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**The sexual division of labour in the origins of male domination: a marxist perspective**

**Abstract:** Of all the themes that Friedrich Engels addressed 130 years ago in “The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State”, the question of the oppression of women is one that remains particularly salient today. Serious feminists have always considered that they should base their struggle on a clear understanding of the causes and mechanisms of what they were opposing. However, since Engels’s book was written, our knowledge of primitive societies and prehistory has advanced by leaps and bounds, and has rendered many previously held positions obsolete. This article is an expression of the author’s original view on the problem of the source of the phenomenon of sexual division of labor. The aim of this essay is to suggest a framework for the updating of Marxist arguments on the subject in the light of the findings that have accumulated since then. This article summarises the ideas put forward in my book « Le communisme primitif n’est plus ce qu’il était » (2012).

**Key-words:** Marxism, social classes, social communities, social groups, gender philosophy, feminism

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**Еңбектің гендерлік бөлінуі және еркек үстемдіктің шығу тегі: марксистік көзқарас**

**Аннотация:** Фридрих Энгельс 130 жыл бұрын «Отбасының, жеке меншіктің және мемлекеттің пайда болуы» кітабында қозғаған барлық тақырыптардың ішінде әйелдерге қысым көрсету мәселесі бүгінгі күні ерекше маңызды болып қала береді. Байыпты феминисттер әрқашан өздерінің қарсыластығының себептері мен механизмдерін нақты түсінуге негізделуі керек деп есептеді. Алайда, Фридрих Энгельс кітабы жазылғаннан бері біздің алғашқы қоғамдар мен тарихқа дейінгі біліміміз секіріспен дамып, көптеген позицияларды бұрын ескірген. Бұл мақала гендер бойынша еңбек бөлінісінің құбылысының қайнар көзі мәселесіне автордың өзіндік көзқарасының көрінісі. Бұл эссенің мақсаты - содан бері жинақталған нәтижелерді ескере отырып, осы мәселе бойынша маркстік дәлелдерді жаңарту үшін негіз ұсыну. Бұл мақалада менің « Le communisme primitif n’est plus ce qu’il était » атты кітабымда айтылған идеялар жинақталған («Қарапайым коммунизм бұрынғыдай емес», Француз, 2012). Кристоф Дарманжа – экономист, Париж университетінің доценті 7 Дидро, пәнаралық бағытта жұмыс істейді, қазіргі экономикадағы тарихи және құндылық негіздері тақырыбын қозғайтын көптеген жарияланымдардың авторы.

**Негізгі сөздер:** марксизм, әлеуметтік таптар, әлеуметтік қауымдастықтар, әлеуметтік топтар, гендерлік философия, феминизм

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**Разделение труда по половому признаку и истоки мужской доминации: марксистский взгляд**

**Аннотация:** Из всех тем, которые Фридрих Энгельс затронул 130 лет назад в «Происхождении семьи, частной собственности и государства», вопрос угнетения женщин остается особенно важным и сегодня. Серьезные феминистки всегда считали, что они должны основывать свою борьбу на четком понимании причин и механизмов того, чему они противостоят. Однако с тех пор, как была написана книга Энгельса, наши знания о первобытных обществах и предыстории развивались семимильными шагами и сделали многие ранее занимаемые позиции устаревшими. Данная статья является выражением оригинального взгляда автора на проблему источника феномена разделения труда по половому признаку. Цель настоящего эссе состоит в том, чтобы предложить основу для обновления марксистских аргументов по этому вопросу в свете результатов, которые накопились с тех пор. В этой статье обобщаются идеи, выдвинутые в моей книге «Le communisme primitif n’est plus ce qu’il était» («Примитивный коммунизм не таков, каким был прежде», франц., 2012). Кристоф Дарманжа – экономист, доцент университета Париж 7 Дидро, работающий в междисциплинарном ключе, автор множества публикаций, затрагивающих тему историко-ценностных обоснований в современной экономике.

