

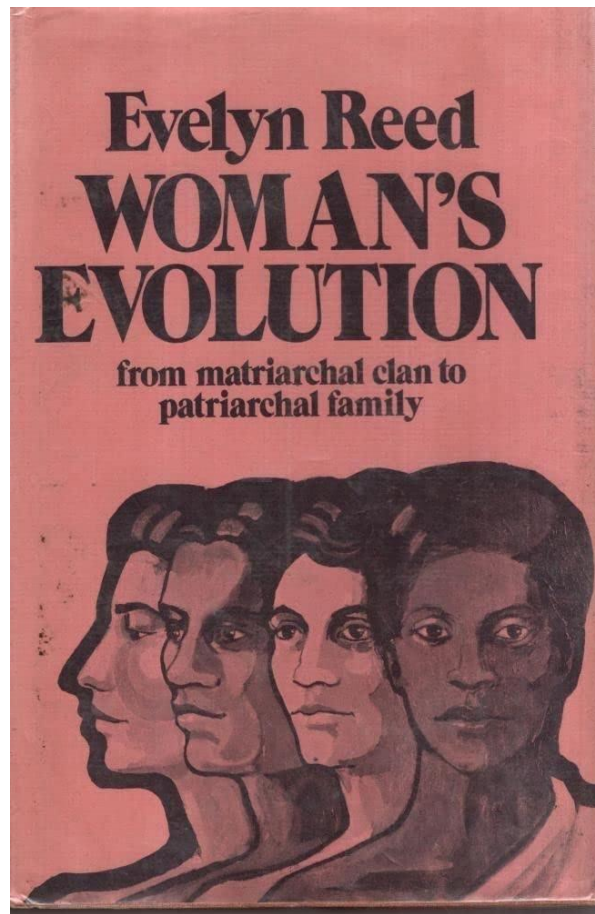
# **The Anthropology of Evelyn Reed**

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Evelyn Reed has performed a service by publishing *Woman's Evolution*. Its significance is that it is the first full-length attempt to provide a Marxist account of the evolution of the family since 1884—the year of Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. An enormous amount of anthropological knowledge has been accumulated since then, so a new work on the subject was long overdue.

Having said that, it must also be stated that Reed's book is a disaster. Its only real merit is that it has reopened issues which have—scandalously—long lain dormant, forcing many feminists and socialists to face once again the real issues of human evolution and potentiality which were taken up by Engels but have been almost forgotten by Marxists ever since.

To pose the issues is one thing, but to answer them adequately is quite another. Reed's answers to the fundamental problems of anthropological theory are—despite the very best of intentions—bizarre, arbitrary, at variance with almost everything which Engels wrote as well as with modern bourgeois anthropology and of little or no use to the women's movement. It simply is not good enough to start with a few ideological preconceptions and then—with the help of snippets of "quotations" culled from here, there and everywhere—to force the facts into the conceptual box. If it is to conquer bourgeois anthropology, Marxist anthropology must show that it is *more* honest, *more* firmly based on the evidence and capable of explaining *more* of the total body of evidence than any other theoretical school. A theory which is compelled to keep excluding evidence and hiding facts from view will get nowhere at all.



Evelyn Reed

## The Hunter Cultures

Evelyn Reed hides from view the greater part of human history. For at least ninety per cent of our period of existence on this planet, we human beings have lived as hunters of big game animals. The Upper Palaeolithic—the period in which (particularly clearly in northern Spain, France and much of eastern Europe) culture in the form of large collective settlements, burials, cave paintings, complex kinship organizations and so on quite “suddenly” flowered—this period was one in which ice covered much of the ground, vegetable food was not abundant and humans depended for their existence upon the hunting of extremely large animals, including mammoths. It was in this period (which came to an end only about eight to twenty thousand years ago) that the final transition to fully-human status took place. Men and women of large-brained, fully-human type (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) spread into Siberia, over the Bering Straits into North and then South America, into Australia and into virtually every other habitable part of the globe. In Australia, the climate was quite different from what it is today, being far more well-watered and fertile, and the earliest Australians were able to hunt many now-extinct huge forms of marsupial, such as *the Diprotodon*—a sort of giant kangaroo. Many of these giant marsupials continued to be hunted for thousands of years, probably from about 50,000 years ago to as recently as 8,000 or so years ago. About 11,000 years ago in North America, hunters killed mammoths, giant bison and possibly many other now-extinct giant species. The animals present in the continent at about the time of the Palaeo-Indian’s arrival (much earlier) included *Titanotylopus* (a huge form of camel), horses, bison, mastodons, llamas, ground sloths (including a giant the size of an elephant), beavers, short Taced bears, armadillos, several sabre-toothed cats, shrub oxen, moose, tapirs, antelope and many more large species. These provided hunters’ paradise and were hunted so successfully and for so long that eventually the effect of human hunting began to tell and the giant species began to become extinct. They were hunted collectively by being surrounded with fire or driven over cliffs or into pits or trenches where they were speared. Multiple kills were often made, and the animals were so large that huge supplies of meat (which kept well in the cold weather) must have been obtained. The slow maturation rate (and gestation periods) of the giants made them vulnerable to extinction relatively sooner than smaller, faster-breeding species, and their size became a handicap as it was this which must have attracted their human predators.

