

## LUNARCHY – RULE BY THE MOON

### POLITICS - Introduction



*Light pollution: the earth at night, satellite view*

Our planet is dying; it's losing its pulse.

The project of never-ending profit-seeking – never-ending growth – is unsustainable. The ice-caps are melting. The oil burns night and day. Commerce is never interrupted. The lamps are permanently ablaze. Capitalism is burning up the one planet we have.

We need to stop. Turn the world upside-down! Once a month, each time the moon dies, let's act to quench the fires.

It means pulling out capitalism's plug. It means going on strike. It means switching off and staying out on strike until full moon. It means dying to this world as the moon does, emerging refreshed and renewed.

Death followed by new life. That's the secret of every magical tale, every initiation, every faith. It's also life's earliest beat. Planet Earth may be dying, but go with it – die properly – and we'll come out the other side. Dying properly means making sure it's only capitalism, not life on earth, that disappears.



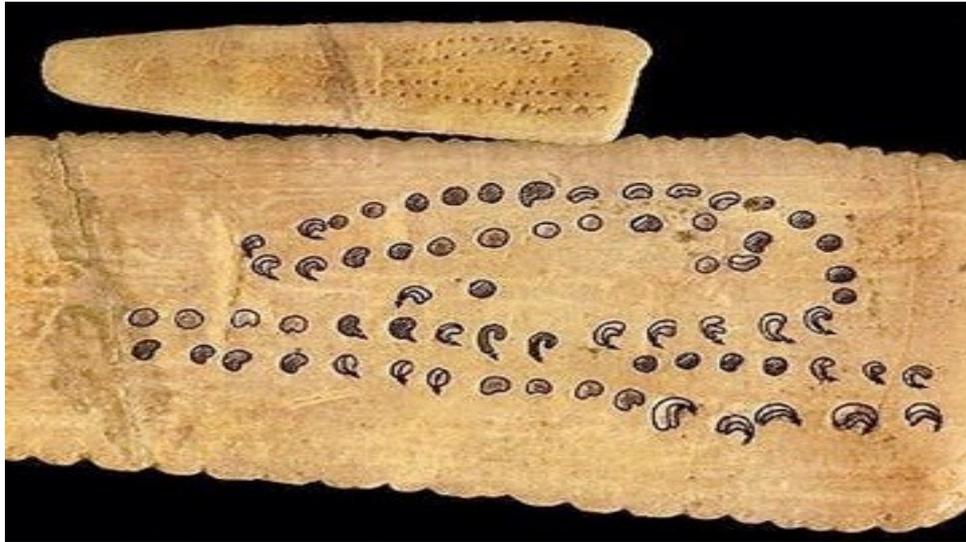
For over a hundred thousand years, since *Homo sapiens* evolved, our species has lived by the moon. After all, we were everywhere hunter-gatherers; as any successful hunter will confirm, you need to keep track of the moon.

For women, the moon is internal; menstruation is part of human nature. So it's hardly surprising that when patriarchs began establishing their jealous gods, they denounced menstruation as 'the curse' and all associated traditions as 'moonshine', 'lunacy' and so forth. They're still using such language today.

Patriarchal religions everywhere privilege the sun. '*Let there be light!*', they command. Torturers during the Inquisition claimed to be in terror of women's 'dark arts' – their healing

powers. Despite this, the ancient traditions linger on. Scheduling ceremonies by lunar phase remains central to all religious traditions to this day.

Rule by the moon harks back to an egalitarian lifestyle forged in a revolution. Archaeologists call it 'the human revolution'. You'll find links to the archaeology on these pages, much of it recent and exciting. But this website is not primarily for scientists. You don't have to be an archaeologist to derive inspiration from the first and greatest of all social revolutions – the one which really worked.



*Aurignacian lunar calendar, 32,000 years old – one of the earliest known records of time*

CHAPTER 1  
**The Revolution Which Worked**  
**by Dr. Camilla Power**

The carnival against capitalism – the joyful revolutionary overthrow – isn't just about class. It's equally about sex. If we track the cycle of the moon with a monthly insurrection, amplifying tidal periodicities in this way, then women all over the world start to tune in to one another's rhythm. The average menstrual cycle is one moon – 29.5 days. Dance in the moonlight, and your cycle gets in step. Hunter-gatherer women know this well, marking time through the dance in their bodies. But of course Euroamerican patriarchs servicing capitalism 24/7 have forgotten this oldest of clocks.

Sound mad? Crazy? Lunatic? No revolution ever worked, right? Or could ever change human nature? Except the one revolution which did work – the revolution which made us human. We know that it worked because here we are today. Among all animals, only we humans have language, art, religion, symbolic culture. We possess these levels of organisation and awareness thanks to the way our unique species emerged in the evolutionary past.

What kinds of evidence can tell us about the human revolution? First, the evidence left us by evolution in the shape of our bodies. Second, archaeological evidence left by our ancestors. Third, we can learn from the lives – especially sex lives – of people who until recent times have been living in ways that resemble our hunting and gathering past.

As far as our bodies go, we may be 99% similar to chimpanzees in terms of shared DNA. But there are remarkable differences. For one thing, our brains are three times bigger than any chimp's. If you go to the zoo to watch chimps interact you will very soon see obvious differences in sex behaviour. In the few days before, and just when, she is fertile, a female chimp sports a pink sexual swelling the size of a grapefruit. During this period of oestrus, she is busy having sex with all the adult males of her group. And this takes place openly in front of other group members.

Women, by contrast, show no such display marking out the most fertile days of our cycles. We can have sex - or not - pretty much any time. Although it varies between societies, every society on earth has some standard of modesty or discretion surrounding sex, which clearly does not apply to chimps.

Our large brain size can be linked with these features of sexual behaviour. Very large brains are energy-consuming. A human mother breast-feeding an infant needs a lot of high-quality food to sustain the child's brain growth. Once a chimp gets pregnant, the adult males of her troop – any of whom might be possible fathers – simply leave her to get on with the job of childrearing on her own. But a human mother expects others, including men, to help with the energetic burden. The reason why our female ancestors evolved to show no sign of ovulation is that it kept males guessing about when a female might be fertile – and so kept males hanging around, possibly doing something useful. Sex which was not necessarily fertile or reproductive could be used to reward particularly helpful males.

But what about synchrony of menstrual cycles, which most women experience at some time? Is there an evolutionary reason for that? If you observe your cycle entraining with another woman's, the underlying mechanism of the process is that your time of ovulation is coming closer to hers. Now think back to the situation of our evolving ancestors, and take the viewpoint of a male who is trying to find fertile females to get his genes into the next generation. If the females around him are synching their cycles, he will have a hard time paying attention to more than one of them. While he is busy with one, other males are going to be trying to get friendly with the others. This could be very useful for the females if they need more than a single male

to help with protecting the group and getting some high-energy foods for the kids. Females of many mammal species show the capacity to

synchronise their cycles, including several monkey species. And when they synchronise, more males come into their troupes. If females want the males, they do synchrony; if they don't (maybe because there isn't so much food around), they become asynchronous. In the case of human evolution, synchrony seems to have been very important for us. We can tell because not only is the mean length of a menstrual cycle the same as the lunar cycle at 29.5 days, but also the mean length of gestation is a precise multiple of nine lunar cycles. Evolution has inscribed the lunar rhythm into women's bodies. We are designed for lunar periodic synchrony. The limestone plaquette (left) from Lalinde in the Dordogne, carved 13,000 years ago, celebrates this.

Of course, once a woman is pregnant, gives birth and starts nursing, her male partner/s might be inclined to look elsewhere. This was a major problem for our foremothers in evolution. Females had to breastfeed for years after birth; males would be able to tell which females were fertile, not by signs of ovulation – these had been phased out – but by menstruation. A menstruating female is not fertile immediately, but in a week or two she could be. Therefore, evolving human males would have been eager to bond with any menstrual female, bringing her the Palaeolithic equivalent of flowers and chocolates, more likely to be choice cuts of game meat.

But the females who really needed the extra energy were the nursing mothers. Faced with competition from fertile menstrual females, they had two choices: either, hide the fact another female was menstruating from the males; or, use her attractions to encourage the males to extra efforts. This second strategy gave us the first cosmetics – the earliest kinds of body art and symbolism. All women, whether they were pregnant, nursing or fertile, daubed themselves with blood red colours, using ochre and haematite pigments ground up and mixed with fats as sexual warpaint. In this display, the message of the women – as a group – to the men was: you're not going to separate us; you're not going to pick and choose; you're going to hunt for all of us. And NO sex till you do.

By acting in solidarity, women used sexual display to organise the world's first economy. Hiding would have got little extra out of men. Collective cosmetic display got men to go hunting, providing energy and vital nutrients for large-brained offspring. As a result, humans thrived, spreading all over the planet.

We are an extraordinarily young species, emerging from Africa just 150,000 years ago. The 'human revolution' broke out initially in sub-Saharan Africa. Across southern Africa by 120,000 years ago, archaeologists find widespread evidence for a cosmetics industry of red ochre and haematite. This includes bright red crayons, shaped like lipsticks, used in the first body art and colour design over 100,000 years ago. One of the best known sites is Blombos Cave, on the shores of South Africa. Here, among numerous beautifully crafted ochre crayons, archaeologists have found engraved haematite

blocks, one of which has been carefully decorated with a cross-hatch pattern, showing beyond reasonable doubt that its makers were true artists. Dated to 76,000 years ago, this particular item (right) made newspaper headlines across the world in 2002 – proving that art is at least twice as old in Africa as any known in Europe.

Wherever these first humans went, first into the Middle East, then moving round the Indian Ocean to Australia, finally going north into Eurasia and the Americas, they carried red ochre cosmetics with them. We can track and date their movements. There is even some evidence that Neanderthals picked up and copied our cosmetics when we came into contact in Ice Age Europe some 40,000 years ago.

Among African hunters and gatherers, cosmetics have cosmic significance. When a young

woman begins menstruating for the very first time, her older sisters and other kinswomen celebrate the occasion by bonding tightly with her, not letting her from their sight. Her menstruation may be marked by red ochre. The girl stays in a hut while all the women dance outside. The much-desired maiden is declared off-limits. Her body is 'sacred' – no man may come close. The sisters accentuate their bond with the girl by constructing her blood as enveloping them, too. The blood refuses to be confined, welling up like a flood, casting its spell everywhere. In Africa, Australia, Eurasia and the Americas, women traditionally wore blood-red cosmetics to make just this point, asserting their bodies to be 'blessed by the moon'.

Moon-scheduled revolution, for Africa's surviving hunting-and-gathering peoples, is not an event dimly remembered in ancient myths and traditions. Rather, it is a task still to be accomplished each month. As the new moon makes its appearance in the sky, people form a circle as brothers and sisters, singing and clapping hands as if a baby had been born. This is their revolution, and it happens each month. How is it that a revolution can be constructed as a repeatable event? The secret is to know not only how to seize power, but to know how to let go, how to play.

Each month, at new moon, synchronised insurrection overthrows the rule of men. Women declare themselves on strike, extending their action until they have got the message and understood. No individual can be exempt from the action: fertile sex is impermissible during this time. But why stay on strike forever? Why cling to power once victory has been achieved? At the approach of full moon, women begin anticipating an all-night celebration. A fortnight earlier, they had sent the men away. Now, utilising the moon's light, these hunters should be closing in for the kill. On the night of the full moon, they should ideally be returning home – laden with freshly-killed game. According to a popular Kalahari saying, Women like meat! They like hunters' bodies, symbolically identified with the fatty flesh which good hunters bring. Where there is meat in abundance, the matriarchs will be happy to yield. If this were a permanent surrender, they might have legitimate doubts. If the enemy could regain and entrench sexual dominance, it would be unwise to surrender at all. But the women know that this is not so. They won the revolution once – they know they can win it again. Men's victory will be as transient as women's, each camp yielding to the other in turn. As women choose honeymoon, they relax in certain knowledge of what the future will bring. Next dark moon, sure as our blood flows – we'll be out on that picket line again!

## CHAPTER 2

### **Lunar Economics**

All economics, as Karl Marx observed, is an economics of time.

Capitalism has robbed us of time. We're endlessly reminded that 'time is money'. Having fun? Playing with your kids? Enjoying slow sex? Singing in your local choir? According to the ideologues you're losing out because you could be earning. You're basically wasting time.

Go back in history a bit. We once had our feast days, our holidays, our moments of sacred time. Not just Christmas, Easter or a few paltry bank holidays – but every sabbath, every saint's day, every festival or carnival week or month throughout the year.

Then came Cromwell and his killjoy bourgeois revolutionaries. They abolished Christmas. They abolished May Day. No maypoles, no celebratory sex, no feasting, no joy! They laid the groundwork for the 'protestant work ethic' – experienced nowadays as capitalism's regime of 24/7 endless anxiety, constant orientation toward money-making, endless profit-seeking in wage slavery.

All categories of time became merged into just one: time for work. In Britain today, the employers are trying to abolish even the very concept of 'overtime'. Sundays are like any other day: one more opportunity for profit, for work.

Well, lunarchy means going on strike. Not just over some dispute but regardless of any dispute – just to take a break. Defending the picket line is demanding work, but creative and exciting. It's wage-slavery in reverse. We're now working for comradeship and solidarity – ultimately for another world. Lunarchy means restoring sacred time. And each sacred holiday lasts two whole weeks!

Think about it. At present, half the world's population is working far too much. Millions of the urban population in, say, China or India are kept on production lines in what amount almost to concentration camps, deprived of leisure time, deprived of a life, without trade union rights and barely able to make ends meet.

Meanwhile, millions of us are unemployed, without any regular income whatever, excluded forcibly from the whole wage slavery system, struggling to make a living on rubbish tips or in other hopeless and degrading tasks.