**Ключевые слова:** марксизм, социальные классы, социальные сообщества, социальные группы, гендерная философия, феминизм

**Introduction. Traditional Marxist positions**

In the second half of the nineteenth century, when archaeology and, especially, social anthropology were barely established as sciences, a body of consistent evidence appeared to suggest that male domination had not always existed since the beginning of time. In his 1861 work Das Mutterrecht, Johann Jakob Bachofen embarked on an analysis of the myths of the ancient Greeks and of certain archaeological materials. Bachofen concluded that before historical times, characterized by male domination, Greek societies (and, by extension, all human societies) had gone through a long period of what he termed “mother-right”. Before its overthrow by men, this primitive matriarchy was believed to have culminated in the supreme, militarized form of the Amazons.

Theses of this kind had a considerable impact; they struck a particular chord with Lewis H. Morgan, a specialist in the Iroquois nation of the north-eastern United States. Morgan’s studies of this Indian tribe suggested that their social organization was marked particularly by the existence of matrilineal clans and by the elevated status that women held inside them. Besides enjoying considerable autonomy in domestic matters (they could divorce their husbands as they pleased, simply by placing their spouse’s belongings on the doorstep), Iroquois women had notable economic power, owning houses and managing the tribe’s grain reserves; indeed, their representatives could even remove male leaders. Another extremely rare feature of this tribe was the fact that the compensation payable for murder was greater when the victim was a woman. In short, the Iroquois were a living refutation of the idea that, in primitive societies, women were treated as virtual slaves, and seemed to be a perfect exemplification of the matriarchy theorized by Bachofen.

In his general scheme of social evolution, Morgan (1985) saw matrilineality as a universal characteristic of societies at the beginnings of “barbarism” (today we would say the Neolithic). Combined with an allegedly egalitarian economic structure, this system was believed to have guaranteed women a position of some prestige until the Age of Metals, when private property, material inequality and male domination developed all at the same time.

These studies, whose evolutionist perspective stemmed from an encyclopaedic knowledge of the materials available, caught the imagination of Marx and Engels. In their eyes, these analyses represented the most accomplished scientific work of their age. After Marx’s death, Engels popularised the main theses in 1884 in the book that would become the reference point on the subject for generations of Marxists: The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State.

Engels accepted Morgan's conclusions regarding the late appearance – at the same time as social class, or very shortly before– of male domination, and took them a step further. For him, “the subjugation of the one sex by the other, [... the] struggle between the sexes, [is] unknown throughout the whole previous prehistoric period” (1972, 128). Stopping short of endorsing Bachofen’s boldest proposals, Engels nevertheless spoke of the “high respect” for women, and the “supremacy of women in the house” (1972, 113) in those early times. So there would have been a “supremacy of women” but not a “subjugation” of men: the nuance is important. This initial harmony between the sexes had ended with the advent of the society of classes among peoples in the Bronze and Iron Ages, which created material inequalities and private property and thus definitively sealed the fate of women:

*The overthrow of mother right was the world historical defeat of the female sex. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude; she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children.* (Engels 1972, 120-121)

In a few luminous pages, Engels contrasted the situation of women in societies structured by the “domestic communist” economy with their position in capitalist society –but also stressed the prospect that the overthrow of capitalist society would pave the way for their emancipation.

In the decades that followed The Origin of the Family, Marxism continued to be a living doctrine. Its supporters were not afraid to amend its proposals in response to new discoveries. Some of Engels's assertions were quickly challenged, for example by Alexandra Kollontaï (1978). But this period would prove short-lived, and in the 1920s all Marxist debate was smothered by the leaden weight of Stalinism. The atmosphere of free discussion gave way to the imposition of an “official” doctrine; silenced for decades, this debate was only revived in the 1960s and 1970s.

During this long period, a considerable amount of new materials accumulated. Hundreds of primitive societies were studied, and currents of thought, not always inspired by progressive motives, for a long time concentrated their fire on Morgan’s arguments (and aiming explicitly, in turn, at Marxism).

On the Marxist side, several researchers fought tooth and nail to try to prove that all these data did not undermine the arguments inherited from Engels. This required them to challenge the body of evidence that seemed to reflect the oppression of women in pre-Bronze Age and pre-agricultural societies which were nevertheless characterized by a strict economic egalitarianism. The figurehead in this battle was Eleanor Leacock (1972, 1978), who strove to establish that these testimonies were mere illusions created either by contact between these societies and the West, or by the biases of the observers themselves. We do not believe that this position can really be defended. We should not allow “noise” to distract our attention from the solid body of observations that stand up to scrutiny; we must be sure to separate the wood from the trees. Marxist reasoning is obliged to “take due account of the present state of knowledge” (Engels 1972, 74) and to integrate these elements rather than ignore them.