In all the world’s continents, the pattern appears to have been roughly the same: giant mammals survived into the late Pleistocene and then gradually became extinct. There is no doubt whatsoever that early humanity was able to hunt much larger species than has been possible in recent times, and that we ourselves as a species contributed to the extinction of the game animals on which we had originally most depended for much of our food. If we want to picture the kind of life with which Stone Age humanity spearheaded the conquest of the animal kingdom and led the advance of *Homo sapiens*, we must imagine, not scattered, small bands of nomads hunting relatively small animals, with hunters acting individually or in small parties, but large groups of big game hunters positioning themselves close to water-holes of other spots where the game congregated in great masses. These human groups would have had fixed, or seasonally-fixed, home-bases—sometimes cave-dwellings—protected by fire, where the women and children could stay while the men were out hunting. Weapons were perhaps crude and unwieldy by later standards (although not always so) but, to make up for this, hunting itself was a tremendously *organized* and *collective* activity producing large supplies of meat. There is no need to assume economic scarcity under these conditions: on the contrary, it is likely that the hunters were able to assume a relative abundance of game and to adjust their behaviour to correspond with this assumption.

It is now some time since there existed, anywhere in the world, the large herds of wild big game necessary to sustain that kind of way of life. The hunter-gatherers who have survived into the twentieth century hunt for the most part relatively small animals either in small hunting parties or with hunters acting alone. The fact that they find it possible to hunt without large-scale organization and collective techniques testifies to the relative sophistication of their weapons—bows and arrows, poison darts,

blow-guns and so on. Of course, it is dangerous to generalise here: some cultures have survived with the crudest technologies, and collective game-drives have often been reported within the ethnographic present. But the fact remains that modern hunter-gatherers give no picture at all of the way of life most characteristic of Paleolithic humankind. With few exceptions, they rely to a very large extent on vegetable foods gathered by women and children—a mode of life ruled out for most of the time to the Ice-Age mammoth-hunters of Northern Europe and Siberia, or to the Palaeo-Indians who entered North America by way of the Bering Straits (where there was virtually *no* vegetable food edible to humans available). For surviving hunter-gatherers to obtain wild vegetable foods, large expanses of territory have often to be combed. The best technique is typically to scatter widely into small family groups, or for bands of a dozen or more individuals to roam about, each having relatively little contact with its neighbours for much of the time. Such nomadic habits have undoubtedly contributed to a blurring of older residence-patterns and to a general loss of complexity in forms of social organization. Only where hunters have developed some horticulture has the resulting residential stability enabled something of the structure of the more complex cultural heritage to be retained.

## Hunting and the Power of Women

The ancient cultural heritage of the big-game hunters included the principle of matriliney but it was not really based on it. The matriliney rule is a rule of exchange, but it is only a rule of procreative exchange—of the exchange of human offspring. Matriliney means that men's own offspring do not belong to them. Men have to surrender the children whom they father, receiving back in exchange shared rights in different children—the children of their sisters. This rule is important, but much more important to the ancient hunters was its *economic* aspect—the rule which denied men rights in their *economic* produce, the animals which they killed themselves. The “own kill” rule was a universal component of the ancient hunter-cultures. It meant that men could never eat the game which they themselves had “produced” surrendering this to their wives’ (i.e. their sexual partners’) kinsfolk, but receiving in exchange the game animals which their own kinsfolk (mothers and sisters) had obtained. The “own kill” rule survives today mainly in the form of the principles of “sacrifice”, “totemism”, “hunters’ taboos” and so on and so forth, but even today in most hunter-gatherer cultures it is considered quite wrong for men to kill animals merely in order to eat them themselves. Even where men do eat their own kills, they feel it necessary to make atonement for doing so, to “apologise” to the “souls” of the animals concerned, to make “offerings” of the meat to spirits or ancestors before eating any, to retain at least one species of animal (the so-called “totem” species) to which the “own kill” rule fully applies or to pay lip-service to the ancient norms in some other way.

But the nomadic, scattered way of life of modern hunter-gatherers has destroyed the one thing upon which the “own kill” rule (along with matriliney) most depended. The Upper Palaeolithic cultures were relatively settled, in the sense that the caves and other shelters used were inhabited continuously for long periods of time. In each settlement, a *community of women* could form. Archaeological remains show how “long-houses” were built, and how the women's hearths were arranged in rows together, clearly indicating that groups of matrilineally-related women formed the nuclei of the large households to which the menfolk brought the produce of the hunt. It was these collectively-organized groups of women who controlled the “magic” of fire, and who alone (we can imagine) had the right to cut up the meat and make it available (by cooking) as food. The “own kill” rule was, from this standpoint, the rule that once men had killed an animal, its meat would concern them no more. They had no right to cook it or eat it and very likely no right to cut it up or distribute it at all. All that was in the women's hands. The women took the children (matriliney) and the game animals (the “own kill” or meat-exchange rule), leaving their husbands with nothing. Even sexual favours were conditional upon the efforts of the men in hunting. For their rights in children and in cooked meat, these husbands had to go back to a *different* group of women, their clan “sisters”. You could only eat with your own kin, not with non-kin (such as