So why is going on strike a solution? It's a brilliant, extraordinarily simple solution. We who are in work just go on strike. It's a general strike and it lasts for two whole weeks. We down tools at new moon and return to work at full. That makes the whole period of the moon's waxing a holiday – time just for ourselves.

But it also has another consequence, hugely beneficial. It means that when we do go back to work, there's TWICE as much work to be done! That means TWICE as many of us need to be involved.

So instead of allowing one half of the world's population to be permanently enslaved while the other is excluded from work, we establish a proper balance. Work is declared a legal activity only during waning moon.

Think of it as restoring the Sabbath – while extending the Lord's Day to full parity with the Devil's.

## **Why surrender power?**

**Q: Lunarchy allegedly involves seizing power only to surrender it. Why do that?**

A: So you can repeat the revolution again.

**Q: But why go to such trouble? Why not fix everything for good?**

A: Because revolution is fun. Anyway, nothing can ever be fixed for good. That way lies death. Seizing power and keeping it makes YOU the problem, not the solution. You'll be leading the counterrevolution.

**Q: But if you surrender to the state, won't that be counterrevolution anyway?**

A: Yes indeed. We'll need a transient taste of that, sufficient to provoke us into resistance once again. Try breathing in; now you've got to breathe out. You don't have a choice about breathing out. Like anything alive, the body has its rhythms. With that in mind, we're going to take the power, then lose it on purpose, then win it again and again. That's how lunarchy works.

**Q: How do you know it works?**

A: Because it worked last time we tried. Our species lived that way, winning and losing with the moon, for thousands of years. In fact, for some ninety per cent of human history. Only with the Neolithic transition, when states and class rule became established for the first time, did sovereignty involve just one side clinging fixedly to power. Popular sovereignty can't operate that way. It presupposes laughter and play. It presupposes successful resistance culminating in joyful surrender. Nothing can be more empowering than the insurrection itself. So why enact it just once?

**Q: Is there concrete evidence that such a system worked?**

A: Moon-scheduled revolution, for Africa's surviving hunting-and-gathering peoples, is not an event dimly remembered in ancient myths and traditions. Rather, it is a task still to be accomplished each month. As the new moon makes its appearance in the sky, people form a circle as brothers and sisters, singing and clapping hands as if a baby had been born.

This is their revolution, and it happens each month.

## ORIGINS

### Life on Earth, thanks to the Moon

Life on Earth began following an interplanetary collision which produced an unusually large moon. [Read more....](#)



### **Darwin versus Marx: Labour, sex and human origins**

Chris Knight, Lewisham. May 1st, 2011

For the rest it is not difficult to see that our epoch is a birth-time, and a period of transition. The spirit of man has broken with the old order of things hitherto prevailing, and with the old ways of thinking, and is in the mind to let them all sink into the depths of the past and to set about its own transformation. It is indeed never at rest, but carried along the stream of progress ever onward. But it is here as in the case of the birth of a child; after a long period of nutrition in silence, the continuity of the gradual growth in size, of quantitative change, is suddenly cut short by the first breath drawn – there is a break in the process, a qualitative change – and the child is born. In like manner the spirit of the time, growing slowly and quietly ripe for the new form it is to assume, disintegrates one fragment after another of the structure of its previous world. That it is tottering to its fall is indicated only by symptoms here

and there. Frivolity and again ennui, which are spreading in the established order of things, the undefined foreboding of something unknown – all these betoken that there is something else approaching. This gradual crumbling to pieces, which did not alter the general look and aspect of the whole, is interrupted by the sunrise, which, in a flash and at a single stroke, brings to view the form and structure of the new world.

G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*

In 1844, following a four-year voyage around the world, Charles Darwin confided to a close friend that he had come to a dangerous conclusion. For seven years, he wrote, he had been 'engaged in a very presumptuous work', perhaps 'a very foolish one'. He had noticed that on each of the Galapagos Islands, the local finches ate slightly different foods, and had correspondingly modified beaks. In South America, he had examined many extraordinary fossils of extinct animals. Pondering the significance of all this, he had felt forced to change his mind about the origin of species. To his friend, Darwin wrote: 'I am almost convinced (quite contrary to the opinion I started with) that species are not (it is like confessing a murder) immutable' (Desmond and Moore 1992: 314).

In 1844, belief in transmutation – the idea that species could evolve into one another – was politically dangerous. Even as Darwin was writing to his friend, atheists and revolutionaries were circulating penny papers around London's streets, championing evolutionary ideas in opposition to the authorised doctrines of Church and State. At that time, the best-known champion of evolution was Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, whose job was to display insects and worms at the Natural History Museum in Paris. Closely identified with atheism and other radical tenets emanating from revolutionary France, evolutionism in Britain was then known as 'Lamarckism'. Any 'Lamarckian' – in other words, anyone doubting the God-given immutability of all natural species – was likely to be branded a communist, rioter and insurrectionary. Should the feared revolution break out, Darwin's clerical friends stood to be stripped of their tithes by the 'red Lamarckians'. Caught between his cautious liberal politics and his science, Darwin became ill with anxiety, suppressing his findings as if he had, indeed, secretly committed a murder (Desmond and Moore 1992: 313-338).

Fanned by the still-glowing embers of 1789, the revolutionary movements of the 1830s and 1840s culminated in a wave of insurrections across Europe. Each ended in defeat. 'After the failure of the Revolutions of 1848', recollected one participant (Marx 2000 [1864]: 579) in his inaugural address to the Workers' International, all party organizations and party journals of the working classes were, on the Continent, crushed by the iron hand of force, the most advanced sons of labour fled in despair to the Transatlantic Republic, and the short-lived dreams of emancipation vanished before an epoch of industrial fever, moral marasmus, and political reaction.

Darwin was slow to realise that he and his clerical friends were now in a more congenial political situation. By 1858, another natural scientist – the socialist-leaning Alfred Wallace – had independently hit upon the principle of evolution by natural selection; if Darwin did not publish, Wallace would win all the scientific glory. With revolution no longer an immediate threat, Darwin's courage rose and in 1859 he at last published *The Origin of Species*.

In his great book, Darwin outlined a concept of evolution quite different from that of his French predecessor. Lamarck had viewed evolution as driven by a 'tendency to progression' – a constant striving for self-improvement on the part of animals during their lifetimes. Darwin viewed this as 'nonsense' (Desmond and Moore 1992: 315). His own grimmer, crueller idea was borrowed from the Reverend

Thomas Malthus, an economist employed by the East India Company. Malthus had no interest in the origin of species; his agenda was political. Human populations, he argued (Malthus 1826), will always increase faster than the supply of food. Struggle and starvation must inevitably result. Public charities, said Malthus, can only aggravate the problem: hand-outs will make the paupers feel comfortable, encouraging them to breed. More mouths to feed must lead to more poverty and so to yet further – insatiable – demands for welfare. The best policy is to let the poor die.

Darwin's genius was to link the zoology, botany, geology and palaeontology of his day with this politically motivated advocacy of free competition and the 'struggle for survival'. Darwin saw Malthus's 'laissez-faire' morality at work throughout nature. Population growth in the animal world would always outstrip the local food supply. Hence competition was inevitable, with many individuals starving to death. Whereas moralists or sentimentalists might have sought to tone down this image of a cruel and heartless Nature, Darwin learned to celebrate it. Just as capitalism brutally punished the poor and needy, so 'natural selection' would weed out those creatures less able to fend for themselves. As the less fit in each generation kept dying, so the survivors' offspring would multiply, transmitting to future generations the characteristics responsible for their success. Starvation and death, then, were positive factors, within an evolutionary dynamic which relentlessly punished failure while rewarding success.

Darwin's incorporation of Malthusianism succeeded in transforming the political implications of evolutionary theory. Far from legitimising resistance to privilege, Darwin's evolutionism was designed to serve a reverse political function. Darwin pictured nature as a world without morals. By implication, this lent justification to an economic system based on unrestrained competition, free of any misguided 'moral' interference from religion or state. Later in the century, the social philosopher Herbert Spencer would invoke 'the survival of the fittest' to assure Britain's rich and powerful that their privileges were indeed well deserved. Spencer's brazenly imperialist evolutionary ideology – 'Social Darwinism' – would make its contribution to a variety of political currents including eugenics and eventually Nazism. Darwin's biographers (Desmond and Moore 1992: xix) comment:

'Social Darwinism' is often taken to be something extraneous, an ugly concretion added to the pure Darwinian corpus after the event, tarnishing Darwin's image. But his notebooks make plain that competition, free trade, imperialism, racial extermination, and sexual inequality were written into the equation from the start – 'Darwinism' was always intended to explain human society.

Following the revolutionary failures of 1848, communist and socialist activists came close to despair. As an asylum-seeker in Britain, Karl Marx attempted to keep hope alive by equipping the proletariat intellectually for its future inevitable victory, burrowing deep into obscure records in the British Museum and keeping abreast of all major developments in bourgeois scholarship and science. In his mature years, Marx came to fully appreciate the ideological implications of post-Lamarckian evolutionary theory. But despite this, he found no difficulty in welcoming Darwin's *The Origin of Species* soon after it was published. Certainly, its bourgeois premises and assumptions were no obstacle. Marx, after all, was steeped in the dialectic of Hegel, for whom history is driven by internal conflict and contradiction. Pursued relentlessly to its logical conclusion, every historical idea – he knew – must collapse eventually into its dialectical antithesis. During the 1840s – as fears of social turbulence caused Darwin to suffer anxiety attacks – Marx was optimistically concluding that the more ruthlessly capitalism advanced, the closer it must bring its own revolutionary overthrow. As Marx and Engels drafted *The Communist Manifesto*, they therefore felt uninhibited in celebrating the bourgeoisie's role:

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his "natural superiors", and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous "cash payment". It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom – Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation (Marx 2000 [1848]: 247-8).

When – years later – Marx and Engels encountered Darwin's thought, they instantly recognised in it that same 'icy water', that same 'unconscionable freedom'. Darwin seemed intent on shattering all former illusions about 'natural harmony' in favour of 'naked, shameless, direct, brutal' competition and exploitation, whether human or animal. Marx and Engels knew how to categorise such a school of thought. 'The ideas of the ruling class', they had always held (Marx 2000 [1845]: 192), 'are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force'. 'Natural selection' was clearly an accurate intellectual reflection of its age.

Marx welcomed Darwin's materialist methodology and unsentimental celebration of the role played by suffering, conflict, extinction and death. 'Darwin's book', he wrote to his friend Lassalle in 1862, 'is very important and serves me as a natural-scientific basis for the class struggle in history'. He expressed his delight at the 'death-blow' dealt by Darwin against teleology in the natural sciences. Evolution – Marx agreed – did not unfold in fulfilment of a preordained plan (Marx 2000 [1858-1868]: 565). In 1873, Marx even sent Darwin a copy of his own recently published *Das Kapital*, inscribed 'from a sincere admirer'. It was a 'great work', Darwin realized, as he cut open the first few dozen pages. But Darwin was not fluent in German; moreover, the tenor of Marx's book seemed 'so different' from his own. Politely thanking Marx for his gift, Darwin expressed the wish that he was 'more worthy to receive it, by understanding more of the deep & important subject of political economy'. No doubt, he added, their respective efforts towards 'the extension of knowledge' would 'in the long run...add to the happiness of mankind' (Desmond and Moore 1992: 601-02).

The two thinkers were, in fact, poles apart. While admiring Darwin as a natural scientist, Marx scorned his Malthusian political assumptions. In 1862, he wrote to Engels:

....Darwin, whom I have looked up again, amuses me when he says he is applying the 'Malthusian' theory also to plants and animals, as if with Mr. Malthus the whole point were not that he does not apply the theory to plants and animals but only to human beings – and with geometrical progression – as opposed to plants and animals. It is remarkable how Darwin recognizes among beasts and plants his English society with its division of labour, competition, opening-up of new markets, 'inventions', and the Malthusian 'struggle for existence'. It is Hobbes' *bellum omnium contra omnes*, and one is reminded of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, where civil society is described as a 'spiritual animal kingdom', while in Darwin the animal kingdom figures as civil society..... (Marx 2000 [1858-1868]: 565).

Whatever its relevance to plants and animals, Marx saw no reason why an unregulated 'struggle for existence' should serve as a model for politically self-organised, conscious human beings.

Long before he had heard of Darwin, the young Marx had been nurturing his own convictions about human evolution. As 'everything natural must have an origin', he wrote in 1844, 'so man too has his process of origin, history, which can, however, be known by him and thus is a conscious process of origin that transcends itself' (Marx 2000 [1844b]: 113). According to this conception, history 'transcends itself' as the species at last grasps its own evolutionary trajectory, consciousness then entering as a factor in shaping future developments. Marx's whole life was dedicated to this task.

Marx's thoughts on human nature and human origins drew heavily on the concept of 'species-life' as developed by the materialist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach. An enormous influence on the young Marx, Feuerbach taught that the essential human capacities are always universal rather than individual – they are properties of the species, connecting men instead of dividing them from each another. 'The individual man by himself', Feuerbach (1970a) insisted,

whether as a moral being or as a thinking one, does not contain in himself the nature of man. The nature of man is contained only in community, in the unity of man with man – a unity, however, that rests only on the reality of the distinction between I and Thou. Isolation is finiteness and limitation; community is freedom and infinity. Man by himself is but man; man with man, the unity of I and Thou, is God.

Feuerbach (1970b) defines 'truth' in corresponding terms:

That is true in which another agrees with me – agreement is the first criterion of truth; but only because the species is the ultimate measure of truth. That which I think only according to the standard of my individuality is not binding on another, it can be conceived otherwise, it is an accidental, merely subjective, view. But that which I think according to the standard of the species, I think as man in general only can think, and consequently as every individual must think if he thinks normally, in accordance with law, and therefore, truly. That is true which agrees with the nature of the species, that is false which contradicts it. There is no other rule of truth.

