

Sex and the human revolution

Chris Knight of the Radical Anthropology Group looks at the transition from ape to human and quantity into quality, plus the importance of language, counter-dominance and sex in the human story.

Chris Knight

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The way I distinguish science from ideology is quite simple. If the knowledge gives certain people power but not others, it is ideology. So all kinds of racism, sexism and crap bourgeois ideology might give certain people power, but at the expense of the rest of us.

If it is science, it is empowering. Full stop. It does not matter who you are — you can be rich, poor; male, female. Science is knowledge that gives humans power. But in order to put the big picture together we cannot merely be scientists in the bourgeois sense of controlling bits and bobs of nature for particular purposes. We must be dialecticians — able to resolve and transcend contradictions rather than being gripped by those contradictions.

When it comes to looking at human origins, the standard Darwinian, ‘naked ape’ view — that humans evolved and we got a little cleverer than other apes, but essentially we are animals — has a lot going for it. It solves a lot of problems because you can just use simple Darwinism to explain many things. But in making the problem of human origins simple you are hitting a brick wall. Although Darwinism works to a huge extent, there is no Darwinian explanation for the main thing that marks humans out from apes: a particular form of consciousness we have, expressed in language.

Many people do not realise this. People tend to think language must have evolved. After all, all animals have a means of communication. If you have a look at Chris Harman’s book *A people’s history of the world*, it starts out with the story that language evolved because humans became more cooperative. Actually, no Darwinian thinks that this is sufficient as an explanation. If that were the case, the more cooperative a species, the more linguistic capacity it would have.

The thing about language is that it is not like that: it is either there or it is not. It is not about chimpanzees having communication systems more language-like than cats. In fact if you look at the natural world, the species that has got the closest to a communication system like language is bees, in the sense that they have displaced reference. But bees have very small brains, so the idea that a larger brain is more likely to produce language just does not work.

However, the Darwinians have no theory for the origins of language, and if you cannot explain the origins of language then you cannot explain a whole lot of other things about humans either.

Evolution has always been a question of incremental, cumulative change. But at certain moments in human evolution something very different happens, when there is a build-up of contradictions. Then at a certain point quantitative changes reach a tipping point and a qualitative change emerges, as all the contradictions are resolved.

There is a wonderful book called *The major transitions in evolution* written by someone who was sarcastically called god in Darwinian circles, John Maynard Smith. He is almost a fundamentalist Darwinian. He points out that the evolution of life on earth goes through major transitions that are quite sudden, quite extraordinary moments, like the origin of life itself, the origin of multi-cellular organisms. He treats the origin of human society and language as one of these major transitions. My position that

language emerged in the process of a revolution is a variant of that ‘major transitions’ theory.

Perhaps I will just quote Trotsky on this: “Every educated person since Darwin has labelled himself an evolutionist, but a real evolutionist must apply the idea of evolution to his own forms of thinking. Elementary logic, founded in a period when the idea of evolution itself did not exist, is evidently insignificant for the analysis of evolutionary processes. Hegel’s logic is the logic of evolution.

“Only one must not forget that the concept of evolution itself has been completely corrupted and emasculated by university professors and liberal writers to mean peaceful progress. Whoever has come to understand that evolution proceeds through the struggle of antagonistic forces, of a slow accumulation of changes that at a certain moment explodes the old shell and brings about a catastrophe, a revolution, he has learnt finally to apply to the general laws of evolution to thinking itself; he is a dialectician: that is, to be distinguished from vulgar evolutionists.”

So if you are a Marxist you expect the transition from ape to man to be revolutionary because we are qualitatively different from the rest of nature. Which would mean, of course, that prior to that revolution you would expect a build-up of contradictions. So the question is, what could those contradictions have been? As soon as you look at ape social organisation it becomes pretty obvious. You get major conflicts over resources and over sex.

Sexual conflict

There is an odd thing about Marxists who write about human origins, including the Socialist Workers Party and Chris Harman. There appears to be some peculiar blockage when it comes to talking about sex, even if you are talking about monkeys and apes.

It is not just that people who think of themselves as Marxists, and therefore are inspired by Marx and Engels, do not agree with Engels and Marx — that would be legitimate. It could well be that Engels was wrong to think in terms of sexual conflict as the build-up of contradictions which led to the establishment of human society. And Engels could have been wrong to think of the matrilineal clan being the central institution of early society, primitive communism. As we have to be scientists rather than starting out from preconceived political positions, we cannot say something is right because Engels said it was right.