wives or in-laws). Even today, this is one of the fundamental principles of kinship in all societies which can be said to be “kinship-based”, despite the fact that nowadays the rule is often evaded or overlaid in practice. But this rule of separation at meals meant that the men in each kin-group were dependent upon their kinswomen for their meals. Hence the kinsmen had a deep interest in defending at all times their sisters against the in-married, non-kin husbands of these sisters. Their meals depended on it. It was the control of the *fire* and hence of the *food-distribution system* which enabled the women to set men as brothers in balanced opposition against men as husbands in this way, thereby negating the dominance of the male sex as a whole. And it is this *economic* as well as *sexual* system of “total exchange” which the “matriarchal” system (a bad term, since it implies rule by women instead of equality) represents.

The disappearance of the big game animals meant the breakup of the ancient women’s communities. Foraging for wild vegetable foods meant that (except where horticulture had become possible) groups became nomadic or semi-nomadic. Small bands or family groups had to cover wide territories and therefore had to scatter widely in search of food. The women in this way became split up. A husband would depend on his wife or wives for food (the inverse of the previous pattern), so that men stayed with their wives, relinquishing their sisters. The “protectors” of women became their husbands, no longer brothers. But this meant that women could no longer protect themselves *against* their sexual partners, because their (theoretical) “protectors” *were* their sexual partners themselves. The whole process of exchange which had created a *balance* between the sexes began to collapse. When this process of disintegration first began, attempts were made again and again to restore the power of the ancient feminine communities. But no matter how many “mother-goddess” figurines were carved or placed under hearths, no matter how many feminine or fertility cults were developed, these compensatory rituals could never really compensate for the real feminine communities whose power was ebbing away. All the rituals of the Australian Aborigines centre around the ancient notions of the power of women, but it is pure ritual, bearing little relation to the way in which men in practice treat their wives in the present day. The same applies to the hunter cultures—or what is left of them — of all parts of the world. In ritual, men try to conjure up the powers of women (even, often, to the point of artificially “menstruating” by subincising the penis), but to little avail. It is economic necessity which ultimately determines the forms of social life, and this is something which no amount of religion can deny or change.

## Evelyn Reed’s Argument

Now, what has all this to do with Evelyn Reed? Unfortunately, nothing. Or at any rate very little. But this is because Evelyn Reed’s book has almost nothing to do with reality at all. Wherever a relationship with reality is discernible, it turns out to be an inverse one—the evidence is turned on its head. Evelyn Reed hides from view virtually all the evidence relating to the early big-game hunting cultures on the grounds that hunting was the work of men. Having apparently never conceived the possibility of the “own kill” rule, and knowing almost nothing of what happens even in those hunter-cultures which have survived into recent times, she imagines that men simply ate their own kills, women playing no part in the exchange-processes which the hunting economies involved. Starting out with this disastrous misconception, Evelyn Reed then proceeds to do all possible to blot out, obscure and minimize the significance of hunting in the evolution of the human race.

This is how Evelyn Reed “proves” the former existence of what she calls “the matriarchy”:

“The matriarchy was the necessary first form of social organization because women were not only the procreators of new life but also the chief producers of the necessities of life” (*Woman’s Evolution*, p.xv).

Reed argues that in earliest times, men were of little or no economic importance. She attacks all those anthropologists who “could not see that in the period of the maternal clan, when men were preoccupied with hunting and fighting, women were the principal producers of the necessities of life

for all the members of the community” (p.104). The bulk of the food-producing was done by women. Consequently women were the most important sex.

Now, is this argument convincing? Does it make sense to talk of “hunting and fighting” as if both forms of male “violence” were the same sort of thing? Or does it strike the reader as mere feminist myth-making and dogma? How on earth can men have been economically unimportant at a time when big game hunting was humanity’s vital source of food and the activity around which both tool-making and social organization primarily centred? Reed’s “answer” is to bolster up one factually hopeless assertion with an even more ludicrous one. According to her, the women just “chose” not to eat the meat which the male hunters caught:

“... in the matriarchal period women decided for themselves whether they would eat meat, and usually they did not” (p.93).

Reed speaks of “the long-drawn-out resistance of women to eating meat or even eating together with men who were eating meat” and, discussing “vegetable dishes”, asserts:

“Such foods were the preference of primitive women at all times except for ritual occasions, when it seems to have been far more a duty than a desire for the women to swallow morsels of meat” (p.72).

Evelyn Reed suggests that women may have “excluded themselves from having anything to do with a food that repelled them”, the repellent food in question being, of course the meat killed by the violent males (p.73). In this way, the women demonstrated their complete economic separation from and independence of the opposite sex:

“Since neither women nor young children depended upon meat for their food, they were not dependent upon male hunters for their subsistence”, (p.83).

So there were two quite separate economic systems—a male one, and a female one:

“The males are the hunters and eaters of flesh foods, the females the collectors and eaters of vegetable foods” (p.137)

Neither economic system had any necessary connection with the other—and, in fact, the females (according to Reed) avoided the males as much as they could. Reed cites no evidence whatsoever for this extraordinary theory beyond a few “quotations” relating to the Akikuyu and the Masai, along with one or two other *modern* “tribal” cultures of evidently male-dominated types (p.72). Even in the case of these cultures, however, Reed’s idea of two economies unconnected with each other does not apply.