It was from this standpoint that Marx approached the topic not only of *science* but also of *labour* in social evolution. In both intellectual and physical labour – in both scientific and economic production – the individual produces not merely for his own benefit but for others. Ultimately, all human production is an activity of the species as a whole.

Each natural species, Marx argued, is defined by the way it reproduces. Productive life, as he puts it (Marx 2000 [1844b]: 90),

is species-life. It is life producing life. The whole character of a species, its generic character, is contained in its manner of vital activity, and free conscious activity is the species-characteristic of man.

In fact, Marx conceptualised labour – the distinctively human form of 'life producing life' – as a variation on the theme of procreation. Like all animals, humans not only survive but also procreate, co-operating socially to do so. In social action each individual is conceived, born and subsequently nurtured during infancy. Labour in the human case, however, represents a radical extension and intensification of such biological interdependence. *Throughout adult life*, the human individual continues to depend on food and other means of subsistence provided through the labour of others.

As humans engage in the labour-process, Marx argued, they act universally rather than individually, producing for others rather than just for themselves – and defining themselves thereby as human. 'Men can be distinguished from animals', as he put it (Marx 2000 [1845]: 177),

by consciousness, by religion, or anything else you like. They

themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life.

Labour, then, is what defines our uniquely productive species as human. 'It is true', Marx (2000 [1844b]: 90) concedes, 'that the animal, too, produces. It builds itself a nest, a dwelling, like the bee, the beaver, the ant, etc.' But the animal only produces what it needs immediately for itself or for its offspring; it produces one-sidedly whereas man produces universally; it produces only under the pressure of immediate physical need, whereas man produces freely from physical need and only truly produces when he is thus free; it produces only itself whereas man reproduces the whole of nature.

With the arrival of humanity, in other words, something extraordinary occurs – as if procreative 'species life' had evolved all over again, but this time on a higher level. 'The production of life', writes Marx (2000 [1845]: 182), 'both of one's own in labour and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a double relationship: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social, relationship'. Individuals now produce and reproduce not only their own species – but an entire world of objects and relations entailing the transformation of nature and themselves.

Above all, the young Marx offers an idealistic vision of human consciousness arising out of such 'life-producing life'. The species is born in conscious creativity amounting to a kind of love, as individuals produce life for one another not grudgingly – not just as a means to a selfish end – but in expressing their innermost, deeply social nature:

Supposing that we had produced in a human manner; each of us would in his production have doubly affirmed himself and his fellow men. I would have: (1) objectified in my production my individuality and its peculiarity and thus both in my activity enjoyed an individual expression of my life and also in looking at the object have had the individual pleasure of realizing that my personality was objective, visible to the senses and thus a power raised beyond all doubt. (2) In your enjoyment or use of my product I would have had the direct enjoyment of realizing that I had both satisfied a human need by my work and also objectified the human essence and therefore fashioned for another human being the object that met his need. (3) I would have been for you the mediator between you and the species and thus been acknowledged and felt by you as a completion of your own essence and a necessary part of yourself and have thus realized that I am confirmed both in your thought and in your love. (4) In my expression of my life I would have fashioned your expression of your life, and thus in my own activity have realized my own essence, my human, my communal essence.

'In that case', concludes Marx (2000 [1844c]: 132), 'our products would be like so many mirrors, out of which our essence shone'.

This, then, is the young Marx's picture of human 'species life' prior to its alienation under those drawn-out historical processes which eventually culminated in capitalism. To be human is to reproduce the species, nourishing and sustaining others' lives not out of obligation, not under compulsion and not merely to gain materially as an individual – but for the intrinsic enjoyment such productivity brings:

In so far as man is human and thus in so far as his feelings and so on are human, the affirmation of the object by another person is equally his own enjoyment (Marx 1972 [1844]: 178-9).

According to the young Marx, it is characteristic of man not only that he enjoys such life-sustaining activity, but that he does so with full awareness – that he

'makes his vital activity itself into an object of his will and consciousness' (Marx 2000 [1844b]: 90). It is in the light of this species-specific human potential that Marx offers his celebrated critique of the suppression of this potential which so characterises modern times. In all his economic writings, Marx's target remains the same: the alienated, mindless labour which distinguishes capitalism – social production divorced from the will and consciousness of the producers themselves. Labour of this kind, Marx (2000 [1844b]: 88) writes,

produces works of wonder for the rich, but nakedness for the worker. It produces palaces, but only hovels for the worker; it produces beauty, but cripples the worker; it replaces labour by machines but throws a part of the workers back to a barbaric labour and turns the other part into machines. It produces culture, but also imbecility and cretinism for the worker.

The producer, Marx (2000 [1844b]: 88) continues, is not in possession of his own work:

Therefore he does not confirm himself in his work, he denies himself, feels miserable instead of happy, deploys no free physical and intellectual energy, but mortifies his body and ruins his mind.... His labour is therefore.... not the satisfaction of a need but only a means to satisfy needs outside itself.

To the young Marx (1963 [1844]), it seemed 'unbearable, dreadful and contradictory' that humans should possess consciousness and a social nature – yet submit to arrangements in which these seem superfluous. Yet exclusion from human life is precisely what alienated labour entails:

The *social life* from which the worker is *shut out* is....*life* itself, physical and cultural life, human morality, human activity, human enjoyment, real *human* existence (Marx 1963 [1844]).

Under capitalism, then, Marx sees human capacities turned in on themselves. Human nature – Marx calls it 'the human essence' – is everywhere denied. Bourgeois man doesn't even know that to possess things in a *human* way is to enjoy them not just for their intrinsic utility – but for their value in creating and sustaining relationships. 'Private property', Marx (2000 [1844b]: 100) observes, 'has made us so stupid and narrow-minded that an object is only ours when we have it, when it exists as capital for us or when we directly possess, eat, drink, wear, inhabit it, etc. in short, when we use it'. Marx continues:

Man – and this is the basic presupposition of private property – only produces in order to have. The aim of production is possession. Not only does production have this utilitarian aim; it also has a selfish aim; man produces only his own exclusive possession. The object of his production is the objectification of his immediate, selfish need. Thus, in this savage and barbaric condition man's production is measured, is limited by the extent of his immediate need whose immediate content is the object produced (Marx 2000 [1844c]: 129).

Under these conditions, our species' uniquely social creativity is subordinated to the perverse, flatly antithetical project of merely selfish individual gain. Such alienation 'degrades man's own free activity to a means, it turns the species-life of man into a means for his physical existence' (Marx 2000 [1844b]: 91). It is as if poetry were being composed – merely to buy food or pay the rent. Once productive labour – our species' most distinctive activity – is reduced to the status of a compulsory and mindless means of staying alive, the final paradox is reached. 'The result we arrive at then', Marx (2000 [1844b]: 89) concludes, 'is that man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions of eating, drinking and procreating, at most also in his dwelling and dress, and feels himself an animal in his human functions'. The world has been turned upside-down.

Darwin, according to Marx, had sought to explain and legitimise capitalism by

projecting free market principles – conceptualised as the ‘struggle for existence’ – directly onto ‘nature’, as if no distinctively *human* nature could ever have existed. Without his Hegelian background, Marx might have responded in mechanical fashion – merely denying Darwin’s identification of Malthusian ‘laissez-faire’ as the secret of ‘natural selection’. Instead, he did the opposite. Marx agreed with Darwin. There really *is* something ‘capitalist’ about the way natural selection works. Capitalism, in short, is far from an unprecedented or one-sidedly artificial system: on the contrary, it echoes certain very ancient themes. From a proletarian standpoint, however, any similarities between Malthusian social policy and the amorality to be found in nature serves not as an inspiration but rather as a terrible warning. Is this what we have come to? Are we really no more than wild animals? The parallels which so inspire Darwin have in Marx’s eyes just the opposite effect: they demonstrate not the legitimacy of capitalism – only its inhuman brutality and backwardness when viewed in the context of human evolution as a whole.

Marx (1971 [1857-8]: 21) contested the notion that private property can be traced to the origin of the species:

History points rather to common property (e.g. among the Hindus, Slavs, ancient Celts, etc.) as the primitive form, which still plays an important part at a much later period as communal property.

Bourgeois ‘society’, from this perspective, represents not continuity with our relatively recent cultural past but a decisive break with all traditional concepts of human solidarity and community. In Hegelian terms, it represents a return to a stage so primitive and savage as to be effectively *pre-human* – a reversion to animal-like conditions of unregulated competition, isolation and consequent stress. ‘What sort of a society is it, in truth’, the young Marx (quoted in Kamenka 1962: 36) had asked,

where one finds several millions in deepest loneliness, where one can be overcome by an irresistible longing to kill oneself without anyone discovering it. This society is not a society; it is, as Rousseau says, a desert populated by wild animals.

In his later writings, Engels developed this point. Darwin, Engels (1964 [1873-86]: 35-36) caustically observes,

did not know what a bitter satire he wrote on mankind, and especially on his countrymen, when he showed that free competition, the struggle for existence, which the economists celebrate as the highest historical achievement, is the normal state of the animal kingdom.

Capitalism, as Engels sums up the situation (Marx and Engels 1952 [2]: 131), is the Darwinian struggle of the individual for existence transferred from nature to society with intensified violence. The conditions of existence natural to the animal appear as the final term of human development.

The coming socialist revolution, by contrast, will return our species once more to its proper human status. This, in fact, is the ultimate aim of the proletarian insurrection – it will ensure that

man, in a certain sense, is finally marked off from the rest of the animal kingdom, and emerges from mere animal conditions of existence into really human ones (Engels 1962 [1887]: 153}.

It was for good reason, therefore, that Engels dedicated so much effort to the study of human origins. The task of today’s communists is to learn about the process in order to repeat it a second time.

Once Darwin’s anxieties over communists and radical atheists had been dispelled, he found himself battling against a very different enemy – conservative preachers who denied that natural selection could possibly explain man’s god-given ‘soul’. For Darwin, it seemed axiomatic that the ‘soul’ concept was unscientific; furthermore, human evolution could not have been a special case. Our species must have evolved gradually – the way all species evolve. Ancestral humans would have been

ape-like creatures – and humans today remain essentially ape-like, albeit with certain peculiarities such as a larger brain. In 1857, Darwin's creationist adversary Richard Owen had announced the discovery of a uniquely human cerebral lobe, the hippocampus minor, on account of which Man should be allocated to a special sub-class. Darwin was incredulous, throwing up his hands: 'I cannot swallow Man' being *that* 'distinct from a Chimpanzee' (Desmond and Moore 1992: 453). Darwin was equally emphatic that 'the difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, is certainly one of degree and not of kind' (Darwin 1871 [1]: 104).

Turning to sexual relationships, Darwin (1877 [2]: 362-363) postulates convergence between early human arrangements and those of living apes:

We may indeed conclude from what we know of the jealousy of all male quadrupeds, armed, as many of them are, with special weapons for battling with their rivals, that promiscuous intercourse in a state of nature is extremely improbable....Therefore, if we look far enough back in the stream of time, it is extremely improbable that primeval men and women lived promiscuously together. Judging from the social habits of man as he now exists, and from most savages being polygamists, the most probable view is that primeval man aboriginally lived in small communities, each with as many wives as he could support and obtain, whom he would have jealously guarded against all other men. Or he may have lived with several wives by himself, like the Gorilla; for all the natives "agree that but one adult male is seen in a band; when the young male grows up, a contest takes place for mastery, and the strongest, by killing and driving out the others, establishes himself as the head of the community".

Note how in this short passage, Darwin links 'polygamy' among 'savages' and 'gorillas', the 'habits of man as he now exists' and the postulated marital arrangements of 'primeval men and women'. If there is a Garden of Eden in Darwin's scheme, it bears no resemblance whatsoever to the young Marx's dream of equality and reciprocity between the sexes. For Darwin, the social habits and psychology of humans must always have evolved under the tyranny of polygamous, ape-like males.

No idea could have seemed more repugnant to the young Marx. The term 'human' in his early writings always has a moral ring to it. Nowhere is this more so than when he touches on sexual relationships. 'The immediate, natural, and necessary relationship of human being to human being', Marx (2000 [1844b]: 96) writes, 'is the relationship of man to woman'. Here, each gives the other pleasure not out of calculating self-interest or moral compulsion – but simply out of intrinsic enjoyment :

Thus, in this relationship is sensuously revealed and reduced to an observable fact how far for man his essence has become nature or nature has become man's human essence. Thus, from this relationship the whole cultural level of man can be judged (2000 [1844b]: 96).

Marx (pp. 96-7) continues:

From the character of this relationship we can conclude how far man has become a species-being, a human being, and conceives of himself as such; the relationship of man to woman is the most natural relationship of human being to human being. Thus it shows how far the natural behaviour of man has become human nature or how far the human essence has become his natural essence, how far his human nature has become nature for him.

The sexual relationship is 'human' in that each partner directly and immediately needs another human being – without whose presence man's social nature cannot be expressed.

Relationships devoid of love, or in which the love is only one-sided, not only fail to affirm the participants' humanity – they actively dehumanise those involved. As Marx (2000 [1844b]: 120) writes:

If you suppose man to be man and his relationship to the world to be a human one, then you can only exchange love for love, trust for trust, etc.... Each of your relationships to man – and to nature – must be a definite expression of your real individual life that corresponds to the object of your will. If you love without arousing a reciprocal love, that is, if your love does not as such produce love in return, if through the manifestation of yourself as a loving person you do not succeed in making yourself a beloved person, then your love is impotent and a misfortune....

To be human – to *feel* fully human in body and mind – is in this conception to experience fulfilment precisely by producing it in one's intimate partner.