**Justification of the choice of sources. Goals and objectives**

*The observations*

To begin with, gender relations do not conform to a single general law. For each of the key technical levels and major types of social organization, from egalitarian hunter-gatherer nomads to the first state societies, societies are situated along a continuum between the two extremes of exacerbated male domination on the one hand and a relative gender balance on the other.

In fact “matriarchy” in the strict sense –that is to say, a situation in which it is the women who lead– has never been observed in any community. Nor is there any serious archaeological indication of its existence in the past. The Iroquois are often cited as an example of a matriarchal society, but in parallel to the very real power of the women, Iroquois men also held equally real powers of their own. For example, only men could be elected to the Iroquois League Council, the tribe’s highest political institution. After the Iroquois, several other societies were found in which women enjoyed prerogatives that gave them a social status comparable to that of men: for example, the Khasi of India, the Minangkabau of Sumatra, the Ngada of Flores Island or the Na of China. But nowhere, not even among the Na –probably the only people in the world without marriage or paternity– do women lead the community. What is true of people who have mastered agriculture or livestock farming is also true of nomadic hunter-gatherers: the Kalahari Kung, the Mbuti of Central Africa or the natives of the Andaman Islands are more examples of communities in which male domination, though probably not entirely absent, is in any case relatively limited. But at the other end of the spectrum are countless testimonies of unquestionable male domination, sometimes extreme, and which cannot be attributed either to observer bias or to other effects of contact with modern societies.

*“Neolithic” societies*

In New Guinea, several hunter-gatherer tribes live alongside small- scale crop and pig farmers.

In the farming societies with inequalities of wealth, the status of women was as a rule lower than that of men. Among the Bena Bena, for instance, “Men regard women, and women tend to regard themselves, as (relatively) weak, more sexual, less intelligent, more inconsistent, dirtier, and in almost every way inferior.” This inequality was enshrined in law: “if a woman attacks or strikes her husband her subclan must pay compensation. The reverse is not true.” (Langness 1974, 191) Suffice to say that husbands were free to strike and hurt their wives as they saw fit. Among the Fore (Lindenbaum 1978, 55-56):

*The rubbish woman (...) is one who challenges male authority, who is undisciplined and willful. (...) A truly defiant wife is brought under control by disciplinary intercourse, the husband and all the men of his “line” copulating with her in sequence.*

Among the Mae Enga (Meggitt 1964, 220-221):

*The men have won their battle and have relegated women to an inferior position. In jural terms, for instance, a woman remains throughout her life a minor (the ward of her father, brother, husband or son), denied any title to valuable property. She rarely participates in public affairs except to provide food for men or to give evidence in court cases. For the rest, she should simply look on passively and keep her opinions for herself. (...) Mae men expect, and in general receive, deference from their women, even to the extent that the latter should turn aside and lower their eyes whenever they encounter men walking on the same track.*

In the same region, societies which might maintain a very strict economic egalitarianism were generally characterised by a male domination that was just as strong, if not more so. Among the iconic Baruya studied by Maurice Godelier, male superiority asserted itself everywhere. A young boy was automatically considered senior to all his sisters, even those born before him. The roads that twisted their way through the villages were divided into two, with one path lying a few metres below the other; naturally, the upper path was reserved for men. When women happened to cross the men’s path, they averted their gaze and hid their faces under their cloak as the men passed by, ignoring them. The women lacked (among other things) the right to inherit land, to bear arms, and to make the bars of salt which the tribe used for trade. They were banned from using the tools to clear the forest or from making their own digging sticks. As for the sacred flutes and bullroarers believed to embody the deepest mysteries of the Baruya religion, any woman who laid eyes on them, even inadvertently, was immediately put to death. And while men could at any time repudiate their wives or give them to other men, wives could not leave their husbands without incurring severe punishment. Godelier (1982, 221) summarizes the situation of the Baruya women:

*The men enjoyed in this society a whole series of monopolies or key functions that continuously guaranteed them, either collectively or individually, theoretical and practical superiority over women, a material, political, cultural, ideational and symbolic superiority.*

Allowing for certain nuances, we find a similar picture in Amazonia. The legitimacy of violence against women, in particular, is well documented. Among the Kulina (Lorrain 2000, 298), an economically egalitarian community of hunter-gatherers and small farmers, physical violence may be used, although not routinely. Men may beat their unmarried daughters or sisters because they do not approve of the lovers they choose, or because their lovers are too numerous. Men may beat or gang-rape women who refuse to have sex with them, and may also beat their wives when they refuse to have children.

Among their neighbours, the Amahuaca (Dole 1974, 12-13), in general men exert considerable authority over women (...) Once married, a man beat [his wife] on the shoulders, arms, legs, buttocks or back with a special hardwood club that has a flat blade with sharp edges. A beating with such a club may be so severe that the woman is barely able to walk for a few days afterwards. A woman may be beaten for annoying her husband in a variety of ways, such as not preparing food when he wants it or putting too much salt (a recently acquired trade item) in his food.

Gang rape for refusing sex, a “special hardwood club” for beating wives: these testimonies speak volumes about a people’s perception of the relationship between the sexes. Without a shadow of a doubt, male violence here is not occasional or individual: it is institutionalized, and recognized by society as necessary and legitimate. Further striking evidence of this is found in the extraordinary biography of Helena Valero, who was captured by the Yanomami as a child and lived among them for 22 years (Biocca 1970). Finally, in the men's house of the Mundurucu (the building typical of both Amazonian and New Guinean villages) the occupants loved to reminisce about gang rapes inflicted on wayward women, confiding in the ethnologist with a knowing smile: “We tame our women with the banana” (Murphy 1986, 413).

*Nomadic hunter-gatherers*

Among many nomadic hunter-gatherers, to all intents and purposes strictly egalitarian at the material level, the status of women is equally unenviable.

Among the Inuit, Saladin d'Anglure summarized the situation of women as follows (1977, 81-82):

*The young women were (...) subject to men and older women until they have grown children of their own and can then control their daughters in law. Polygyny, much more common than polyandry, exchange of wives, habitually organized by men, and total extra-marital sexual freedom for men were other expressions of male domination.*

In Australia, the immense continent populated exclusively by nomadic hunter-gatherers until the arrival of the Westerners, the first observers were unanimous in noting the extreme inequality that presided gender relations. “Slaves”, “servants”, and “beasts of burden” were the terms that they invariably used to refer to aboriginal women. Even though the ethnology of the twentieth century added important nuances to these assessments, it confirmed that the entire continent was pervaded with a pronounced male domination in all the domains –domestic, political and religious. Ethnologists as sympathetic towards the Aborigines as Catherine and Ronald Berndt (1992, 208) wrote as follows:

*Overall, a man has more rights over his wife than she has over him. He can reject her or leave her if he wishes without giving any grounds for his action except his own inclination. She (...) can leave him finally only by elopement, in other words, by entering another union; but if she does this he is quite entitled to proceed against her and her lover. The new union is not regarded as a valid marriage until the first man relinquishes his rights in her, or accepts compensation. (...) Further, a man has the right to dispose of his wife's sexual favors as he pleases, with or without her consent; but in doing so he does not relinquish his own claims to her. She cannot, however, do the same where he is concerned. Formally speaking, 'wife lending' has no counterpart in 'husband lending'. (...) In summary, the status of women, taken as a whole, is not equal to the status of the men, taken as a whole.*

Finally, among the Ona (or Selk'nam) nomadic hunter-gatherers of Tierra del Fuego, men organized religious ceremonies specifically designed to control and terrorize women (Chapman, 1982). To an English sailor who asked if they had chefs, an Indian replied: “Yes, Señor, we, Ona, have many chiefs. The men are all captains and all the women are sailors” (Bridges 1948, 216).

**Research methodology**

*An initial assessment*

Two key points emerge from this brief overview.