Reed’s theory is supposed to apply to the hunter cultures of the palaeolithic. Now, can we seriously imagine that women “chose” not to eat meat, when the ability to utilize this food- source was the supreme benefit conferred by the mastery of artificial tools (hunting weapons etc.)— the great technological breakthrough which laid the basis for the emergence from an animal to a human way of life? Can we really believe that only the male sex benefited from this breakthrough, while the women’s “maternal functions and sentiments” (as Reed puts it —p.71) “... caused them to lag behind in their diet, retaining the vegetable food of the primates”? According to Reed, the economic basis of the transition from animal to human life never touched the female sex at all. The transition from ape-like vegetable-gathering to organized, collective hunting concerned only the men. Reed asserts that the (supposed) refusal of the women to progress in this respect was a positive thing:

“The fact that females, like their ape forebears, continued to collect vegetation instead of hunting and killing animals may have played a highly salutary role under the circumstances” (p.70)



Reed means to say that killing was dangerous, both to the women's offspring and to wild animals, and that the females, being uninvolved in killing, were in a good position to put up barriers against it (p.70). Does it even begin to make sense to speak of hunting as "killing" in this way? Can anyone take seriously Reed's idea that both human children and wild animals needed protecting from this "killing" at the same time? And can it be imagined that the earliest human females made the transition to humanity by continuing to gather wild vegetable foods "like their ape forebears"? No specialists have doubted that, in many hunter cultures at many times during the year, the gathering of wild vegetable foods was useful and essential, and that it was mainly women and children who were responsible for this. But whether in the form of chipped stone handaxes, spear-heads, earth-traps filled with bones, tools for scraping hides, archaeological kill-sites, butchering sites or paintings on cave-walls—the evidence for the importance of meat food to early human society is overwhelming. Only a writer without training in anthropology, with scant regard for the methods of science and with a purely "ideological" aim in view could claim that throughout a period of tens and even hundreds of thousands of years women and children "lagged behind", continuing despite the hunting going on all around them to live like monkeys and apes, picking and grubbing for berries and roots so as to prove their "independence" of men.

But Reed's real argument is a moral rather than a factual or scientific one. She believes in what she calls "the individualistic and competitive character of male sexuality" (p.49), "the violence of male sexuality in the natural state" (p.64) and so on. Counter posed to such characteristics are the non-violent, biologically co-operative "maternal functions" and "sentiments" of women (p.71). "Only the women" we are told, "possessed maternal functions and sentiments" (p.71), and it was these which caused women to "lag behind" where hunting was concerned and to single-handedly bring about the transition from animal to human life as a result. Never could an inversion of reality have been more total. Reed understands nothing of the fact that it was women who made human big-game hunting possible, who initiated the hunting expeditions, who demanded the meat, took the meat when it was brought home, skinned the animals, treated the hides, made clothing, cooked the meat, distributed the food, organized (with their brothers) the systems of meat-circulation and exchange and so on. In Reed's view, the hunting of animals was just another form of "male violence", associated in the "matriarchal period" with rampant cannibalism.

## Cannibalism Violence and Male 'Nature'

Reed notes that there is in "primitive" societies a widespread custom according to which husbands are prevented from eating with their wives or in-laws. The actual reason for this is that it is simply an aspect of the "own kill" rule where hunter-cultures are concerned. A man brings his kills to the camp of his wife and his wife's kin. But here, with non-kin, he is not allowed to eat. Various taboos (e.g. the "mother-in-law taboo") prevent him from ever eating with his in-laws. He must provide for these in-laws (in this way *earning* whatever sexual rights he is given), but cannot take meat from them. If a man were permitted to eat with his wife and her kin, he would be eating his own kills. The whole system of game-exchange would break down.

Reed understands nothing of all this, having not even a glimmering of an awareness of the "own-kill" rule. In her view, the hunters had to be kept away from their wives and children because otherwise they would have eaten them. She interprets the separation of husbands from wives and children at mealtimes among even existing, surviving tribal cultures in these horrifying terms (any tribal peoples who got to read Reed's book would tear it up in indignant anger). Quoting Crawley, who asked why "according to a very general custom" men and women are separated at meal-times in present-day tribal societies, Reed replies:

"The answer is that the food segregation of the sexes is only the most conspicuous part of the general segregation of the hunters from the mothers and children in the epoch of cannibalism" (p.84).

According to Reed, the “trail of cannibalism extends from the beginning of the palaeolithic era to its end” (p.27). She also quotes approvingly a statement by Julius Lippert to the effect that cannibalism “once covered the entire earth” and “is widespread over the whole of Oceania as far as Malaysia, and in America it extends from south to north, reaching its climax in the civilised states of the center” (p.25). But according to Reed, it is also true that “the maternal system ... dates from the beginnings of humankind” (p.xiv). The whole of the early “matriarchal period”, in other words, was one in which men were eating one another. The men of this period— whom Reed calls “cannibalistic hunters”—were shunned and tabooed. They were the “contaminating sex” (p.101). Children had to be kept away from their fathers, who might eat them at any moment:

“The segregation of ‘father and child’ was originally a segregation of children still in the care of their mothers from adult men, who were hunters and warriors. It cannot be understood except as a survival of the epoch of cannibalism.