For the young Marx, the proper relationship between subsistence and sex was self-evident. First, you should be able to eat, find shelter and by other means avoid physical extinction. Then, when you are free of such material anxieties, you might be in a position to enjoy sexual or other human relationships *for their own sake*. In order to eat, the individual may of course have to work – seeking out, appropriating and processing the necessary food. But it would seem wholly unnatural to invert the relationship between eating and sex to the extent of engaging in sexual intercourse *in order* to eat – *in order* to stay alive. Marx, however, saw an inversion of just this kind as the inner secret of capitalist production.

To Marx, it was self-evident that procreation in its widest sense – that enjoyable activity through which we produce and sustain one another's lives – should be experienced as an end in itself. Such social creativity is life – human life. A particular mode of production, consequently,

must not be considered simply as being the production of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce (Marx 2000 [1845]: 177).

Since to produce socially is to live a human life – since, indeed, such productivity *is* human life – it should be bent to the service of nothing less. Against this background, Marx's central accusation against capitalism is that it subordinates human creativity – human 'species-life' – to the basest imaginable priority. Under capitalism, individuals no longer produce consciously and willingly, finding satisfaction in meeting others' needs. Instead they do so reluctantly and instrumentally – to secure *material* gains *for themselves*. It is as if lovers were engaged in procreative activity not for its own sake – not for the enjoyment of the relationship – but simply in order to earn a living.

It is for this reason that prostitution features so centrally as a theme in Marx's early writings. No idle metaphor for the alienation of labour, it serves to expose capitalism's ultimate shame – its ultimate inner secret:

Suppose I ask the economist: am I acting in accordance with economic laws if I earn money by the sale of my body, by prostituting it to another person's lust...? He will reply: you are not acting contrary to my laws, but you must take into account what Cousin Morality and Cousin Religion have to say. My *economic* morality and religion have no objection to make, but.... But then whom should we believe, the economist or the moralist? (Bottomore 1963: 173).

Bourgeois moralists who repudiate prostitution, in Marx's view, are completely

hypocritical. Capitalism entails prostitution as a matter of course. Its internal logic is to commercialise everything – including even ‘the species-relationship itself’:

‘The species-relationship itself, the relationship of man to woman, etc., becomes an object of commerce! Woman is bartered (Marx 2000 [1843]: 68).

The person so bartered must meet others’ needs not out of passion or enjoyment – but simply in order to make ends meet. Marx has already demonstrated, however, that alienated labour *in general* entails precisely this perversion – namely, that ‘work, vital activity, and productive life itself appear to man only as a means to the satisfaction of a need, the need to preserve his physical existence’. ‘Life itself’ as Marx (2000 [1844b]: 90) sums up the situation, now ‘appears merely as a means to an end’. Since this fate is shared by wage-workers everywhere, anyone genuinely opposed to prostitution should avoid picking on sex-workers and instead confront the system as a whole.

In opposing prostitution, then, Marx repudiates conventional morality. He refuses to portray the ‘bartered woman’ as especially debased. On the contrary, her position is that of the entire proletariat:

Prostitution is only a particular expression of the general prostitution of the worker, and because prostitution is a relationship which includes both the person prostituted and the person prostituting – whose baseness is even greater – thus the capitalist, too, etc. is included within this category (Marx 2000 [1844b]: 98n).

Marx, as we have seen, conceptualises human origins not as past history, but as current and urgent work in progress. Capitalism is more than an aberration – its emergence was historically inevitable. The prostitution of human species-life was destined to happen, being central to an inverted, pre-revolutionary world of problems and paradoxes out of which communism will emerge. It is only when we fail to see it in its dialectical, evolutionary perspective that ‘prostitution’ appears merely negatively – as ‘prostitution’. In its historical context, Marx (1971 [1859]: 71) observes, ‘universal prostitution appears as a necessary phase in the development of the social character of personal talents, abilities, capacities and activities’. By being harnessed and alienated in the service of capital, human species-life becomes enormously developed, socialised and – more and more – subjected to global forms of control. This divorce of creative labour from its former attachment to purely local, limited needs is a precondition which has to be met if, eventually, an expanded human species-life is to return to self-organisation. By joining with others and reclaiming her self, the prostitute – her predicament inseparable from that of the proletariat – will decisively reclaim her full human status. ‘All emancipation’, declared Marx (2000 [1843]: 64), ‘is bringing back man’s world and his relationships to man himself’.

The young Marx, as we have seen, linked humanity’s initial situation with communism and sexual freedom. Late in his life, he began intensively studying ethnography in order to elucidate how primitive communism might have worked. The science of kinship – arguably the core discipline of modern social anthropology – can be traced to events which occurred in North America during the 1840s, just when in Europe the young Marx was first becoming politically radicalised. The eventual outcome was a book as significant as Darwin’s in determining how Marx conceptualised anthropological science.

In 1844, a young American named Lewis Henry Morgan was browsing in a bookstore in Albany when he met a Seneca Indian. The young man invited him to meet some chiefs. That night, with his new acquaintance interpreting for him, Morgan interviewed several Seneca elders in their hotel room. He returned again the next day and the day after, pencil in hand, asking questions ‘as long as propriety would permit’. Morgan’s informants explained the organization of the Iroquois Confederacy, the structure of a tribe and clan, and supplied him with

relevant Seneca terms. In this chance encounter, American ethnology – and arguably the discipline of anthropology – was born (Resek 1960: 27).

The young Iroquois first encountered by Morgan was the son of a chief. Educated at a Baptist mission station, he was now studying law to defend his people against deportation beyond the Mississippi. As Morgan learned more and more about the Iroquois system of self-governance, he became increasingly filled with admiration, resolving to use his own legal training to defend these and other tribes against prejudice, dispossession and persecution. So much did he gain the confidence of his new Iroquois friends that they arranged an initiation ritual and adopted him into the tribe. Morgan – an instinctive republican and democrat – devoted much of the remainder of his life to championing their cause.

In 1877, Morgan published his *Ancient Society* – the first scholarly attempt to draw on ethnographic knowledge to reconstruct the whole span of history since the origin of the human species. The book had an immediate impact, coming quickly to the attention of Darwin – who generously commented that Morgan's work on the evolution of the family 'would stand till the end of time' (Resek 1960: 125). The volume was also carefully studied by Marx and Engels, who found confirmation of their youthful beliefs – and enormous political inspiration – in the author's account of the egalitarian matrilineal clan system of the Iroquois and other North American tribes.

The Iroquois were one confederated people who called themselves 'Ho-de'-no-sau-nee' or 'People of the Long-House'. A typical communal dwelling or 'long-house', writes Morgan (1965 [1881]: 126-7),

was from fifty to eighty and sometimes one hundred feet long. It consisted of a strong frame of upright poles set in the ground, which were strengthened with horizontal poles attached with withes, and surmounted with a triangular, and in some cases with a round roof. It was covered over, both sides and roof, with large strips of elm bark tied to the frame with strings or splints. An external frame of poles for the sides and of rafters for the roof were then adjusted to hold the bark shingles between them, the two frames being tied together.

The interior was compartmentalised at intervals of six or eight feet, each room facing like a stall into the central corridor. A house would contain perhaps twenty apartments, each spacious and tidily-kept and with raised bunks constructed around the walls.

The mothers and children in a given house would all belong to the same clan, having invited in as guests husbands and fathers belonging to neighbouring ones. The well-organised mothers took collective possession of all incoming provisions:

Whatever was taken in the hunt or raised by cultivation by any member of the household....was for the common benefit. Provisions were made a common stock within the household.

In describing women's status, Morgan (1907 [1877]: 455n) cites personal correspondence from 'the late Rev. Arthur Wright, for many years a missionary among the Seneca Iroquois':

As to their family system, when occupying the old long-houses, it is probable that some one clan predominated, the women taking in husbands, however, from the other clans; and sometimes, for a novelty, some of their sons bringing in their young wives until they felt brave enough to leave their mothers. Usually, the female portion ruled the house, and were doubtless clannish enough about it. The stores were held in common; but woe to the luckless husband or lover who was too shiftless to do his share of the providing. No matter how many children, or whatever goods he might have in the house, he might at any time be ordered to pack up his blanket and budge; and after such orders it would not be healthful for him to attempt to disobey. The house would

be too hot for him; and, unless saved by the intercession of some aunt or grandmother, he must retreat to his own clan; or, as was often done, go and start a new matrimonial alliance in some other. The women were the great power among the clans, as everywhere else. They did not hesitate, when occasion required, to 'knock off the horns', as it was technically called, from the head of a chief, and send him back to the ranks of the warriors. The original nomination of the chiefs also always rested with them'.

As Marx and Engels read all this, they excitedly realised that Iroquois women must traditionally have possessed what modern trade unionists could only dream of – collective control over their own bodies and lives.

Morgan visited Paris shortly after the defeat of the Commune. For several days, he roamed the workers' quarters of the city, noting the remnants of barricades, the marks of cannon and rifle fire and revolutionary slogans carved into masonry. Such scenes made a deep impression. 'The Commune, the principles, objects and acts which made up its history, have been unjustly condemned, because not justly understood', Morgan wrote (Resek 1960: 123). While in Austria, the American traveller had been shocked at the working conditions of women carrying bricks and mortar, shovelling coal and digging soil along railroad embankments. Everywhere across Europe, reaction appeared rampant. The poor of this continent, he concluded, were as oppressed as any class in history.

No less than Darwin but with a diametrically opposite agenda, Morgan drew on his deep convictions to fuel his scientific scholarship. Morgan was a democrat, a socialist and a supporter of women's rights. Like many an American patriot, he detested monarchy, feudal despotism and aristocratic privilege. He looked forward to a communist future for humanity. Reconstructing our species' past, he saw 'communism in living' as fundamental to society in the period before the family, private property and the state had emerged. One of Morgan's basic themes was that in the course of human history and prehistory, the matrilineal clan must have long antedated the more familiar Roman-style patriarchal family. Reversing Darwin's picture of early ape-like family units each under the dominance of its tyrannical patriarch, he placed *organised females* centre stage. Writing shortly after Marx's death, Engels stressed the theoretical significance of Morgan's work:

The rediscovery of the original mother-right gens as the stage preliminary to the father-right gens of the civilized peoples has the same significance for the history of primitive society as Darwin's theory of evolution has for biology, and Marx's theory of surplus value for political economy (Engels 1972 [1884]: 36).

Intent on completing Marx's unfinished work, Engels adopted Morgan's scheme as he attempted to provide for the communist movement an up-to-date theory of human origins. The relative prosperity and relaxed communal atmosphere of a typical Iroquois longhouse offered a vision of pre-capitalist life far removed from Malthus' picture of endless scarcity, misery, starvation and extinction for all but a privileged few.

Morgan was a gradualist. Engels needed to integrate his work on social evolution with Darwin's ideas. But how? The two thinkers' basic premises seemed incompatible. In Darwin's scenario, pre-civilised humans were organised under the dominance of polygamous ape-like males. In Morgan's alternative vision, alpha-males were nowhere to be seen and instead 'group marriage' led eventually to Iroquois-style matrilineal sisterhoods. To resolve the contradiction, Engels drew on his Hegelian background, postulating not evolutionary continuity but a break. There was no need to choose. Darwin's and Morgan's pictures were *both* correct. Engels could accept with Darwin that male apes – should the reports of his day prove accurate – compete violently for females, a minority succeeding in

monopolising all those locally available. He accepted that the ape-like ancestors of humans may well have lived something like this. But if Morgan's ideas were also correct, then the transition to distinctively *human* status must have involved at some point a *leap*. There must have been a momentous transition from alpha-male dominance to a whole new *level* of organisational complexity. Distinctively *human* arrangements must have been established not under the dominance of polygamous males but owing to the eventual triumph of collective *counterstrategies*. 'Animal' family arrangements, as Engels' put it (1972 [1884]: 49-50), have 'a certain value in drawing conclusions regarding human societies – but only in a negative sense'.

Engels sees privatisation as the secret of the 'animal family' – the system which, speculatively, he attributes to our ape-like ancestors. Despite variability in mating arrangements, as Engels explains, 'the higher vertebrates know only two forms of the family: polygamy or the single pair'. In either case, 'only one adult male, one husband, is permissible' (1972 [1884]: 49). The dominant male's sexual prerogatives, however, face threat from the countervailing solidarity of the primate 'horde' – Engels' term for the ever-present possibility of a coalitionary alliance representing wider community interests. In terms resonant with echoes of *The Communist Manifesto*, Engels pictures pre-human social life as a battle between these conflicting camps or forces, one tending in an 'animal' direction, the other offering glimpses of human potential:

The jealousy of the male, representing both tie and limits of the family, brings the animal family into conflict with the horde. The horde, the higher social form, is rendered impossible here, loosened there, or dissolved altogether during the mating season; at best, its continued development is hindered by the jealousy of the male. This alone suffices to prove that the animal family and primitive human society are incompatible things; that primitive man, working his way up out of the animal stage, either knew no family whatsoever, or at the most knew a family that is nonexistent among animals.

In the remotest past, continues Engels, our ancestors could survive in pairs or in small groups without need of community-wide collective solidarity. But as challenges and threats to survival intensified, there came a point when such social fragmentation could no longer be afforded:

For evolution out of the animal stage, for the accomplishment of the greatest advance known to nature, an additional element was needed: the replacement of the individual's inadequate power of defence by the united strength and joint efforts of the horde.

The eventual liberation of human potential – the 'greatest advance known to nature' – was finally achieved by escaping altogether from the constraints imposed by male sexual jealousy and control. According to Engels (1972 [1884]: 49-50), correspondingly, 'the first condition for the building of those large and enduring groups in the midst of which alone the transition from animal to man could be achieved' was the establishment of marital arrangements in which 'whole groups of men and whole groups of women belong to one another', the outcome being 'freedom from jealousy' and 'mutual toleration among the adult males'.

