

Solidarity and Sex

by Chris Knight

The image of 'man, the mighty hunter' dominated scientific thinking on the subject of human evolution throughout much of the 20th century. Until the 1980s, it was widely believed that the sexual division of labour - with males going away hunting and bringing home the meat - became established millions of years ago in a process linked with the evolution of bipedalism, tool-making and the uniquely large and complex human brain.

During the final decades of the 20th century, however, a revolution occurred in archaeology and palaeontology. More rigorous methods of excavation and analysis led to the realisation that the earliest hominids ('australopithecines') were in fact ape-like creatures leading more or less ape-like lives, and that it was only in a relatively recent 'human revolution' that symbolic culture, including language, emerged.

Archaeologists found that, in Europe at least, there is no evidence that organised hunting parties were travelling long distances, hunting large game animals or bringing meat in a systematic way to base camps. This kind of economic strategy - known technically as 'logistic hunting' - did not get underway in Europe until the so-called 'Upper Palaeolithic revolution' of about 40,000 years ago. Before this period, archaic humans such as the Neanderthals were undoubtedly hunting and eating meat. But their strategies of so-called 'encounter hunting' were less dependent on forward planning and could evidently be successful without any need for the mysteries or complexities of symbolic culture.

Nowadays, archaeologists and palaeontologists are for the most part agreed: Europe's pre-modern inhabitants - the Neanderthals - were highly intelligent and genetically capable of at least rudimentary symbolic culture. But for reasons which remain unexplained they failed to realise their potential and eventually became extinct. The dominant view today is that modern *Homo sapiens* (our own species) emerged elsewhere in a relatively sudden 'speciation event'. In small numbers at first, the new species seems to have emerged somewhere in Africa about 150,000 years ago; it then began spreading rapidly across the planet from around 60,000 to 40,000 years ago. Archaeologists frequently refer to this whole process as some kind of revolution - the 'human revolution', also known as the 'symbolic explosion'. As always, the details can be debated, but the prevailing consensus is that only during this revolutionary transition did symbolic language, art, ritual and culture appear on the scene.

What did the 'human revolution' consist of? Those primatologists, evolutionary biologists and others attempting to work out the internal dynamics are agreed on one point: it makes no sense to talk about 'man, the hunter' or 'man, the toolmaker' in isolation. The behaviour of one sex is heavily dependent on that of the other. In other words, female foraging, reproductive and other strategies must be taken into account. Engels recognised this long ago, as we will see in a moment. But, of course, modern evolutionary science's focus on female strategies has little connection with Engels's influence. Instead, scientific confidence on this score is rooted in standard Darwinian theory. Humans are primates, and primates are mammals. Among mammals in general, female foraging, mating and reproductive strategies are absolutely decisive in shaping and constraining male behaviour and in driving evolutionary change.

The human revolution happened. The details of precisely how it happened have not yet been agreed. My work as a Marxist is essentially about the details - about the social and political dynamic of that revolution. When leading human-origins specialists talk about a 'human revolution', it is little more than a formal term, which anyone can interpret more or less as they like. Palaeontologists rely on excavated bones, and it is less easy to see the politics in those. Academics can talk about the human revolution without thinking things through as Marxists would do. Was the key transition some kind of social revolution? Or was it rather - as Noam Chomsky insists - a more narrowly 'cognitive' event? Many scholars do not mind either way. In certain respects this may be fortunate, since scientists tend to be less defensive and more open-minded when they do not see a connection with politics.

But for Marxists matters are different. Science and politics will always be connected, even where this is denied. Chomsky, for example, is forced to deny the social nature of what he calls the 'great leap forward', because his entire strategy of securing funding for his projects (military funding included) depends on the claim that he is doing 'natural science' and not 'social science'. This leads him to absurd claims, such as the idea that language is not social or communicative, but emerged suddenly in a brain that started talking to itself! Marxists can have no time for such rubbish.

From the moment when we start trying to think about a 'human revolution' in the pre-cultural past, we are bound to start wondering about the social dynamics, the conflicts, the struggles of contending forces. Yet it cannot possibly have been 'class' in the ordinary sense that was at issue at this early stage. So what can it have been?

Well, the only theoretically possible answer is that of Engels in *The origin of the family, private property and the state*. The dynamic can only have been sexual. Or, to be more accurate, 'class' conflicts and divisions in this period took the form of conflicts and divisions over sex. Following this logic through, there must have been a sexual revolution which led to what Engels termed the "primacy" of women in the "communistic household".

It would be scientifically a huge mistake to argue that we can make valid inferences about early hunter-gatherers simply by turning to accounts of native American life during the 18th or 19th centuries. But, leaving aside such difficulties, let me simply document what Engels's vision of 'primitive communism' was. This may be necessary because so many Marxists appear to have forgotten.

Quoting the missionary Arthur Wright, Engels describes how Iroquois women wielded their power: "Usually, the female portion ruled the house ... 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 pick 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 he must retreat to his own clan" (F Engels *The origin of the family, private property and the state* www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/index.htm).

Women's power, according to this account, was based on their solidarity, and on the fact that they had the right to rupture their sexual relations with men at any time.

My work starts from the idea that to be fully human is to be conscious, and that consciousness in any meaningful sense has something to do with the class struggle. What has that got to do with the human origins? The answer is that the class struggle as a

determinant of consciousness did not begin yesterday, or even a few hundred years ago. As both Marx and Engels fully realised, if our struggle is traced back far enough into the past, it will be found to take other forms, sexual contradictions being among the most central.