The dangers to the children are reflected in the curious rituals performed around the lying-in mother and child ... women were confronted with the real problem of protecting infants and children from hungry predators, both animal and human. They solved the human part of the problem by segregating themselves and their offspring ...” (pp.140–141).

According to Reed, one of the most important functions of fire was to enable women to keep at bay hungry fathers who would otherwise have eaten their own offspring (pp.145–148). Being unaware of the “own kill” rule, Reed does not realize that the custom of denying men rights in their offspring has a far less lurid meaning. She does not realize that men had to be denied rights in their own economic produce — i.e. the animals they killed—and that, to do this, it was inevitable that they should also be denied (by their in-laws) rights in their own “sexual produce” (i.e. their own offspring), as well as property-rights in their wives or wives’ kin generally.

Among the Sharanahua of Peru, the women of a village collectively initiate hunting expeditions by sexually challenging the men—the implication being that a sort of “sex strike” will be enforced unless the men go off and bring back some meat. In all the ancient hunter cultures of the world, wherever hunting was a collective activity, something of this kind took place. A complete ban on sex was enforced (the men agreeing to this) until a successful outcome to the hunt could be announced. Reed notices this, but comes to her usual bizarre conclusions. According to Reed, what was involved was not a sex-strike, but a horrified response on the part of some women to the fact that the men were ready to go about “killing”. While in reality, it was the women who initiated the hunt by beginning to sexually “freeze out” their husbands, Reed sees everything upside down and imagines that the men spontaneously began to feel violent about everything, whereupon the womenfolk began rushing to protect their children and shutting themselves away. According to Reed:

“... it was the women who laid down the edict that they were not to be approached at times when the men were engaged in the dangerous and contaminating occupation of hunting and killing.

And it was more than a mere sexual avoidance. It was a total taboo that prevented men from having any kind of association with women. Its object was to prevent hunters or warriors from coming into contact with women and children whenever they were embarked upon killing expeditions. Even more fundamental than sexual intercourse was the rule of avoidance of food intercourse, for it was primarily against cannibalism that the taboo was directed” (pp.87–88).

With arbitrary and unsubstantiated nonsense such as this it is impossible to know what to do.

From earliest times, according to Reed, women had attempted to make men feel guilty about “killing” The violence had to be stopped, and

“it was the females, with their highly developed maternal functions and their inhibitions with regard to eating meat, who led the way” (p.73).

This is Reed’s utterly original explanation for “totemism” which, she tells us, was “the earliest social institution” (p.37). Not realizing that “totemism”, to the extent that it is anything at all, is a form of breakdown of the “own kill” rule—a way of evading it, and a form of religious escape from the ancient hunting norms rather than “the earliest social institution”—Reed invents an immense problem which has to be solved, and boldly constructs her own theory. Her starting point, once again, is universal cannibalism. This cannibalism, we are told, was “innocent”, because men were not eating their own kinsfolk but only their own wives, children and other non-kin people (you had to marry non-kin and your children were nonkin). Reed explains:

“Those who were of the same kin were of the same kind, human beings. Outsiders, non-kin, were members of a different kind, i.e. animals. This kinship criterion established the boundaries of cannibalism. The lives of all members of the horde or kin-community were sacred and inviolable; kinsmen could never kill or eat other kinsmen. They could only kill and eat outsiders or non-kin who were regarded as animals” (p.30).

For this reason, cannibalism never seemed like cannibalism to the cannibals themselves. They were always eating non-kin (e.g. their own wives and children), who were only “animals” like other animals which were hunted:

“Under these circumstances savages were not cannibalistic according to their comprehension of what constituted human beings. Since kinsmen never killed or ate other kinsmen, this was equivalent to a total taboo on cannibalism. When we speak of cannibalism in the epoch of savagery we must bear in mind this limited conception of humanity which made the men of those days unwitting or innocent cannibals” (p.31).

Now, according to Reed, it was to achieve this level of cannibalism (as opposed to absolutely indiscriminate cannibalism) that women established the taboos of totemism in order to prevent men from eating their own kin (although this would *not* have prevented the men from eating their own wives or offspring).

Reed’s argument runs as follows. First, men in this period were incapable of discerning the differences between two-legged creatures of their own kind on the one hand, and bison, deer—or cuttlefish—on the other. Reed writes:

“It may seem incredible that humans at any stage of development could fail to see the essential differences between themselves and animals. But in remote ages men and animals were closely associated; they lived together in the primal forest and their necessities were the same to a large extent. Even at a higher stage of evolution, savages continued to credit animals with an intelligence and capability similar to their own” (p.29).