Engels in this way built on Morgan's scheme to construct a detailed speculative scenario of human social origins. Drawing on support from sons and brothers and linked by the strongest bonds of sisterhood, early human females – according to Engels' inspired narrative – resisted privatisation under the control of competitive, jealous males. Through strategies of resistance culminating in Iroquois-style 'communism in living', they collectivised childcare and other domestic responsibilities, thereby safeguarding their own solidarity and power. Denying patriarchal rights, females ensured that in-marrying males – if they were to enjoy marital access – must bring food and supplies to the communal home. 'The

communistic household', Engels (1972 [1884]: 61) proclaimed, was 'the material foundation of that predominancy of women which generally obtained in primitive times'. It was an origins myth as distant from Darwin's as could possibly be imagined.

In this debate as in all others, Engels was motivated by contemporary passions and controversies. 'It is a curious fact', he had written the previous year (1883 [1957]: 205), 'that with every great revolutionary struggle, the question of "free love" comes into the foreground'. Marx and Engels had daringly called for full sexual freedom in *The Communist Manifesto*, where they had advocated – to the horror of their bourgeois opponents – the total 'abolition of the family'. But lurid fantasies aside, the aim of the communists – the two revolutionaries insisted – was not to prostitute 'wives' by turning them into 'common property'. The aim was to abolish the category of 'wife' precisely by abolishing that of 'prostitute', ending men's traditionally one-sided access to sexual 'property' in either sense.

A version of 'sexual communism' which prostituted all females could only end in horror. Such 'crude' so-called 'communism', Marx and Engels observe,

considers immediate physical ownership as the sole aim of life and being. The category of worker is not abolished but applied to all men. The relationship of the community to the world of things remains that of private property. Finally, this process of opposing general private property to private property is expressed in the animal form of opposing to marriage (which is of course a form of exclusive private property) the community of women where the woman becomes the common property of the community. One might say that the idea of the community of women reveals the open secret of this completely crude and unthinking type of communism. Just as women pass from marriage to universal prostitution, so the whole world of wealth, that is the objective essence of man, passes from the relationship of exclusive marriage to the private property owner to the relationship of universal prostitution with the community (Marx 2000 [1844b] : 96).

Genuine communism, as envisaged by Marx and Engels, turns this hideous vision inside out. Instead of submitting to 'society' as an external force, the living 'instruments of production' – in other words, socially productive human beings – establish mutual possession of *one another*, constituting *themselves* as 'society' and thereby transcending their former instrumental status. It is this theoretical possibility which Marx and Engels believed to have been confirmed by Morgan's discovery of domestic solidarity, sexual equality and 'communism in living' among the Iroquois Indians. With this precedent in mind, communism, for these writers, would not be a mere leap into the unknown. Its establishment would be no novelty but instead an act of *restoration* – return us on a higher level to the human relationships of our pre-capitalist past.

Morgan had not read Hegel; neither was he familiar with the work of Engels or Marx. Despite this, he shared with communism's intellectual founders the dialectical view that history is ultimately non-linear – that in ancient forms of human solidarity a possible future can be discerned. 'A mere property career', writes Morgan (1877: 561-2) in the closing paragraph of his *Ancient Society*, cannot be the final destiny of mankind. Since the advent of civilization, the outgrowth of property has been so immense, its forms so diversified, its uses so expanding and its management so intelligent in the interests of its owners, that it has become, on the part of the people, an unmanageable power. The human mind stands bewildered in the presence of its own creation.

The time will come, nevertheless, when 'human intelligence' will 'rise to the mastery' over property. 'The time which has passed away since civilization began',

continues Morgan,

is but a fragment of the ages yet to come. The dissolution of society bids fair to become the termination of a career of which property is the end and aim; because such a career contains the elements of self-destruction. Democracy in government, brotherhood in society, equality in rights and privileges, and universal education, foreshadow the next higher plane of society to which experience, intelligence and knowledge are steadily tending. It will be a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, quality and fraternity of the ancient gentes.

## MATRIARCHY

Was early society matriarchal?

Arguably, kinship was originally matrilineal. Even to this day, hunter-gatherer women have much solidarity and power. But what tribal myths recurrently denounce as women's one-sided 'rule' is a fantasy. Examine such myths and it turns out that they concern women's menstrual cyclicity, which men blame for women's *periodic* 'rebellion', their *periodic* menstrual synchrony and corresponding power. In real life, hunter-gatherer women's moon-scheduled rituals were playful and part of the order of things, as they still are among many African hunter-gatherers to this day. Men assert power for part of the month; women seize back that power during their countervailing ceremonies. It was only when such periodicity became lost – only when men seized power and insisted on a permanent monopoly – that women's biological nature became perceived as a threat to the entire social order. One way or another, all the world's great patriarchal religions continue to hold this view.

### THE MYTH OF PRIMITIVE MATRIARCHY

Matriarchy myths tell of an "original" period of supposedly disastrous "women's rule" which came to an end when men gained power. The theme is known in many parts of the world. It is particularly prominent in those areas in which men seek a monopoly of ritual power through secret male initiation rites. Such areas include much of tropical South America, Africa, Melanesia and Australia. In the societies concerned, men organise an apparent conspiracy against women, using an array of theatrical devices, sound-making instruments, blood-shedding operations and ritual songs, dances and other performances in order – it seems – to intimidate women and separate them from their male offspring as these come of age. The success of these endeavours varies from place to place, but in general the logic which men follow and the myths and symbols through which it is expressed are so stunningly alike in such widely separated regions of the globe that anthropologists have long sought an explanation for the parallels. We argue that women's "rule" refers, in fact, to *les règles* – to women's periods, which – tradition holds – can be synchronised with one another and phase-locked to the periodicity of the moon.

Myths of matriarchy, writes Joan Bamberger (1974: 249), justify male dominance "through the evocation of a catastrophic alternative – a society dominated by women". The final image of womankind which emerges from such myths, she continues (p. 280), "is that she represents chaos and misrule through unbridled sexuality."

In the myths, woman-dominated society is envisaged not only as excessively sexual. It is seen as a world ruled by mysterious forces emanating in a more general way from nature. These are forces of "evil", "witchcraft" or "medicine" bound up with darkness and the changing Moon (as opposed to the Sun) and intimately linked with both reproductive and sexual aspects of female physiology. In a number of myths it is the "Sun-man" or "Sun-father" who finally overthrows "women's rule" (Bamberger 1974: 269, 273). Few specialists in comparative religion or mythology have doubted that such myths are assuming or alleging woman's governance by the Moon (cf. Eliade 1958: 154-63, Lévi-Strauss 1978: 221-2, 506). The Oglala Indian saying that woman's power "grows with the moon and comes and goes with it", women secluding themselves monthly in their menstrual huts "to keep their medicine effective" (Powers 1980: 62, 57) provides a good example. Beliefs of this kind, while varied in their specific forms, occur virtually throughout the traditional world. Through their bodies and, in particular, through their reproductive organs, women are felt to have a peculiar and privileged mode of access to "medicine", "magic" or "witchcraft" of a kind which is all the more dangerous for being linked with the moon, rooted in nature and therefore

ultimately beyond male cultural artifice or control.

Against this background, we may examine some typical "primitive matriarchy" myths, several of them featuring a women's Lodge or Hut suggestive of a communal menstrual hut:

*The origin of the Nain. Tierra del Fuego: Selk'nam-Ona.*

*In the beginning, witchcraft was known only by the women of Ona land. They practised it in a Lodge, which no man dared approach. The girls, as they neared womanhood, were instructed in the magic arts, learning how to bring sickness and death to those who displeased them. The men lived in abject fear and subjection. Certainly they had bows and arrows with which to hunt. "Yet", they asked, "what use are such weapons against witchcraft and sickness?" The tyranny of women bore down more and more heavily, until at last one day, the men resolved to fight back. They decided to kill the women, whereupon there ensued a great massacre, from which not one woman escaped in human form. The men spared their little daughters and waited until these had grown old enough to become wives. And so that these women should never be able to band together and regain their old ascendancy, the men inaugurated a secret society of their own and banished forever the women's Lodge in which so many wicked plots had been hatched (Bridges 1948: 412-13; quoted in Bamberger 1974: 270).*

The essence of this myth is the allegation that women once "banded together" in some way connected with a "lodge" from which emanated death-dealing supernatural powers.

Our next myth adds to these themes that of a special "paint" used by women to change their apparent identities. The "Great Kina Hut" is the hut in which men carry on their rituals today:

*The origin of the kina. Tierra del Fuego: Yamana.*

*In the beginning, women had sole power. They gave orders to the men, who obeyed just as women do today. The men took care of the children, tended the fire, and cleaned the skins, while the women did no work in the hut at all. That was the way it was always to be. The women invented the Great Kina Hut and everything which goes on inside it, and then fooled the men into thinking they were spirits. They stepped out of the Great Hut, painted all over, with masks on their heads. The men did not recognise their wives, who, simulating the spirits, beat the earth with dried skins so that it shook. Their yells, howls and roars so frightened the men that they hastened into their huts and hid, full of fear.*

*But one day, the Sun-man, who supplied the women-spirits in the Kina hut with an abundance of game, overheard the voices of two girls while he was passing a lagoon. Being curious, he hid in the bushes and saw the girls washing off painting which was characteristic of the spirits when they appeared. They had also been practising their imitations of the voices of the spirits. Suddenly, the Sun-man confronted them, insisting that they reveal to him what went on in the Kina hut. Finally, they confessed to him: "It is the women themselves who paint themselves and put on masks; then they step out of the hut and show themselves to the men. There are no other spirits there, It is the women themselves who yell and howl; in this way they frighten the men." The Sun-man then returned to the camp and exposed the fraudulent women. In revenge, the men stormed the Kina hut, and a great battle ensued in which the women were either killed or transformed into animals. From that time on, the men have performed in the Kina hut; they do this in the same manner as the women before them (Bamberger 1974: 269; citing Gusinde 1961: 1238-49).*

In this myth, men are associated with the Sun. The women, by contrast, are associated with the waters of a lagoon, in which they used to wash off "paint" which acted as a "disguise". When painted all over, the women inspired terror as they impersonated "the spirits". They

organised their sexual power in a fearsome great "hut", but men eventually stormed this, taking it over for their own use and performing in it exactly the same rituals as the women had done before them.

A further myth introduces (a) the theme of flutes and bullroarers and (b) the theme of sexual dominance as expressed in the capacity to rape. It is narrated by a man:

*The origin of the bullroarer. Amazonia: Mehinaku*

*In ancient times the women occupied the men's houses and played the sacred flutes inside. We men took care of the children, processed manioc flour, wove hammocks, and spent our time in the dwellings while the women cleared fields, fished and hunted. In those days, the children even nursed at our breasts. A man who dared enter the women's house during their ceremonies would be gang-raped by all the women of the village on the central plaza. One day the chief called us together and showed us how to make bullroarers to frighten the women. As soon as the women heard the terrible drone, they dropped the sacred flutes and ran into the houses to hide. We grabbed the flutes and took over the men's houses. Today if a woman comes in here and sees our flutes we rape her. Today the women nurse babies, process manioc flour and weave hammocks, while we hunt, fish and farm (Gregor 1977: 255).*

\* \* \* \* \*

In the next myth, women's sacred flutes are associated with the waters of a lagoon. These flutes needed "feeding with meat" – that is, the women when in possession of them were able to compel men to hunt for them:

*The origin of the sacred flutes. Amazonia: Mundurucu.*

*Three women were walking through the forest long ago when they heard music coming from a lagoon. They investigated and caught three fish, which turned into three sacred flutes. The women played these to produce music so powerful that they were enabled to occupy the sacred Men's House, forcing the men to live in ordinary dwellings. While the women did little but play on their flutes all day long, they forced the men to make manioc flour, fetch water and firewood, and care for the children. The men's ignominy was complete when the women visited the men's dwellings at night to force their sexual attentions on them ("Just as we do to them today"). However, the flutes needed feeding with meat. One day, the men – who were the hunters – threatened to withhold what they caught unless the women surrendered the flutes. Frightened of angering the fertility-spirits contained in the flutes, the women agreed, and the men seized the flutes and the power, which they have held to this day (Murphy 1973: 21 7-18).*

In this myth, the men gain power by organising what may be termed a male counterpart to women's menstrual "sex-strike" – a collective "hunting-strike". They then base their power in what was formerly the women's sacred "House", monopolising now the "flutes" which "needed feeding with meat". In this as in so many similar myths, the implication is that every collective, solidarity-engendering strategy which women once resorted to against men, men are nowadays justified in practising against women – and in a form as close as possible to the feminine-inspired original.

We now come to a myth which replaces "flutes", "bullroarers", "masks" and "paint" with a strange power-conferring garment: a skirt made of fibres stained with the world's first menstrual blood:

*The origin of royal dress. West Africa: Dogon.*

*A woman stole a fibre skirt which was stained with the world's first menstrual flow.*

*Putting it on herself and concealing her identity by this means, she reigned as queen and spread terror all around. But then men took the fibres from her, dressed themselves in the royal garment, and prohibited its use to women. All the men danced wearing the reddened fibres, and the women had to content themselves with admiring them (Griaule 1965: 170).*

The statement that the woman had "stolen" the power of menstruation expresses a male stance typical of myths of this kind. While many of the myths frankly acknowledge that men "robbed" women of a power which was "naturally" theirs, in other cases men assuage their guilt through a paradoxical assertion. It is claimed that women's power – even when taking the form of the potency of the menstrual flow – had been "stolen" by women in the first place!

