights as men, exercise the same occupations, the same functions, in short, occupy the same social place as them. In order for such an idea to emerge and win people's minds, the economic structure of societies had to undergo dramatic upheavals.

The past, the present and the future

The revolutionnary role of capitalism…

The fact that capitalism is the first society in the entire human adventure to have secreted the so-called ideal of sex equality owes nothing to chance.

Capitalism is in fact the first economic system to be based, so to speak, on generalized anonymity. The products of labor all tend to take the form of commodities, that is, to be exchanged for an universal equivalent called "money". As Marx had shown, money represents human labor, but abstract, that is, undifferentiated, human labor. Thus, the fact that the products of labor are now destined to be sold on the world market means that the concrete characteristics of the producers of each commodity, including their sexual identity, are melted and dissolved in a gigantic crucible, where only the quantity of human labor it embodies remains. Nothing, in the fact that a shirt is worth €20 and a car is worth €10,000, makes it possible to know if one or the other was made by men rather than women. If money has no smell, it also has no sex.

Moreover, capitalism has not only established the common nature of the products of labor: by transforming labor-power into merchandise, by remunerating all wage earners, male and female, with the same money, it has also established the com-

mon nature of the workers themselves. "For equal work, equal pay!" This emblematic revendication of proletarian women expresses it in the clearest possible way.

These evolutions alone do not eliminate the sexual division of labor, nor its unequal character; they do not prevent women from being confined, de jure or de facto, to certain jobs or from being victims of prohibitions. But, and this is the crucial point, they create the conditions for its disappearance by demonstrating daily that from now on the work of men and women no longer exist side by side, in separate spheres, but are of the same nature, share the same substance, of which money is the measure.

Thus, by instituting the generalized exchange of the products of labor and of the workers themselves for money, capi-

"We want sex equality!", photo from the eponymous movie (2010), based on the 1969 strike by Ford Dagenham women workers for equal pay.

talism, for the first time in history, has given rise, in the reality itself as well as in the minds of men, to abstract human labor. And by establishing the common nature of work and of workers of both sexes, it has broken down a multimillennial barrier and paved the way for a conception of society in which gender would no longer be the basis for distinguishing between human beings, neither in the sphere of work nor in the rest of social life.

In the long march that has led humanity on the road to ever greater productivity, the sexual division of labor was the first step. It could hardly have been otherwise: the difference between the sexes was obvious and provided a ready-made material for the first specialization of workers. Subsequently, with the progress of the economy, science and technology, the division of labor continued to deepen. In the course of time, new occupations appeared, first in tens, then in hundreds, making the age-old sexual division of labor objectively more and more outdated. But as long as products were not commodities, as long as economic forms meant that producers could be directly identified through their products and thus assimilated to them, as long as labor-power itself was not transformed into a commodity, this further progress could be achieved within the general framework set by the sexual division. There were more and more occupations of all kinds; nothing prevented them from continuing to be men's occupations and women's occupations. It was this barrier that capitalism helped to undermine. By generalizing the form of the commodity, it has brought about a new reality, that of sexually undifferentiated human labor, which allows us to glimpse the time when the sexual division of labor will be relegated "to the museum of antiquities, by the side of the spinning wheel and the bronze axe," to paraphrase Engels.

It is in this sense that capitalism, on the issue of women's emancipation as on so many others, has played a revolutionary role. Not that the situation of women would be in itself "better" than in previous societies. At this level of generality, this assessment does not make much sense. The situation of women under capitalism according to the time, the country and the social milieu is certainly as diverse as it was in the first human societies. But just as it laid the economic and social foundations that made national borders or private possession of the means of production obsolete, so it made the division of tasks and social roles according to sex obsolete.

...AND THE NEED TO OVERTHROW IT

Of course, one could question the possibility of ending the oppression of women without destroying the foundations of exploitation and all oppression, that is, without destroying the capitalist system itself. This is the choice made by many feminists, who stand on the sole terrain of the struggle against male domination.

This choice might not seem absurd. After all, in the ethereal realm of pure theory, a capitalism free of all forms of gender discrimination is not inconceivable – and some women from the more privileged classes do not necessarily want to link their fate to the overthrow of the entire existing social order. However, reality is not an ethereal realm; and to refuse to situate the struggle for women's emancipation within the broader struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat is a reckless short-sightedness.

Capitalism carries with it a procession of misery and oppression that constantly renews the fertile ground on which all forms of prejudice, including those against women, can flourish. The period we are living through is a cruel illustration

The « mujeres libres », anarchist organization of women during the spanish revolution and civil war. Women's emancipation is closely related to social emancipation.

of this. Even in the few countries of the world where women have achieved some degree of emancipation, it remains under the constant threat of backsliding. In France, abortion remains legal. But for how many women does the dismantling of the public hospital make it more difficult each year to exercise this right? And how can we affirm that the reactionary currents which, until very recently, have been so noisy, will never achieve their ends? One need only look elsewhere in Europe to measure the fragility of a right that seemed to have been taken for granted. As for the poorest part of the planet, crushed by underdevelopment and war, the last fourty years have shown time and again that the flag of oppression of women, raised as an "anti-imperialist" symbol, can be successfully used as a diversion from genuine emancipatory struggles – and these currents have gained a certain audience even within the developed countries, among workers of immigrant origin.

While many feminist may have believed in the possibility of eradicating male domination within existing economic structures, to the eyes of the communist current such choices have always appeared reductive and ultimately short-sighted. Not only is there nothing contradictory between the fight against male domination and the fight against the exploitation of man by man, but neither can ignore the other without running the risk of failure.