We are presented with a picture of “savages”—including modern ones—so myopic as to be unable to tell the difference between man and beast. Reed quotes the following words of Frazer to back up her argument:

“This incapacity to distinguish between a man and a beast, difficult as it is for us to realize, is common enough, even among savages who have not the totemic system. A Bushman, questioned by a missionary, “could not state any difference between a man and a brute—he did not know but a buffalo might shoot with bows and arrows as well as a man if it had them.” When the Russians first landed on one of the Alaskan Islands the natives took them for cuttlefish “on account of the buttons on their clothes.” (pp.29–30)

It is a pity the Bushmen are not given a chance to answer back. As to what the Alaskan Islanders would say, it is hard to imagine. But we must try to follow Reed's argument. "Savages" were incapable of distinguishing humans from beasts.

Therefore, to stop them from eating humans, it was as well to stop them eating beasts as to do anything else. To do this, the women got the men to confuse themselves with particular *species* of animals, so that one group of men was confused with, say, the bear, another with the deer and so on. One group of men thought of the bear as their kin, another believed they were kinsfolk of the deer, another felt they were descended from beavers etc. etc. The men were then prohibited from killing or eating their animal "kinsfolk". They could still eat non-kin (i.e. those whom they married), but the great value of totemism was that "it eradicated any possibility that a kinsman would hunt, kill or eat another kinsman" (p.38) Men could now eat their wives, but not their sisters:

"All hunting, whether for food or for mates, was expelled from the community. The brothers had to go outside the community of kin to hunt "animals"; they could only eat "strange flesh". Curiously enough, the term "strange flesh" applied also to mates, i.e. women who were not of their own kin" (pp.174-5).

What are we to make of all this? To some readers—brought up since infancy to imagine "savages" as cannibals before all else—it might seem plausible enough. However, that anyone claiming to be a Marxist should write such stuff is almost beyond belief. As far as cannibalism goes, no-one would deny that many tribespeople treated real "outsiders" occasionally as fair game. And if it is permissible to kill people, why not eat them, too? Brotherhood has never yet been established on an international scale. The "sanctity of human life" has rarely transcended the boundaries of restricted tribes or cultures, and in that sense, men have always treated other men occasionally no better than they would treat animals. However, it is among *horticultural* tribes, not among hunter-gatherers, that "headhunting" and regular cannibalism has been fairly prevalent. Among hunters, cannibalism as a means of gaining food is virtually unknown. To find evidence of widespread cannibalism among regular meat-eaters, it is necessary to go way back to before the Upper Palaeolithic, back to *Homo erectus* and beyond—to the period *before* the race had become fully and completely human. Reed's whole case, however, rests on the view that everything was the reverse of this, that cannibalism and big game hunting were the same kind of thing, that horticulture led to a decline of cannibalism and so on. Reality is inverted, point by point. Reed's view is that even after "the first social institution" ("totemism") had been established, men were still fully entitled to eat their wives and offspring on the grounds that these were non-kin. The whole "matriarchal period"—stretching from the earliest humans to the early agricultural civilisations—was continuously being threatened by "killing" and "cannibalism". And it is on this basis that Reed's strange theory of "totemism" is erected.

Are we really to believe that a South African Bushman, who could tell from the faintest traces on the ground not only the exact species but also the approximate age, condition and probable location of his animal quarry, might mistake a buffalo for a human being? Or are we to believe that an Alaskan Islander or other "savage", seeking a few moments of innocent sexual pleasure, could have been so stupid as to mistake a human female for a *cuttlefish*? Are there really any reports of attempted sexual intercourse with cuttlefish? Or perhaps with bears or buffaloes? Reed's idea that "savage" males were incapable of distinguishing human females from animals is baffling. She naively accepts at face value the most ridiculous allegations by Victorian missionaries and explorers (note how *little* use is made of modern ethnological reports) as to the crude mental level of "savages". Can we really take seriously the idea that a taboo on eating *animals* was the only way in which men could be stopped from eating *each other*. Could there not have been a simpler, more direct, way of achieving the end in view? And finally, even if we accept Reed's argument, is it not somewhat disappointing to learn that the supreme act in the transition from Nature to Culture—the establishment of "the first social institution"—was the setting up of a food taboo which in any case allowed a man with the clearest conscience to eat his wife, his

children, his mother-in-law and all of his in-laws? Isn't it rather difficult in this light to understand how the human race survived?

It has to be admitted that Reed herself, later in the book, seems to become aware of such difficulties. To get around the problem of wives being eaten by their husbands, she changes her mind about the confusion of humans and animals and suddenly introduces the argument that only men could be so confused. Although men imagined *other men* to be animals, "there is no equivalent documentation, however, on women having ever been conceived as 'animals'" (p.280). Women were, from the very beginning, conceived as human beings, we are now told. So now, men *ate* their brothers-in-law, but only had sex with the sisters of these unfortunate men. But isn't this an equally impossible contradiction? Whenever Reed gets herself into a contradiction, she describes it as "a paradoxical situation", imagining that it existed in reality rather than in her own mind. As she writes of the taboo on eating women:

"This produced a paradoxical situation. One group of men killed and ate men of another group who were 'strange flesh'. At the same time these men, as 'strange flesh', were eligible as mates for their sisters" (p.277).