To begin with, the evidence shows that male domination is not restricted to a specific stage of technical and economic development. If this evidence does not conclusively prove that it existed (even its more extreme forms) among technologically equivalent prehistoric societies, it is certainly a possible scenario.

Although societies present a great diversity with regard to gender relations, on all continents and at all stages of social development the sexual division of labour and the existence of specific social roles prove to be remarkably constant.

Thus, even if the scenario and the traditional arguments of Marxism on this issue can no longer be considered valid, the key to the enigma is indeed to be found in the direction in which historical materialism looked for it –that is to say, in the economic structure, and specifically in the forms of the sexual division of labour. This is the fundamental element that allows us to reflect on the contingent and general dimensions of gender relations.

**Results and discussion**

*The sexual division of labour*

The sexual division of labour is a universal feature of human societies. It represents the oldest form of the social division of labour, and has been present since the times of the hunter-gatherer societies. The ways in which the functions of men and women are distributed vary greatly from one people to another. Everywhere, however, it is marked by a male monopoly on what can be called (slightly anachronously) as the military industrial complex: the combination of hunting, the handling of lethal weapons, and politico-military functions. While there are a very few instances in which this monopoly is weakened –for example, among the Agta, a hunter- gatherer society in the Philippines in which women can also handle the bow– these exceptions are due to the very particular circumstances in which these peoples live (Testart 1986).

The question of the origin of the sexual division of labour is probably one of the most difficult of all to answer. We cannot say for sure when this practice emerged, though some argue that there is evidence for it in the early Upper Palaeolithic (Kuhn and Stiner 2006). For a number of reasons, it is doubtful that it was established with the conscious purpose of placing women in subjection; most likely it was the first form of the social division of labour, in which the temporary, relative limitations associated with motherhood took the form of rigid, permanent prohibitions dictated by a supernatural imperative. It succeeded probably because it ensured higher productivity and a more diversified exploitation of resources.

Attempts to explain male domination sometimes allude to psychological motivations: it is because men have tried to appropriate the reproductive power of women that they have devalued and thus dominated them (Héritier 1996). The problem with this argument (besides its being very hard to demonstrate), is that it says nothing about why women would have accepted it. To contest the idea that the devaluation of women's activities is a precondition to the oppression of women, one might invoke the case of the Achuar hunter-farmers of Amazonia who were part of the Jivaro community, in which the mechanisms of male domination are presented in what we might call a chemically pure form. The Achuar do not attach a distinct value to hunting (a male activity) and gardening (a female activity) (Descola 1983). In contrast to the general pattern, the female gardeners are not considered less worthy than men. Beyond the domain of labour relations, however, this egalitarianism between the sexes does not apply. Socially, men dominate women, and in an extremely brutal form, since the right of husbands extends to allowing them to dispose of the lives of their wives. Since this authority does not derive from any prestige associated with their labour, it must have another origin:

*The strategic location of male power is [...] outside the production process. The Achuar men have an absolute monopoly over the conducting of “external relations”, that is to say of the domain of supra-family relations that controls social reproduction. As a result, they exercise a right of guardianship over their wives, sisters and daughters, and they are therefore the only decision makers in the general process of the circulation of women, whether in the form of peaceful exchange with allies, or in the form of bellicose abduction from enemies.* (Descola 1983, 87).

Peaceful exchange with allies, abductions from enemies: the situation is clear. As in all economically egalitarian primitive societies, because they do not have weapons, Achuar women tend to become the instruments of relationships between men. Perhaps this analysis appears to place excessive emphasis on violence. The myth of the “noble savage” is a resilient one; one is often inclined to imagine that socio-economic equality goes hand-in-hand with pacifism and that armed conflicts only appear with the inequalities of wealth or even with the advent of the State. This is an idea that has been amply refuted by ethnology and archaeology (Martin and Frayer 1997; Gat 2006; Allen and Jones 2014). For men, securing and maintaining relations with other men was a constant concern, and the circulation of women was an ideal way to shore up these relations.

*Why control women?*

Two theses are sometimes proposed to explain the male domination of women in these societies.