The following myth is called "The Origin of the Bullroarer"; it might have been called "The Origin of Menstruation", however, since it simultaneously accounts for the first appearance of the menstrual flow. In contrast with the previous myth, this one depicts women's menstruation in negative terms:

*The origin of the bullroarer. Papua New Guinea: Kwavuru.*

*Tiv'r, the Originator, was puzzled to hear a faint sound – like that of a bullroarer – whenever his wife moved. He asked her what the sound was, but she pretended not to know. Eventually, Tiv'r felt sure that it was coming from her vagina, and he commissioned various birds to steal the object responsible. A number of birds swooped down on her while, with beaded back and legs spread wide apart, the woman was engaged in sweeping the village. But each time, she frustrated them by abruptly sitting down. Only the parrot got near enough to draw blood: this is why parrot's feathers are red. Eventually, Tiv'r called upon the little bird, Serekute, and threatened him with death if he failed to obtain the sound-making instrument. Tiv'r shouted to his wife to show a little more rigour in her sweeping, and as she bent down and the point of the bullroarer protruded from her vagina, the bird swooped down and snatched it away. The woman lay streaming with her first menstrual flow, while Tiv'r hugged the bullroarer to his breast and declared that henceforth it would belong to man alone (Williams 1936: 307-08).*

Womankind, then leaves her vagina exposed, losing her power as a result.

The next myth features a "sacred enclosure" which seems to correspond to the "lodges" and "huts" of many of the other myths. It is similar to the above story in saying that womankind lost her power when she opened her legs too wide, leaving her vagina exposed:

*The origin of Ida. Papua New Guinea: Umeda*

*One day the women – who alone held the secrets of Ida – were preparing for a ceremony as usual, asking and storing the materials, paint, masks etc. in the sacred enclosure. But this time, the men had decided to set a trap for them. They went hunting and killed so many pigs that, when the women had eaten, they lay about in postures of repletion, with their knees spread and their skirts out of place. The men copulated with the women, who "died" (slept, fainted). While the women slept, the men broke into the sacred enclosure, stole the masks, etc. and began to perform Ida for the first time. "We're no good", said the women when they woke up; "We fell asleep. From now on Ida belongs to the men" (Gell 1975: 172).*

The image of women lying "with their knees spread and their skirts out of place" suggests womankind's abandonment of cultural duty, her surrender of the weapon of sexual self-control. The men seize their opportunity to strike-break, taking advantage of the sleeping pickets, invading women's sacred enclosure and in this way stealing the sacred power.

Two more myths in this vein are worth citing. In what follows, it is acknowledged not only that the flutes were originally women's, but also that they functioned much more spontaneously and naturally in women's hands:

*The origin of the sacred flutes. Papua New Guinea: Wogeo.*

*Two women invented the sacred flutes following a dream. The flutes played of their own accord. But then a man stole the flutes and started blowing into the holes. When the women tried to explain that blowing was not necessary, he kicked them out of the way. "Very well", shouted the women in anger, "you males can keep the flutes. But flutes won't sing by themselves again. You decided to blow this one, and that's the way it shall be. And learning what to do won't be easy – no, you'll have to work hard and sweat." (Hogbin 1970: 101).*

The interest of this story lies in the notion that women's flutes "played by themselves", whereas when men possess them, an artificial effort has to be made.

The following myth stresses the genital, menstrual associations of the sacred flute, comparing and contrasting female menstruation in huts with male ceremonies in the Men's House:

*The origin of the sacred flute. Papua New Guinea: Gimi.*

*A woman kept the sacred flute under her bark-string skirts until, one day, it was stolen by her brother. On putting the blow-hole to his mouth, however, his sister's pubic hairs attached themselves to the man's face: this is why men today have beards. The loss of her flute caused the woman to menstruate for the first time; ever afterwards, she was secluded each month in a menstrual hut. The men, meanwhile, began playing the flute inside the Men's House, and have held power ever since (Gillison 1980: 156).*

The final myth in this set falls into a slightly different category, since it says nothing about ritual or the transfer of sound-making instruments or ritual adornments to men. Nevertheless, something is transferred from female possession to male. The myth was given, writes Lewis (1980: 121), "in answer to my question why, exactly, the moon was connected with menstruation..."

*The origin of the moon. West Sepik, Papua New Guinea: Gnau.*

*A woman caught the moon in her net while fishing in the river. Calling it a turtle, she hid it in her house under a pile of firewood, intending to cook and eat it later. She began to prepare the necessary sago, leaving her house each day with the moon in its hiding-place inside. As she left, she barred her house, and each evening as she returned she refused to let her husband come inside, instead asking him eat his sago outside, always outside. He wondered why.*

*One day, while the woman was out, her husband peered through a crack in the wall and saw the light of the moon under the firewood. Calling to his brothers in secret, he obtained their help in breaking in to the woman's house. They stole the moon. Singing, they pushed it up on a pole until it stuck fast to the sky. At this point, the woman was at work and saw the moon's image reflected in the red-leached sago washings in her vat. Desperate, she rushed back. Discovering her loss, she cursed her husband. The men hunted by night, killing phalangers and feeding them to the woman until her jaws ached. At last, she made it up with the hunters and demanded no more meat. "My grandchildren", she said, "I was cross over my loss. I took all you hunted. From now on, you may eat the phalangers" (Lewis 1980: 122-3).*

Much of the interest of this story lies in the manner in which it echoes recurrent themes –

among them the link between cooking and the moon, woman's "ownership" of the moon, the effects of this in enabling women to compel men to hunt for them and the practice of hunting by night. Two points in particular should be noted: (a) the menstrual connotations of the moon "reflected in the red-leeched sago washings" of the woman's vat; (2) the fact that men's gaining control over the moon and their trick in over-feeding the woman enabled them for the first time to eat their own kills. This seems reminiscent of men's gaining control over the flutes which "needed feeding with meat" in the Mundurucu myth discussed above. It will be remembered that womankind's possession of menstrually symbolised, lunar- scheduled solidarity and power was the factor which – according to the arguments of Chapter 5 – enabled her to compel male hunters to provide her with meat.

## Discussion

We won't dwell individually on each myth, or detail in any depth its ritual context. In terms of their logic, such myths are all sufficiently similar to be dealt with – following Bamberger (1974) – as a set.

If it is accepted that the fisherwoman's "moon" in the Gnau myth symbolises womankind's lost ritual power, then it may be said that in the case of all these different narratives, the formula remains consistently as follows:

(a) women possess ritual power (b) they lose this power to men.

Since we are dealing with a set of variations on a theme, we may suspect that the myths are transmitting a message of some kind which remains constant despite the variations in coding. A relatively simple task is to arrange the components of the superficially different narratives within a grid which brings out the consistencies which we suspect to be involved. In the case of the set selected here, the women – it has been seen – begin with ritual power. It seems clear that the "flutes", "bullroarers", "masks" etc. are code-terms for something which is naturally to be found in womankind's "lagoon", "hut", "enclosure" or "vagina". This can be stolen when Woman loses or surrenders her ability to "band together" with her sisters in menstrual seclusion, or (to put matters another way) when she leaves her legs apart or her enclosure unguarded. But what is this "something" which is then stolen?

At this point it may be useful to glance at some aspects of the ritual contexts to which these myths refer. It will then be seen that in some cases, male genital bleeding and flute-possession are quite explicitly linked with menstruation, although in other cases they are not. In what follows, we will touch on some ritual aspects of the Gnau, Mehinaku, Dogon, Wogeo and Gimi peoples whose matriarchy myths we have examined.

Gnau men ritually bleed from their penises, but, when asked whether this is "like" menstruation, reply: "No, it is not like menstruation" (Lewis 1980: 2). However, in Mehinaku myth and ritual, there is

*"evidence of the mutability of gender. During two ceremonies men shed 'menstrual' blood by scarifying their bodies and piercing their ears..." (Gregor 1977: 254).*

Dogon men circumcise their youths, and, in discussing menstrual blood, the ethnographer's informant Ogotemmelé "compared this blood with that shed in circumcision" (Griaule 1965: 146).

On the island of Wogeo, "the technique of male menstruation" involves wading out to the sea with a crayfish or Crab's claw, until the water is up to the man's knees:

*"He stands there with legs apart and induces an erection... When ready he pushes back the foreskin and hacks at the glans, first on the left side, then on the right. Above all, he must not allow the blood to fall on his fingers or his legs. He waits till the cut has begun*

*to dry and the sea is no longer pink and then walks ashore."*

The man then wraps his penis in leaves, returns to the Men's House and stays there for two or three days, sexual intercourse being prohibited until the appearance of the new moon (Hogbin 1970: 88-9).

In discussing the Gimi "Rule of Women" myth, Gillison (1980: 163) turns to the initiation-ritual described in the myth:

*"...clan elders intern one or two of the men at a time inside a 'menstrual hut' or 'flute house' rapidly constructed in a clearing from palm fronds and wild banana leaves. Inside the hut, an older man applies a tourniquet made of peeled banana stems to the upper arm of the initiate and 'shoots' a protruding vein at the inside of the elbow with a miniature bow and obsidian-tipped arrow. As the blood spurts up...the men shout threats at the novice, telling him they will kill him if he reveals the secret they are about to reveal to him."*

And what is this secret? The Initiate whose blood "spurts up" is menstruating. The "secret" is that men are trying in this way to do artificially what women achieve in another way more easily. The novices, having sworn secrecy, are shown the most sacred flutes, which – although in a certain sense symbolic "penises" – are penises of a kind originally owned by women. When they were owned by women, they took the form of menstrual blood. The entire ritual, as Gillison (1980: 164) explains, is "predicated on the 'secret' idea that menstrual blood betokens women's original ownership of the penis".

The myths of the Gimi assert that menstrual potency left in women's hands is deadly and destructive, whilst in men's hands it becomes phallus-like and creative. The initiation rite in the forest is designed to transfer the menstrual power of women and attach it to men. "The rite", as Gillison (1980: 164-5) puts it,

*"implies an equivalence between the penis and the creativity of menstrual blood in this sense: once menstrual blood is taken away from women (by men who menstruate) its phallic power is 'restored'. Female attributes that are deadly in women become life-producing when they are detached from women and owned by men."*

A very similar point is made by Lindenbaum (1976: 56-8) in connection with the Fore, another tribe of the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Men seek to take the potency of menstrual blood from women on the grounds that "menstruation is dirty and demeaning for women, strengthening and purifying for men." Fore men "menstruate" from the penis and from the nose.

A hypothesis to explain our set of "matriarchy myths" can now be proposed. The "power" which men "steal" – stated in the myths to be something to do with women "banding together" – is that of menstrual synchrony and solidarity. Seen in this light, the myths we have examined appear suddenly to make good sense. They appear to be uncannily accurate descriptions of this reality. Because menstrual blood is believed to be supernaturally dangerous, it can be coded as the source of death-dealing "witchcraft". Because the blood is "wet" and resides in the womb it can be coded as "fish" in a "lagoon". Because the cycle is rhythmical, it can be coded as "music" or "dance". Because it secludes women from their husbands – or, from another standpoint, excludes the husbands themselves – It can be coded as establishing Woman's secret "Lodge", "House" or "Hut", which takes womankind to a world apart. Because blood is brightly-coloured and because, while secluded, women are no longer playing the role of wives, It can be coded as a "mask" or "paint" which effaces one feminine image and replaces it by another. And because menstruation's cyclicity is lunar, it can be coded as woman's prior ownership of "the moon".

To these codings and equivalences we may add that if our hypothesis were correct, we would

expect women's power to express itself as a form of solidarity – a “banding together” – associated not only with menstrual huts but also with hunting and the obtaining of male-secured meat. As we have seen, these conditions appear to be met.

A final prediction would be that men should be unable to take over and use for themselves women's power without learning artificially to “menstruate”. This, we have seen, is the case. The myths explain how men establish the Men's House or ritual Lodge as their political answer to women's “banding together” in their menstrual huts. As the men's counterrevolution is accomplished, male “menstrual blood” becomes sacred and life-giving, whilst women's becomes polluting and feared, the first symbolising solidarity and power, the second, isolation and exclusion from power.

In short, men gain the “flutes”, “bullroarers” and “lodges” – while women are left to menstruate in their little huts. And in this respect, it is not just that our hypothesis is confirmed within the realm of myth. At this point it is as if the characters in each mythical portrait were refusing to stay within the picture-frame, insisting on stepping out into real life. Men as they establish and affirm their ritual solidarity set out deliberately and in often-painful ways (a) to isolate menstruating women and (b) to menstruate collectively themselves. In this context it would seem that there are at stake sexual and political issues so burning as to be uncontainable within the confines of the myth-making mind.

What are the political functions of the myth of original matriarchy? An answer now suggests itself. Men, it seems, need to menstruate in collective ritual performances because for some reason they lack an alternative language in which to express their jealously-guarded ritual power. The ideological function of the myth of matriarchy, in this context, is to legitimise the otherwise-inexplicable and certainly unnatural fact that today men menstruate and thereby “rule”. The myth legitimises this in pseudo-historical terms, constantly reiterating, as Bamberger (1974: 280) puts it, that “women did not know how to handle power when they had it”.

## **Nature and culture**

Our own, western myths differ in that they deny even the possibility of women's power. But they agree in arguing that culture and social order were established in the first place through the work of men.

Writing of institutions embodying male dominance generally, Lévi-Strauss (1969a: 116-17) argues that these have “absolute priority” over all others “because political authority, or simply social authority, always belongs to men...” Lévi-Strauss (1969a: 116) posits an initial situation – taking us back to the origins of culture itself – in which incest-avoidance and the institution of marriage were founded as the cornerstone of culture's supremacy over nature. Central to this conception are two claims: (a) that exogamous “marrying out” is always and everywhere the exchange of women between different groups of men and (b) “that the relationship of reciprocity which is the basis of marriage is not established between men and women, but between men by means of women, who are merely the occasion of this relationship”. The very inception of culture, then, rests on relationships of exchange and reciprocity only between men, who use women only as the means of forging relations between themselves. In this scheme of things, woman-to-woman bonds have no place at all.