Reed describes this as a "peculiar relationship which existed", unaware that the peculiarity is hers, not that of the "savages" about whom she is supposedly writing. It should hardly need saying that at no "stage" in human evolution has eating one's brother-in-law really been approved of. Needless to say, Reed gets around the problem of how men could have eaten the people to whom they were presenting their sisters as wives by the invention of a further "taboo". But Reed's need to keep adding afterthoughts and arbitrary assertions in order to clear up contradictions as she goes along only emphasizes the hopelessness of the underlying theoretical presuppositions on which her contorted arguments are based.

## Method

Reed's hair raising theories stem from the most disastrous defects of method. It is not an exaggeration to say that Reed has taken advantage of *none* of the theoretical achievements which anthropology has made over the last fifty or so years. The great names of twentieth century anthropology might as well never have lived. Reed's methods belong to the curio-collecting, quotation-mongering, arbitrary theory-spinning traditions established by such figures as J.F.McLellan or J.G.Frazer in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Any modern book of Marxist anthropology would have to begin by seriously dealing with such modern "giants" of bourgeois anthropology as Claude Lévi-Strauss, taking up their ideas in order to transcend them. But Evelyn Reed has not even presented the ideas of Lévi-Strauss to her readership, let alone effectively criticized them. Instead, his and other modern ideas are dismissed with a few derogatory remarks aimed from a nineteenth century pre-Marxist and non-Marxist *standpoint*.

Having read *Reed's book*, can any reader new to the subject have gained a clear idea of what "matriarchy" or a matrilineal descent-system entails? No such clarity is provided. Nowhere is a given matrilineally-organized community systematically analysed or even described, although (for anyone interested) there is excellent material available on the Western Pueblo Indians, the Ge Indians (mostly matrilineal) of the eastern highlands of Brazil, the Truk Islanders, the Menangkabau of Sumatra and many, many others. Instead, we have a jumble of isolated "quotations" (the entire book hobbles from one quotation to the next), often from the most dubious sources, and usually relating to almost entirely unconnected times and places on earth. This intrinsic arbitrariness in the selection of "facts" makes it impossible to form any idea of how the interdependent economic, social and sexual relations and mechanisms within a given matrilineally-organized community actually *function*. Everything is ripped out of its context. Reed tries to make an economic fact of life in one kind of social system actually appear to be the economic basis of quite another kind. For example, in the course of "proving" that the "matriarchal system" rested on the overriding importance of women's labour in gathering wild vegetable foods (the reverse is the case), Reed cites Frazer to the effect that "it is generally considered the province of women

to dig roots" (p.107; see also pp.105–6). In Australia (as amongst most hunter-gatherers who have survived), it is the women whose food-gathering provides the overwhelming bulk of the food-supply. Reed forgets, however, to mention a small detail—no-where on the Australian continent have we an example of a matriarchal (or even matrilineal-matrilocal) social system. It is true that Aboriginal women work hard—but many authorities have described this in many regions as a form almost of slavery: the system is extremely male-dominated, the males using their wives as drudges, forcing them to do all the heavy work. No reader of Reed's book would realize this. The method is one of "well-intentioned" distortion.

In the same chapter, Reed notes the traditional division of human history into two main epochs: the food-gathering (hunting etc.) and the food-producing (farming) epochs, with a transitional horticultural (small-scale gardening) period in between. Having noted this distinction, Reed then obliterates it for all practical purposes. For we are told that throughout all these different periods, women's labour predominated, as a result of which the same social system (matriarchy) prevailed. Just why it should be considered inescapable that the sex which is the materially productive one must by that very fact be emancipated and predominate socially is not explained. In class-societies, are the materially productive classes necessarily the ruling classes? Isn't it more usually the other way round? And was it not the view of Marx and Engels that class-exploitation *begins* with the economic and sexual exploitation of women by men? But for Reed, such notions are unimportant. Women did all the work, so they "must" have been emancipated. And women (argues Reed) did essentially all the work from the earliest beginnings of human evolution into the early stages of agriculture and civilization. Throughout all these stages of technological and economic evolution, women's labour predominated, as a result of which the same social system (matriarchy) prevailed. In this context, the economy of the Australian Aborigines is lumped together in the same section (entitled "Control of the Food Supply", pp.106–110) with the neolithic revolution and the domestication of animals. It is all, after all, "primitive society or 'the matriarchal period'". When human beings were living in caves, hunting large game and wearing skins, the matriarchal clan system prevailed ("the maternal clan system was the original form of social organization" and "dates from the beginning of humankind"—pp.xiii, xiv). Millennia later, when early agriculture and the neolithic revolution were underway *women were not only still in charge but "reached the apex of their influence and prestige"* (p.411). Going back now in the opposite direction, to when (according to Reed) man-apes were bludgeoning each other in sexual fights for access to females, feminine emancipation was no less universal: for the "sexual freedom of female apes and other animals who mate at their own will and with any number of males they choose testifies that, in nature, males do not dominate females" (p.53) Reed lumps all animal species together to form one undifferentiated mass and then proceeds to discuss "animal behaviour", "the animal family" and so on. We are given statements like: "Animal behaviour, fashioned by nature's mode of survival, is preponderantly individualistic and competitive" (p.45). Or again: "A careful study of animal life and behaviour shows that it is not the female animal but the male animal that suffers from a biological liability" (p.44). The same methods are used to discuss animals as are used to discuss human cultures: instead of distinguishing one species from another species of animal (noting, for example, that ants- or beavers-organize co-operatively in a way that, say, baboons do not), Reed simply lumps all "animals" together and proceeds to discuss the form of behaviour of this general mass. The general conclusion, naturally, is that the general mass is "matriarchal": "So far as the females are concerned, no male, including the dominant male, can control their lives and sexual activities" (p.52). Or again: "The animal 'family' is no more than a maternal brood, with the mother alone providing for herself and her offspring" (p.53). Matriarchy, in other words, is "natural". It is a biological inheritance of the human species, rooted in biological need. Exactly the same methods as those used by Robert Ardrey, Desmond Morris, E.O.Wilson and others (the "male dominance is natural" school) are adopted by Evelyn Reed, only with the opposite ideological purpose in view.