The first relates to the economic dimension. Men have dominated women in order to appropriate their work or, at least, to ensure certain material benefits over them. The available data neither clearly support nor dismiss this possibility. According to some accounts men did indeed convert their domination into economic privileges, but the general impression (albeit based on piecemeal or fragile evidence) is that the scope of these privileges was limited, even though the domination may have been extreme (Darmangeat 2015).

Some authors have also seen male domination as a decisive factor in the control of reproduction. This idea has also produced two symmetrical theses: Paola Tabet’s identification of the mechanisms of “forced reproduction” (1985), and Estévez and Vila’s focus on birth control (Estévez et al. 1998; Vila and Estévez 2010) Again, at least regarding nomadic hunter-gatherers, these arguments are not clearly supported by the ethnographic evidence; frequently one finds customs pointing in one direction and the other within the same society. In Aboriginal Australia, for instance, young girls were systematically forced from puberty onwards into sexual relations with their husbands but, at the same time, mothers were free to practice infanticide at birth.

More than their work or their reproductive capacities, the clearest, most widely shared focus of the control of women in these relatively poor societies seems to have been their sexuality. One cannot help being struck by the fierce vigilance that husbands exert over any encroachment of their conjugal rights but at the same time by their propensity to concede these rights voluntarily to other men, whether in a ceremonial context or simply in order to seal an alliance or settle a quarrel. A. P. Elkin (1938, 128) provides a vivid description of these practices for Australia; and among the Inuit (Birket-Smith 1937, 173). Moreover, these facts challenge head-on the sociobiological reasoning that male sexual jealousy is the foundation of human marital institutions. In all these societies, what men defend, by force of arms if necessary, is not their exclusive sexual access to their wives, but their exclusive right to dispose of them at their will.

When a man punishes his wife for being unfaithful, it is because she has trespassed upon his rights; the next evening, he will probably lend her himself.

*Female counter-powers and pseudo-matriarchies*

Thus, among hunter-gatherer as well as in more technically advanced societies, it is men who hold the most efficient arms and are trained and organized to use them. Everywhere, it is men who carry out most of or all the political functions, conceding to women only the bare minimum. This is why there is no evidence of women ever having run a society in a “matriarchy”, the mirror image of a patriarchy. This is also why, in many societies, men have amassed all the power and all the prestige. Masters of arms, of war and politics, they are also the masters of hunting, the fields, the livestock, commerce, magic and ritual; on all counts, they exert non- reciprocal rights over women.

However, men have not always attained this situation of hegemony. In some places their powers have been counterbalanced by those of women to the point that both sexes have sometimes exerted a similar influence over the fate of a society. This is particularly the case in the famous (though misnamed) “matriarchies” of the Iroquois, the Minangkabau, the Ngada and the Na. Beyond their differences, these four examples, and all those that could be cited in the same vein, present so many similarities that a definite pattern emerges.

In all these peoples, in fact, the relatively favourable situation of women is associated with the high economic position that the matrilocal residence rule entails. This economic status is the basis of their influence. It supposes that the participation of women in productive work is significant, but this participation alone is not sufficient; women work everywhere, and work hard. They must also exercise rights over their own production: that is, it must be the women who control distribution. Among the Iroquois, the “matrons”, the heads of long-houses and the granaries, could refuse men the resources they needed for war parties and could thus exert formidable pressure over them. Among the Minangkabau, in the prolonged absence of men from the villages, it was the women who owned and managed the houses, the fields, and the livestock.

*The archaeology of the sexual division of labour*

Archaeology studies material elements, and as such cannot give a direct account of the relations between the sexes. These relations can only be reconstituted through inference and exercising considerable caution. Thus the notion that the many female statuettes of Palaeolithic and Neolithic Europe were incontrovertible testimony of a cult of the Great Goddess, a cult that characterizes societies that are intrinsically matriarchal or “matristic” (Gimbutas 1991), has been convincingly refuted (Ucko 1962; Conkey and Tringham 1995; Testart 2010).