In his *Mythologiques*, Lévi-Strauss extends this argument. Not only was the establishment of the incest-taboo and of marital alliance a culture-founding achievement of the male sex: so also was the establishment of rules and taboos governing the cooking and consumption of meat (Lévi-Strauss 1970). And the same applies to the establishment of *les règles* – the “rules” inseparable from women's menstrual periods. Nowhere does Lévi-Strauss intimate that women could have had anything to do with this, except insofar as women were a part of that “nature” which it was culture's project to master and transcend (1978: 221-2).

It is a point worth emphasising: Lévi-Strauss is asserting, not only that culture in general is an invention of and for men, but that even when it came to such matters as cooking and – to take matters to their logical extremes – the timing and synchronisation of women's menstrual periods, all of the structure-imparting, rule-making work had to be performed by men. The reason for women's subjection, writes Lévi-Strauss (1978: 221-2), is above all the fact that women's menstrual synchrony – synchrony both in social terms and in the form of harmony with cosmic rhythms – was not something which could be left to women to safeguard. Not only the cosmic order but the social order, too, would have been "endangered by a state of anarchy in which the regular alternation of day and night, the phases of the moon, feminine menstruation, the fixed period for pregnancy and the course of the seasons did not mutually support each other". The transition from nature to culture demanded "that the femininity organism should become periodic", and it was men who had to ensure that organised, synchronised feminine periodicity upheld the structures of cosmic and social order despite women themselves. In this context, womankind's "physiological insubordination" – her (alleged) tendency to menstruate and give birth unexpectedly and at random – has to be crushed under the force of rituals and regulations ensuring "the correspondence between social and cosmic rhythms." And these regulations (*les règles*) have to be quite externally imposed upon women's minds and bodies – "instilled into them by their upbringing" – "by a social order willed and evolved by men".

Admittedly, Lévi-Strauss is in all this presenting what he takes to be the message of a series of Amerindian myths, including in particular myths of primitive matriarchy. But in discussing the myths of *Mythologiques* as a whole, Lévi-Strauss argues that they express ideas so widespread that they tell us something about "human nature" itself, a "nature" with which man's actual genesis "cannot have been in contradiction..." (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 304-05). In short, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that he believes in these myths. Culture, it is suggested, could only have come into existence as the myths say it did, when nature – in the form, in particular, of womankind's sexual and reproductive power – was brought under male control.

### **Is female to male as nature is to culture?**

Perhaps surprisingly, a very similar view is advanced by a feminist anthropologist, Sherry Ortner, whose paper *Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?* (Ortner 1974) has become a standard reference in cross-cultural discussions of gender relations.

Ortner takes Lévi-Strauss as a starting-point from which to explain the general fact of women's subordination in human societies. Motivated by the "wish to see genuine change come about", Ortner argues that a precondition of effective feminist action is the recognition "that we are up against something very profound, very stubborn, something we cannot rout out simply by rearranging a few tasks and roles in the social system, or even by reordering the whole economic structure" (Ortner 1974: 87-8). This "something" which women are up against is "culture" in the sense in which this term is understood by Lévi-Strauss.

As the argument is clarified in a later paper (Ortner and Whitehead 1981: 7), woman's biology-governed sphere is "the domestic domain" – the sphere of the "biological family". But, according to Lévi-Strauss (1969a), culture can only sustain its pre-eminence over nature by linking these "biological units" into wider systems of alliance, using the incest-taboo to impose "marrying out" and thereby to prevent biological families from turning in on themselves. Ortner's argument is that since it is always the case "that men control the sphere of wider social coordinations, while women occupy the subunits being coordinated" (Ortner and Whitehead 1981: 7), it follows automatically that women must always be subordinate to men.

Like Bamberger (1974), Ortner finds the central motif of myths of matriarchy – the idea that women could dominate men just as easily as men dominate women – a pure chimera. "I would flatly" assert, she writes (Ortner 1974: 70), "that we find women subordinated to men

in every known society. The search for a genuinely egalitarian, let alone matriarchal, culture has proved fruitless."

Women are *always* linked to the domestic sphere, and hence *always controlled and transcended just as "culture" controls and transcends the sphere of biological "nature" in general.*

This brings us to a discussion of considerable importance in considering the significance of menstrual synchrony, a potentiality of which Ortner seems unaware. Why are women, according to Ortner, pre-eminently linked to the domestic sphere? "It all begins of course", argues Ortner (1974: 73), "with the body and the natural procreative functions specific to women alone." She explains

*"It is simply a fact that proportionately more of woman's body space, for a greater percentage of her lifetime, and at some – sometimes great – cost to her personal health, strength, and general stability, is taken up with the natural processes surrounding the reproduction of the species..."*

In other words, woman's body seems to doom her to mere reproduction of life..." whereas man's body makes very few demands for expenditure of energy in reproduction. Since there is no way that this energy-expenditure could enhance or contribute to womankind's potentiality for collectivity or cultural power, this effectively excludes her from cultural management while freeing man to concentrate upon it (Ortner 1974; 75). Woman is therefore for biological reasons imprisoned in the realm of "nature" so that – since "it is always culture's project to subsume and transcend nature" – her subjugation follows as a matter of course (Ortner 1974: 73).

Ortner advances her position as a contribution to the struggle against sexist cultural assumptions. It is difficult to avoid concluding, however, that arguments such as these are part of the problem. Essentially, Ortner concurs with the myths we have been examining in one vital respect: with them, she agrees that men's dominance over women is the condition of culture's reign. For culture to come into existence, feminine "nature" had to be "transcended" and "subsumed". In what follows, this widespread and most tenacious of sexist cultural assumptions will be critically examined.

### **Woman, power and nature**

Myths of matriarchy make the point that even though women once held power, this was a power which men had to take over if nature was to be culturally ordered and controlled. This is implied even despite the seemingly-contradictory assertion that women were the first custodians of ritual power. The notion that ritual power is "naturally" women's becomes interpreted negatively: women's ritual power is "only" natural, as opposed to cultural.

It is a point well brought out by Stephen Hugh-Jones (1979) in his ethnography of the Barasana of northwest Amazonia. Here, women very definitely possess the coveted ritual power of *He* – the power of self-renewal and rebirth – but "only" in natural form. The Barasana admit, that is, "that women are semi-immortal: through menstruation, they continually renew their bodies by an internal shedding of skin" (p. 250). During menstruation and childbirth, women come into the most intimate contact with the mysterious "skin-changing", season-changing, rain-making and life-making cosmic powers which men seek to harness through their own "menstrual" rites. But – and this is the important point – it is argued by men that women's ritual power "is not controlled by the women themselves; rather it is they who are seen to be controlled by their nature and their bodies." In one sense, then, "the women are seen as being closer to the *He* world than men, but this world is on the side of nature and beyond the control of human society" (p. 251). Men's *He* is embodied in cultural symbols; women's is simply in their bodies. Women are controlled by the *He* world, whereas men seek "to dominate and control the *He* world", a process which

"involves the dominance of men over women" (p. 251).

Evidence of this kind could be cited ad infinitum, and superficially gives support to Ortner's thesis. However, a counter-argument has been put forward by Gillian Gillison in the light of her fieldwork among the Gimi of Papua New Guinea. Gimi men fear women's menstrual blood and seek to control its potencies. Were Ortner's arguments correct, writes Gillison (1980: 143-4), a prediction would be that Gimi men's attitude towards menstruation should prove to be one of disgust or contempt stemming from the blood's association with "nature" as a realm "lower" than that of "culture". The evidence does not bear this out. Gimi men's fear of menstrual blood is "not explained by an underlying contempt for lower forms of life in nature nor by a drive to control them." On the contrary, although women's menstrual and reproductive power is identified as non-human, "men's ambition, as expressed in their rituals, is to identify with the non-human world and to be revitalised by its limitless... powers". Far from implying Woman's "natural inferiority", men's rituals "suggest her reproductive superiority" (p. 165); the purpose of men's rituals – among the Gimi as elsewhere – is in such contexts "to perpetuate a connection between a human and a non-human world when the latter is in the ascendancy" (p. 172). Menstruation, then, is one of the "superior" powers with which men must come into communion if they are to have any hope of exerting ritual power themselves.

Other evidence supports Gillison's case. Commenting on the Mundurucu matriarchy myth examined earlier here, Yolanda and Robert Murphy (1974: 91) draw attention to an implication which would seem to be intrinsic to all primitive matriarchy myths:

*"We could not find a shred of evidence to indicate that men think that women are inherently, biologically, and irredeemably inferior or submissive. Indeed, the whole key to the myth is that women once did exercise dominance, and that they had to be overthrown in a primal revolution.... Women are indeed inferior in the ideology of Mundurucu men, but they are also threatening, male status is not secure and immutable, fixed in nature and beyond challenge, for women once held power and can regain it if male vigilance is relaxed."*

In other male secret cults, too, the fear of allowing women to see or touch men's "sacred flutes" or other instruments expresses men's anxieties concerning their power, not their confidence. It is difficult and potentially embarrassing for men to maintain the fiction that they know better than women how to express the mysterious forces and rhythms of menstruation and birth.

The situation of men among the Chagga (a Bantu tribe living on the slopes of Mt. Kilimanjaro) is particularly difficult. Their method of claiming to be in some sense pregnant is to assert that their anuses have been stopped up with a *ngoso* or plug. Consequently, they have only to break wind accidentally in the presence of women or children for the falsity of this claim to be betrayed (Raum 1940: 318). In this case as in so many others, without the great secrecy, formality and social distance placed between women and men, the elaborate fictions could not be maintained.

Were women able to peruse at close quarters the "menstruation" and "childbirth" of men, their scorn and/or amusement could cause the entire enterprise to collapse in shame or hilarity. "Should they know, they would laugh at us", say the men who perform the Nama cult of the Central Highlands of Papua New Guinea (Read 1952: 6). Or as a Kuman man told Nilles (1950: 30) in approximately the same (Chimbu) region:

*"Should we show this flute to our women and children they would laugh at us and we men would lose all authority over them."*

As Gourlay (1975: 109) comments:

*"If the men would 'lose all authority' over women simply by showing them the flutes and*

*being subject to the ensuing ridicule, then either the men's authority rests on infinitesimal grounds or their vanity is so extreme that the entire social structure can be toppled by a woman's laughter."*

And to this we might add that if the entire social structure can be toppled in this way, then this says something about the social structure itself.

For all their claims about women being "nature", men experience women as a cultural threat. The men are attempting to maintain secrets which it would be culturally humiliating for them to divulge to the opposite sex. There is no adequate parallel here with the manner in which culture harnesses the forces of nature to its own purposes, no matter how much men may strive to make this ideological point. Men in their relations with nature should have no reason to experience their activities as a precarious fraud – with all the feelings of fear and exposure, humiliation and guilt attached – unless the "nature" concerned were in fact vested with prior cultural legitimacy and rights. The fact that men do see their mastery as based on fraud indicates that what is being resisted is not "nature" but, in fact, an alternative cultural legitimacy which women are seen to represent. Issues of legitimacy and illegitimacy, of truth and falsehood, of pride and humiliation can only be fought out between parties which are wholly within the symbolic, cultural realm. They cannot be features of the relationship between "culture" and "nature" as conceptualised by Europeans or as Implied in Ortner's paper.

### **Between two cultural logics**

The paradoxical existence of "menstruating men" (Cf. Hogbin 1970) poses a problem for Ortner's analysis. Men ought to be able to harness or control the forces of nature without having to pretend to be those forces. It is not self-evident why, in order to control women, men must pretend to be women. This is certainly not a typical feature of relationships of dominance or control in other spheres. We need a more sophisticated explanation than any which Ortner's or her co-thinkers' paradigm can provide.

In the mythico-ritual complexes under discussion it is not just "nature" – and not even simply human female "nature" – which male ritual power is functioning to transcend and suppress. What is being suppressed is an alternative cultural logic opposed to the prevailing logic of male sexual rule. This feminine alternative to men's rule rests on women's capacity to go "on strike"; it involves, in its pure form, the synchronisation by women of their menstrual cycles. This synchronisation is a ritual, cultural achievement of women themselves, and lies at the basis of all the mythico-ritual complexes under discussion. It presupposes strong woman-to-woman bonds, whose centrality throws doubt upon Lévi-Strauss's conception of culture as in essence a system of marital and other arrangements and agreements arrived at between men.

Menstrual synchrony is touched on or connoted in many of the traditional myths and associated belief- systems we have examined. Often, what is stressed is the idea of harmony between the menstrual cycle and other cycles of cyclical change and renewal. Two case-studies – concerning the Fore of Papua New Guinea and the Barasana of northwest Amazonia – may help us to clarify this aspect of menstrual synchrony as a form of ritual power.

### **The Fore case. Eastern Highlands, Papua New Guinea**

The Fore case illustrates the major points of the argument so far: the link between menstrual cyclicity and wider rhythms of renewal, the threat which men may see in this, the "political inversion" through which men usurp the symbolic potency of menstruation whilst turning real menstruation into a female curse or burden – and finally the link in male ideology between mastery over nature and men's dominance over women:

"In a sense, female menstrual cycles provide a physiological regularity, like the annual

ripening of the pandanus fruit, which is an ecological given... Yet the order in this case poses a threat, since it is a structure provided by women, not men, a phenomenon Fore and other New Guinea groups attempt to neutralize by male rituals of imitative menstruation..., letting blood from penis and nose".

In this way, "a political inversion is accomplished; menstruation is dirty and demeaning for women, strengthening and purifying for men." Women's own menstruation, given this political inversion, becomes a perpetual suppressed threat. But it is not the only threat: it becomes symbolic of a general threat felt to be posed by nature and the forces of the wild. "There is a sense of a universe under constraint, of predatory forces purposefully brought under masculine control." Only with difficulty is mastery over the animal world upheld: myths allow of the possibility that animals might once have gained the upper hand. "But the most precarious victory of all concerns the ownership of the sacred flutes, said to have been once in the hands of women. While the flute myths, stories of male trickery and violence, are myths about the subjugation of women, they are also embryonic statements in the history of the battle of men to control women's bodies. As one Fore man observed: 'Women's menstruation has always been present; men's bleeding, that came later'" (Lindenbaum 1976: 56-8).