The contradictions which led to revolutionary transformation can be traced ultimately to the fact that complex learning depends on large brains. These need time to develop. Besides involving an unusual degree of infant helplessness following birth, such brains also need a prolonged childhood in which sufficient learning can take place. The evolution of large-brained Homo sapiens therefore brought with it dramatically intensified childcare burdens. If these were not to defeat the mothers who were primarily responsible, it was vital for evolving females to ensure that the opposite sex contributed more support than had ever been contributed by male primates, including evolving humans, before.

To understand this, you have to realise that male primates - for example, gorillas and chimpanzees - provide no food for their offspring. They leave that entirely to mothers. If we suppose that, initially, the ape-like ancestors of human males were equally reluctant providers and that human evolution involved contradictions and struggles around such issues, then the mysteries of human cultural origins begin to dissolve.

If females needed to get males to hunt for them, they would have had to link sex with success in the chase. To grasp the main logical possibilities, let us begin by reviewing the situation among chimpanzees.

When a male chimp has caught a monkey or other animal, a female will sometimes rush up and sexually present her hindquarters. If the female is in oestrus and the male is interested, she may obtain a share of his meat, which she will begin eating on the spot, perhaps while copulation is still proceeding. Naturally, if a second female arrives at the kill site, she will be in competition with the first for the male's favours. For obvious reasons, we can see that this strategy is not conducive to female gender solidarity. Neither does it promote solidarity between males. The logic of the situation compels males to do battle against once another, using whatever meat they can obtain in order to entice females to their side.

Human females, as the archaeological record shows, did the exact opposite. As the revolution got underway, they found themselves no longer chasing after meat-possessing males. Instead, they stood firm with their offspring and declined to move.

We can tell this from the archaeological evidence of their home-bases, fires, etc. Unlike Neanderthal females, women of our species resisted male pressure to keep moving endlessly from camp to camp. For much of the time, they doubtless relied partly on their own gathered food. But as and when they wanted meat - as they emphatically did during seasons when gatherable food was scarce - they adopted a revolutionary, new strategy.

Instead of endlessly travelling and foraging, they got their male partners do much of the necessary travelling for them. Instead of running to the meat, they made the meat come to them. The trick was in essence quite simple. They signalled 'No!' to any male who approached without meat. Any male who tried to defy such female sexual resistance met with a wall of collective hostility, generated by the logic of the situation. Readers of the Weekly Worker who have stood on a modern picket line will understand the principles involved.

There would have been no point in signalling 'No!' to a lazy or empty-handed male if the female concerned knew that some thoughtless sister somewhere was going to signal 'Yes!' to him. The male would just cheat and seek out this alternative. In other words, the strategy of signalling 'No!' would have meant choosing the right moment, making sure that all females in the vicinity were in this together. The women's 'No!', then, within this strategy, must have been a collective signal in order to be effective.

The sex-strike organisers, as they became conscious and cultural, had a ready-made biological clock enabling exactly such a strategy. The human female conceals her ovulation, so that no male can tell precisely when she is fertile. When cycling, she loses more blood than any other primate, her menstrual periods signalling imminent fertility. She can have sex at any time in her cycle, or refuse sex at any time.

Finally, women have the capacity to synchronise their menstrual cycles with one another. The average length of the human cycle indicates an evolutionary strategy of synchronising cycles, using the moon to keep everyone in phase: unlike a chimp cycle, which is on average 36 days, the human averages 29.5 days - precisely the time it takes for the moon to pass through its phases, as seen from the earth.

Solidarity enhanced women's consciousness, as if making them more intelligent. The solidarity stemming from strike action would have enhanced menstrual synchrony, enabling women to experience their body-clocks as a source of collective strength. 'Females' in fact became 'women' when they established their own pride, their own dignity, their own power. Empowered by finding themselves in solidarity with one another, women collectively drew on their own biological resources to give their menstrual blood a wholly new, collectively constructed meaning as a symbol of 'taboo' or inviolability. Women chose each period of synchronised menstruation as the best moment to go collectively on strike.

Such collective action, timed to occur around new moon, would have signalled the beginning of each month's preparation for a ceremonial collective hunt, this carefully planned expedition typically culminating around full moon.

Under such circumstances the flowing of the blood, far from symbolising weakness or disability, would have been felt as the symbolic expression of women's solidarity and power, including solidarity with men as sons and brothers acting reliably in women's defence. And I should add that if such blood solidarity or clan solidarity in some ways felt like modern class solidarity - as Engels certainly thought - then the flag of revolutionary sisterhood may have prefigured the banner of socialism today.

In the course of cultural origins, the rule against rape was to revolutionary womanhood what the inviolability of the picket line is to revolutionary communism today. This was the first cultural rule, the one to be established at all costs, and the foundation on which all other rules were to be built.

I make no apology for drawing on the findings of modern 'selfish gene' Darwinism in order to arrive at such conclusions. Marx did the same thing in his own time: he took classical political economic theory which was clearly being used to justify the existing system of class oppression - and instead of ignoring it, looked into its internal contradictions. He was able to make revolutionary use of it.

Modern Darwinism looks at human sociality in the pre-cultural period and sees parallels everywhere with bourgeois economics. It is powerful precisely because of this - because it claims to show that the predatory and competitive realities of contemporary society are rooted in 'human nature'.

My view is that behaviour motivated by the requirements of 'selfish' genes really is what drives Darwinian evolution. There is no point in denying that. The important thing is that humans became human by overthrowing that logic of nature. We got into culture, which is different. Culture, based on solidarity, reconstructed our nature completely. That is what the human revolution was all about, and why it is so important to claim it as the beginning of our revolutionary heritage.

We won the revolution once. This means for certain that we can do it again.