Exploring the meaning of the symbolic representations of extinct cultures is a daunting task. Perhaps the sexual division of labour is a more robust starting point for an assessment of the relationship between the sexes in prehistoric times. The male monopoly on arms appears as a decisive element of male domination in the societies studied by ethnology; it can be argued that in earlier times, the same causes produced the same effects. To be precise: this monopoly does not in itself demonstrate the existence of male domination, since it was effective even in the pseudo- matriarchies of the Iroquois, the Minangkabau or the Na, but it nevertheless indicates that male domination was highly likely. In fact, on this point the data from the five continents are remarkably similar (even allowing for the inevitable difficulties of interpretation). The evidence – artistic representations, grave goods or marks on bodies– points very clearly in the same direction.

In this chapter we cannot hope to give a detailed account of a body of evidence so vast that over the past three decades gender archaeology has emerged as a major branch of the discipline. Here we limit ourselves to noting its most significant achievements.

In many places in the world, figurative art represents gendered characters in activity, thus providing evidence of both the sexual division of labour and the male monopoly on arms. Examples are found in the many eloquent scenes from the Spanish Levant in Mesolithic and Neolithic times (unfortunately difficult to date more precisely), in Aboriginal Australia (Balme and Bowdler, 2006), or in the iconography of hunter-gatherers and farmers in south-western America (Crown 2008; Munson 2000).

Regarding the funeral goods of the Neolithic and later periods, grindstones and awls are generally deposited in female graves, and axes, swords and arrowheads in male graves. There are some exceptions: armed women have been found in burial sites in northern Europe, and, above all, in the kurgans of central Asia (Davis-Kimball, 2002). These exceptions can be attributed to the particular context of these warrior societies which had, so to speak, moved the cursors of the sexual division of labour and of the possession of arms.

Finally, markers of activity on skeletons in the Middle East (Eshed et al. 2004) and in Italy (Marchi et al. 2006) also reveal significant differences between men and women in the early Neolithic and in the preceding period. For the Palaeolithic the evidence is very scarce, but a recent study (Villotte and Knüsel 2014) of remains dating from 30,000 years ago found that the elbows of male skeletons (especially the right elbow) presented an injury that is typical of modern-day baseball players. This injury suggests a powerful and repeated throwing action, probably of the spear aided by a projecting device. The result is one of the oldest indications of the sexual division of labour found so far.

*Subsequent developments*

Male domination is rooted far in the past, long before the appearance of social classes and the State, even before the development of wealth and inequality. It is the product of the most basic division of labour –the one that distributes tasks by gender. To be more precise, it is the product of the way in which the sexual division of labour was created and of how it was reflected in the ideology, establishing an almost complete incompatibility between the social roles assigned to women and another set of functions comprising hunting, weapons and warfare. The initial allocation of these tasks conferred on men the strategically important position of the political leadership of the society. And women, unless they also had an economic capacity that allowed them to counterbalance this male power, became, to one degree or another, and in spite of their resistance, the objects of male strategies.

The position of weakness of women was already established in many economically egalitarian societies and increased their vulnerability to adverse developments. With the advent of storage, wealth began to be accumulated and human labour systematically exploited. Naturally, the first victims emanated from the least protected groups: prisoners of war, deprived of the support their families and now entirely at the mercy of their victors, and women unable to oppose the extension of the field of male domination. Later, the appearance of intensive agriculture compounded the effect, turning men into drivers of draught animals and farm workers par excellence, excluding women from these activities and breaking down the lines of defence which, in some societies at least, they had managed to maintain until then.

**Conclusion**

*The historical role of capitalism*

If male domination finds its ultimate origin in men’s monopoly over weapons and of the actions associated with them, one may wonder why this domination has lasted in one form or another until the present day.

A central part of the answer is the fact that until modern times, none of the successive systems of economic organization questioned the sexual division of labour. The allocation of a specific role in production to each sex has been the substrate of the ancestral idea that, more generally, the sexes should be allocated different roles in all social activities, and that potentially these roles might be unequal. Although the male monopoly over hunting and the possession of weapons no longer applies, the sexual division of labour was the foundation of a gender inequality which has lasted for millennia.