### **The Barasana case. Northwest Amazonia.**

We have become familiar with the Barasana already in this discussion. But at this point it will be worth reviewing more of the evidence contained in Christine and Stephen Hugh-Jones' remarkable two-volume ethnography of this culture.

Like the Fore material, the Barasana case illustrates many of the themes of the preceding discussion, being particularly valuable for stressing the link between menstrual onset and the onset of the annual rains. It is also worth noting how the fairy-tale motif of "skin-changing" is interwoven with other images of cyclical change.

*The initiation-rite known as He House is a rite of artificial male collectively-synchronised "metaphorical menstruation" designed to help bring on the rains, which are a "skin of the universe." It occurs "at a time of cosmic skin-change", namely, the time of the onset of the annual rains (Christine Hugh-Jones 1979: 153). Rain, besides being a "skin", is also the menstrual flow of the most important of all ancestral beings, Woman Shaman, from whom all contemporary shamanic powers derive (p. 156; see also Stephen Hugh-Jones 1979: 100).*

*During He House, the men apply to their bodies red paint, which "is identified with menstrual blood" (Stephen Hugh-Jones 1979: 184). No woman is allowed to touch this paint; if she does, she "will immediately start to menstruate; the blood which flows is this paint" (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 76). The ritual involves men "giving birth": in order to do this, they "must first be opened up and made to menstruate" (p. 132). The boys who are to be newly "born" must first be put back into a "womb": they are said to be swallowed by an anaconda (p. 218) and returned to the condition of fetuses (p. 77). This condition is compared to that of "crabs and other animals that have shed their old shells or skins" (p. 120). He House brings about rebirth; it is "believed to bring about a change of skin" (p. 120), both of the initiates and of the universe, the process being "associated with the moon" (C. Hugh-Jones 1979: 156) and modelled on women's menstruation, which "is an internal changing of skin" (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 183).*

*Women are excluded from the He rites, despite (or more accurately because of) being "naturally" closer to the He world than men (S. Hugh-Jones 251). The matriarchal myths tell of how men seized the sacred He instruments from Woman Shaman, and punished her and all womankind by causing female menstruation (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 266). The most coveted object which men tried to steal was a life-giving gourd. However, they were able to gain only an artificial replica of this. Woman Shaman kept and still keeps in her*

*possession the true gourd: it was her vagina, which alone confers real immortality. Men admit that their attempts to achieve rebirth and immortality through the artificial gourd and other paraphernalia of lie House are somehow "false". "We were told directly", writes Christine Hugh-Jones (p. 154), "that He wi (He house) is like women's menstruation, but that women really do menstruate while He wi is bahi kasoase, imitation". Or, as the women say: "The men make as if they too create children but it's like a lie" (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 222).*

\* \* \* \* \*

The magical power of menstruation, then, has something to do with its perceived connection with wider rhythms of natural, social and cosmic renewal. It is this connectedness – "harmony" and "synchrony" are also applicable terms – which men appear to envy and attempt to duplicate by artificial means.

As for the rituals themselves, they are presented in each native idiom as based on a ground-plan set out in the "rule of women" myths. Certainly, the rites quite accurately replicate the logic of those myths. In the Barasana case, by possessing the gourd which symbolizes Woman Shaman's vagina, the men attempt to "appropriate the ultimate female powers of sexual reproduction for themselves and so maintain their control over women" (C. Hugh-Jones 1979: 155). In the Fore case, men possess on a symbolic level the ultimate female potency of menstruation, operating a "political inversion" so that women have their "original" ritual power turned against themselves (Lindenbaum 1976: 56-8).

In a Baruya (Papua New Guinea) matriarchy myth, the fact that men steal the power from a feminine menstrual hut is spelled out in so many words:

*"In the days of the Wandjinia (dream-time), the women one day invented flutes. They played them and drew wonderful sounds from them. The men listened and did not know what made the sounds. One day, a man hid to spy on the women and discovered what was making these melodious sounds. He saw several women, one of whom raised a piece of bamboo to her mouth and drew the sounds that the men had heard. Then the woman hid the bamboo beneath one of her skirts that she had hung in her house, which was a menstrual hut. The women then left. The man drew near, slipped into the hut, searched around, found the flute, and raised it to his lips. He too brought forth the same sounds. Then he put it back and went to tell the other men what he had seen and done. When the woman returned, she took out her flute to play it, but this time the sounds which she drew were ugly. So she threw it away, suspecting that the men had touched it. Later, the man came back, found the flute and played it. Lovely sounds came forth, just like the ones that the woman had made. Since then the flutes have been used to help boys grow."*

Godelier (1986: 70-71), who recorded this story, comments:

*"The message of this myth is clear, in the beginning, women were superior to men, but one of the men, violating the fundamental taboo against ever penetrating into the menstrual hut or touching objects soiled with menstrual blood, captured their power and brought it back to men, who now use it to turn little boys into men, But this power stolen from the women is the very one that their vagina contains, the one given to them by their menstrual blood. The old women know the rough outlines of this myth and relate it to young girls when they have their first period."*

Such stories, then, describe how – like so many strike-breakers – men violate women's menstrual space and solidarity, In effect invading women's menstrual huts so as to secure the symbols of blood-sanctity for themselves. Myths of this kind – we can now see – are accurate descriptions of the essential structural facts. In describing how women are "robbed", they simply delineate the logic of all that happens in the ritual sphere. It would be different if the rituals were mere theatre – mere re-enactments of an entertaining or

compelling narrative. But they are not. They are the political imposition of the myth of matriarchy's message. While in myth, the ritual expropriation of womankind is described, in ritual it is performed. The fact that women may suspect in the associated ideology something "like a lie" (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 222) does nothing to detract from this political accuracy of the myths. Women's suppressed awareness merely means that the mythico-ritual structure is constantly under threat, so that it cannot be sustained without unceasing conspiracy, secrecy and threatened or actual violence perpetrated against the community of women.

In a sense, then, the myth of matriarchy is good anthropology: It is the perspective of dominant men wherever women's solidarity is perceived as a continuing threat. But as in the case of all anthropology of this kind, its allegations are not simply to be taken on trust. It is one thing to accept that there is a good fit between story and political reality. Quite another would be to accept as science the central ideological thrust of these myths – the allegation, namely, that women's periodicity must be suppressed in order for culture and morality to prevail.

**For Joan Bamberger on 'Primitive Matriarchy' click [here](#).**

**For Sherry Ortner's 1974 article on the inevitability of patriarchy, click [here](#).**

**For Camilla Power and Ian Watts on the origins of gender, click [here](#).**

**For other sources and further reading: click [here](#) and go to 'References' (pages 498-530).**

## The Playful Science of Orgy



*Bruegel's The fight between Carnival and Lent*

In ancient Greek religion, an *orgy* was a secret overnight ritual, overseen by an *orgiophant* (a teacher or revealer) and celebrated with erotic dancing, intoxication and singing.

The underlying theme is almost universal, being traceable to earliest times. Anthropologists speak of 'rituals of license' – ceremonies, found just about everywhere in the ancient world, during which *marital* sex yields to eroticism of other kinds. Participants internalise sacred constraints, making sure erotic contact is not privatised but shared widely across the community. These practices produce powerful social bonds.

Sex of the kind that might risk pregnancy is not allowed. Everything is thereby rendered playful, long-drawn-out and in a sense simulated. Think of the Notting Hill carnival, when the bodily motions of sex are playfully acted out in the streets, accompanied by laughter, rhythmic music and song. Relaxed exuberance feels safe precisely *because* everyone is aware of certain boundaries not to be overstepped. Orgy is sexy, but it's not just sex. Males in particular must know how to behave. Think of it as sex – but on a higher plane.



*Notting Hill Carnival, London*

When all humans were hunter-gatherers and lived by the moon, time tended to be cut neatly in two. Waxing moon was sacred time ('moontime'); waning moon was ordinary or mundane time. Procreative sex was restricted to full moon ('honeymoon') and to the nights immediately following. At dark moon – the moment of 'moon-change' or menstruation – blood was believed to be flowing, prompting women to set themselves apart. Their periodic

withdrawal lasted until full moon and may be thought of as a sex strike. But it didn't stop all kinds of erotic enjoyment: only *marital* sex was off the menu. Other possibilities were allowed and even encouraged. The origins of sacred orgy lie here.

Let's put these ancient traditions into practice on the day of the Royal Wedding, April 29 2011! The dying days of the April Moon may not be particularly auspicious for a young couple's wedding, but they certainly call for orgiastic celebration. Looks like the Court Astrologer cocked up there!



*Notting Hill Carnival, London*

*Text by Prof. Chris Knight just before the inauspicious Royal Wedding of 2011*

## ACTIVISM – GOVERNMENT OF THE DEAD



**Note: Bakhtin inspired *The Government of the Dead* street theatre troupe (whose first performance took place on the pavement outside Lehman Brothers, Canary Wharf, London, on October 31st 2008). Bakhtin's great book on medieval carnival was and remains our bible. Below are some extracts, lightly edited and abridged.**

### **Mikhail Bakhtin 1895-1975**

*Rabelais and His World*. Translated by H. Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1984 [1965].

The basis of laughter which gives form to carnival rituals frees them completely from all religious and ecclesiastic dogmatism, from all mysticism and piety. They are also completely deprived of the character of magic and prayer; they do not command; nor do they ask for anything.

These forms of ritual based on laughter, which existed in all the countries of

medieval Europe, offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world and of human relations. They built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people lived during a given time of the year.

Initially, before the establishment of class society and politics, it seems that the serious and the comic aspects of the world and of the deity were equally sacred, equally "official."

Such equality was preserved in rituals of a later period of history. For instance, in the early period of the Roman state, the ceremonial of the triumphal procession included on almost equal terms the glorifying and the deriding of the victor. The funeral ritual combined lamenting (glorifying) with derision of the deceased. Only once the class hierarchy had become definitely consolidated did all this become impossible. All the comic forms were transferred, some earlier and others later, to a nonofficial level....

Certain carnival forms would parody the Church's cult. All these forms were systematically placed outside the Church and religiosity, pertaining to an entirely different sphere.

Because of their obvious sensuous character and their strong element of play, carnival images closely resemble certain artistic forms. But the basic carnival nucleus of this culture is by no means a purely artistic form; nor is it a spectacle. It does not, generally speaking, belong to the sphere of art. It belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play.

In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance.

Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants.

It was most clearly expressed and experienced in the Roman Saturnalias, perceived as a true and full, though temporary, return of Saturn's golden age upon earth. The tradition of the Saturnalias remained unbroken and alive in the medieval carnival, which expressed this universal renewal and was vividly felt as an escape from the usual official way of life.

Clowns and fools are characteristic of the medieval culture of humour. They were the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of carnival season. They stood on the borderline between life and art....

Thus carnival is the people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter. The feast (every feast) is an important primary form of human culture. It cannot be explained merely by the practical conditions of the community's work, and it would be even more superficial to attribute it to the physiological demand for periodic rest. The feast had always an essential, meaningful philosophical content. No rest period or breathing spell can be rendered festive per se; something must be added from the spiritual and ideological dimension. They must be sanctioned not by the world of practical conditions but by the highest aims of human existence, that is, by the world of ideals. Without this sanction there can be no festivity.

The feast is always essentially related to time, either to the recurrence of an event in the natural (cosmic) cycle, or to biological or historic timeliness. Moreover, through all the stages

of historic development feasts were linked to moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man.

Moments of death and resurrection, of change and renewal always led to a festive perception of the world. These moments, expressed in concrete form, created the peculiar character of the feasts. In the framework of class and feudal political structure this specific character could be realized without distortion only during carnival time and similar marketplace festivities. They were the second life of the people, who for a time entered the Utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance.

By contrast, the official feasts of the Middle Ages, whether ecclesiastic, feudal or sponsored by the state, did not lead the people out of the existing world order. They created no second life. On the contrary, they sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it. The link with time became formal: changes and moments of crisis were relegated to the past.

Actually, the official feast looked back at the past and used the past to consecrate the present. Unlike the earlier and purer feast, the official one asserted all that was stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions. It was the triumph of a truth already established, the prevailing truth asserted as eternal and indisputable. This is why the tone of the official feast was monolithically serious and why the element of laughter was alien to it. The true nature of human festivity was betrayed and distorted.

But this true festive character was indestructible; it had to be tolerated and even legalized outside the official sphere. It was turned over to the popular sphere of the marketplace. As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized, all that was finished and complete.

Rank was especially evident during official feasts; everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his calling, rank, and merits, occupying the place appropriate to his position. It was a consecration of inequality. By contrast, all were considered equal during carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were otherwise divided by barriers of caste, property, profession, and age. People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations.

This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created a special type of communication, not possible in everyday life. The experience demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms. All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities. We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the "inside out" (*à l'envers*), of the "turnabout," of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and un-crownings. A second life, a second world of folk culture is thus constructed; it is to a certain extent a parody of the extracarnival life, a "world inside out."



Bare negation is completely alien to folk culture. Folk humor denies the social order, yet revives and renews it at the same time. So carnival laughter is complex. It is, first of all, a festive laughter. It's by no means an individual reaction to some isolated "comic" event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival.

The people's festive laughter is directed not only at others but also at those who laugh. The people do not exclude themselves from the wholeness of the world. They, too, are incomplete. They also die and are revived and renewed. This distinguishes the people's festive laughter from the pure satire of modern times. The satirist whose laughter is negative places himself above the object of his mockery. He is opposed to it. The wholeness of the world's comic aspect is destroyed, and that which appears comic becomes a private reaction. The people's ambivalent laughter, by contrast, expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to that world.'



*FULL MOON*