Despite the lip-service paid at times to Marxism and "evolution", what Reed in fact gives us is a picture of female emancipation as a universal and timeless expression of "nature", which is contradicted only by unnatural class-society in recent times. This explains why Reed can give no indication as to the way in which the family, forms of religious ritual etc. evolve out of the development of the forces

of production—and why she can only give, if anything, an imaginary picture of just the opposite: the alleged effects of “women’s maternal functions”, of feminine “sentiments”, of “totemism” or of some other “natural” or “moral” factor in actually defying and overturning the economic bases of society. It is in this light that Reed sees the flesh-eating way of life of early hunting humanity curbed and eventually overturned by a *religion* (“totemism”), the religion therefore acting upon the economic basis of society and overturning it. The religion itself was in turn a product of women’s natural “maternal functions”. Marxists, of course, have traditionally reserved the term “idealism” to describe ideological systems and philosophical methods of this kind.

Reed’s view is that the first human social institutions were outgrowths of “the organs and functions of motherhood” (p.43). They were a direct product and extension of female nature, in which male nature had no part:

“The mothers alone were equipped with the maternal and affective responses that were extended into the human world in the form of social collaboration” (p.48).

Male nature was purely animal, until female nature—biologically “humanized” to start with—changed it. As Reed puts it: “the biological advantages for humanizing the species were on the side of the females, not the males” (p.44). Cannibalism was an expression of the violent sexual “nature” of males who had not been modified by female natural “functions”. For thousands of years, according to Reed, females lived in human society—an extension of “maternal functions” and “sentiments”—while males lived like animals (on account of their “violent sexuality”). Not only were these supposedly contrasting life-activities not based on any distinction between a human and an animal form of economy: they diametrically contradicted this distinction, the women continuing to live on plant-gathering (“like their ape forebears”), while the men did what no apes or monkeys can do—hunt big game through collective action and the use of artificial weapons.

In all Reed’s work, there prevails this idea of various immutable “natures”—female nature on the one hand, male nature on the other—whose interactions determine the various forms which human society in the course of its evolution takes on. In this conception of fixed essential “natures” there is not even the glimmerings of a conception of the *dialectic*—of the way in which the evolutionary process moves through the gradual accumulation of tensions and contradictions which eventually result in a sudden explosion, in which things are changed into the opposite of what they were before. How can women’s maternal “nature” explain “totemism” or the origin of society? If this “nature” has always existed, why did society only arise at the particular evolutionary “moment” when it did? Why does Reed feel the need to argue that it is a law of “nature” for the female sex to be emancipated—even devoting several pages to the extraordinary argument that the members of a baboon overlord’s “harem” of females are (like all other female animals) really quite liberated? (pp.49–59). Why the need to argue for an essential *continuity* between animal and human maternal and family forms? Has Reed never considered the possibility that, as Engels (in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*) put it, “... the animal family and human society are incompatible things”, that there was a complete *break* in the continuity of evolution, and that a central feature of the dialectical origins of human society was the *emancipation* of the female sex from precisely that male dominance which *is* so characteristic of the social life of monkeys and apes? Has she never thought of the possibility that human society was the product of a real *social revolution*, and that a precondition for this was the preceding intensification of male sexual dominance to a level incompatible with new socio-economic needs? In recent years a large number even of bourgeois anthropologists have begun describing human origins as “the human revolution”. Is not this idea of more use to Marxists and the women’s movement than the idea that early society was rooted in a “nature” which had always been there?

However “understandable” in terms of feminist sentiment, as an attempt at dialectical materialism Reed’s book is a disaster. Marxism is not a particular “theory” (or string of “theories”) which someone can dream up and then counterpose to all preceding achievements of scientific investigation and thought.

It is nothing other than the sum total of the real findings of the various branches of science themselves—synthesized so that a picture of the whole process of nature and its emergence into culture emerges. It is true that Marxism is also a political weapon in the class struggle and in the struggle for women's emancipation. But this is true only in the sense that only the working class (and within this class, the oppressed sex) has a consistent objective need for scientific truth in all fields. Reed has provided the women's movement with one more attempt at a feminist mythology. But it is not myths which working class women need, but the truth.



The Library of Unconventional Lives

Chris Knight  
The Anthropology of Evelyn Reed  
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