This gender inequality has persisted, but this is not to say that it has not evolved. As long as the division of labour was still elementary, assigning certain tasks to men and others to women seemed likely to be the most obvious and the most appropriate form of organization. But over time, the growing complexity of the social division of labour that accompanied advances in productivity and technology has gradually penetrated the spheres assigned to each sex. Where previously all individuals had performed the basic tasks assigned to their sex, the tasks they carried out became increasingly specialized and differentiated. As this process developed, the division of labour contributed to make the criterion of sex increasingly obsolete and superfluous, but did not dissolve it. There were more and more occupations carried out by men, and more and more occupations carried out by women, but these occupations remained the exclusive domain of one or other sex.

In this area as in many others, the introduction of the capitalist mode of production represented a revolutionary change. Capitalism was the first economic system to lay the foundations of an authentic (though perhaps inaccurately named) gender equality. In generalizing the notion of commodity, it was the first mode of production in which women's work and men's work are compared objectively, daily, and on a large scale, and in which their work blended together in the market in an undifferentiated substance embodied by money. In the depths of its economic machinery, capitalism implements mechanisms that undermine the foundations of the sexual division of labour and create the objective conditions for its future demise.

Marx already remarked that if Aristotle had failed to discover the theory of labour value, it is only because capitalist society had brought forth the concept of “work” in its broadest sense, that of human economic activity, abstracted from all its particular forms (Marx (2008, 590-591). For all pre-capitalist societies, there were different kinds of labour –in particular, free versus slave labour – which could not be reduced, either in reality or in people's minds, to a single common denominator. This applies equally well to the separation between men's work and women's work. In all primitive societies, in the absence of the market and in the presence of a strong sexual division of labour, the functions of the sexes were regarded as different and therefore impossible to measure against each other.

In a fully capitalist economy, however, products are constantly compared and contrasted through the mediation of money. Their value, expressed in their price, is indifferent to the specific nature of the work and the workers involved, including their sex. To the extent that they produce commodities, the various specific tasks dissolve into abstract labour: “equal human labour”, a homogeneous substance in terms of its quality and of which only the quantity, the “socially necessary labour time”, intervenes in the creation of value. And if women are frequently paid less than their male counterparts, the existence of the market itself creates a point of support to correct this apparent anomaly. “Equal pay for equal work!” was the rallying cry of proletarian women; although the battle is still not over, significant successes have been won along the way.

In laying the foundations for a revolution in objective social relations, bourgeois society created the conditions for a revolution of conscience. The historical rallying point of the bourgeoisie in its struggle against the ruling classes of the past was legal equality, which included equality of the commodities in competition and equality of the various components of the labour force. Of course, at the same time as they waved the egalitarian flag, the bourgeoisie were preparing to trample on it; and during the great French Revolution women were among the first to note bitterly that mere political equality was not supposed to extend to them. But even if the nascent bourgeois society was not ready to recognize the legal and political rights of the female half of the population, the emergence of this demand –and its fulfilment, in country after country– was somehow inscribed in the genes of a social organization that marches under the banner of equality.

According to Marx’s famous dictum, humanity only poses itself problems that it can solve. It was in bourgeois society that, for the first time in the human adventure, currents such as the revolutionary workers' movement emerged which set themselves the goal of achieving gender equality. Probably it would be more accurate to speak of the disappearance of the genders or of a process in which they become identical.

In primitive societies, the sexual division of labour permeated the material and ideological life of the community: not only at work, but in all the areas of life men and women were seen as different entities. There is no better indication of the imprint of the sexual division of labour on primitive societies than the fact that in Aboriginal Australia, men and women were metaphorically designated by their main working tool: “spears and digging sticks” (Berndt 1974). In Amazonia we find the same distinction, in the form of “the bow and the basket” (Clastres 1974, 92). More generally, although we have testimonies of many acts of resistance by women in primitive societies against abuses committed by men, the idea that women and men could play the same social roles without differentiation and share the same rights and duties did not emerge anywhere until the modern period. In all societies of the past, lacerated by the sexual division of labour, its overthrow remained, in the true sense of the word, unthinkable.

The question of the possibility of a genuine gender equality (that is to say, the dissolution of the genders) under the capitalist system is too vast to be addressed here. For a number of reasons, there is at least room for doubt. In a famous quotation, Marx said that only the establishment of a socialist society would allow humanity to leave prehistory behind it; in terms of gender relations, a century and a half after Marx wrote the sentence, his words continue to resonate with a strange profundity.

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