In fact this is what Engels himself said on science: “The more ruthless and disinterestedly science proceeds, the more it finds itself in harmony with the interests of the workers.” In other words, we have to put science first. Rather than tailoring it to a perception we have of working class needs, we must go with the science and that itself will be the most revolutionary thing to do. Therefore it could be that Engels was

completely wrong and it would be our duty — and Engels would agree — to affirm that we were right and he was wrong.

What amazes me, though, is that people who call themselves Marxists do not even try to find out. When I first became interested in anthropology in the late 60s, I noticed there were a few people who called themselves Marxist anthropologists. Yet they did not even ask any of the questions Marx and Engels asked.

Putting that aside, Engels had this to say (and Marx said much the same thing in his early writings): “According to the materialist conception, the determining fact in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of the immediate essentials of life. This appears in a twofold character. On the one side, the production of the means of existence, particles of food and clothing, dwellings and of the tools necessary for their production. On the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the proliferation of the species. The social organisation under which the people of a particular historic epoch and a particular country live is determined by both kinds of production: on the stage of the development of labour, on the one hand; and of the family, on the other.”

So for Marx and for Engels there was a concept of species-life, and by that they meant life which reproduces itself. In animals the species reproduces itself through sex. In human society we do that, but also on another level: that of labour process. If we are looking at the evolution of human society and thinking about the origins of labour, we at the same time have to bear in mind that sexual reproduction is underlying that. The actual production of the people engaged in the labour is, of course, a crucial factor. So, according to Engels, we have to keep both these two forms of labour in mind: reproduction and labour in the more narrow sense.

When thinking about the origin of human consciousness and human life we have to turn to the kind of labour which our ancestors, apes and monkeys, were involved in. With apes or monkeys, although they may make the odd tool, or fish for termites, something immeasurably more prominent is their reproductive process, and that is the process which generates conflicts. There is a rather horrible book called *Demonic males*, written by climatologist Richard Wrangam, which describes the kind of chaos produced within chimpanzee society by the way males occasionally rampage. In the chimpanzee community, when a female is fertile, the males get very excited by this and try to grab hold of her. Terrible violence breaks out. The females run for cover. Often someone dies, perhaps a baby. All very unpleasant.

When I first read about that kind of thing I began to realise how correct Engels was to see the male versus female conflict as some sort of premonition, analogous to another kind of conflict: namely, class conflict. I am sure most are familiar with Engels' formulation in *The origins of the family, private property and the state* that the first form of class oppression is the oppression of the female by the male in monogamous marriage. When you read Engels, especially the introduction to *The origins of the family*, you will see how that idea of sex and class in some ways converging informs all his thinking.

Upon learning about the nature of chimpanzee society this seemed obvious to me. You have the sex that gets pregnant, rears the offspring, does all the work of reproducing the species; and then you have the other sex — in a way the leisured sex, the sex which gets someone else to do all the work, gets a female pregnant then goes off to get another female pregnant. All the conflicts in primate society are around that struggle — the struggle by the males for access to fertile females.

What Engels says is that something like that conflict built up and built up, until it reached a point of contradiction where, if it did not get resolved, it would lead to the extinction of the species. But in one particular case — namely, that of our ancestors — it led to a revolution, and according to Engels this revolution established not just the equality and solidarity of women, but in some respects the primacy of women embodied in the matrilineal clan.

As I was mentioning earlier, Marxists today just seem uninterested in the whole subject. It is as if they have just accepted what bourgeois anthropology says: that this fundamental idea of a matrilineal clan has been disproven as romantic nonsense. So I will just say that there is a book that has come out quite recently, *Early human kingship: from sex to social reproduction*, published by the Royal Anthropological Institute, and it has a chapter in it called ‘Early human kinship was matrilineal’. Now, I will admit that this chapter was written by me, but the whole book more or less converges around this same basic argument: early human kinship was matrilineal. I will come back to that and give you the evidence for it.

Similarly there is a fantastic, maybe even better, book by Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *Mothers and others*. Hrdy, a major figure in Darwinian theory, has also written a book called *Mother nature*, and again this is standard stuff now, accepted by nearly everyone in the field. She argues that the crucial thing that distinguishes humans from apes is that an ape female will hold onto her baby and will not let anyone else have that baby, or even touch it. Quite rightly due to the kind of violence evident in chimpanzee society. With humans the baby is so demanding and slow to mature that a human mother could not possibly have coped alone.

In hunter-gatherer society the babies are shared around. The mother has to trust those other people, including male kin, enormously. Without that cooperative effort there is no way that humans, over the course of evolution, could have afforded to give birth to such demanding babies. The whole of *Mothers and others* is about the evolution of collective childcare, exactly as Engels wrote.

Of course, you might say, ‘So what that early human kinship was matrilineal. Does that matter too much?’ As I say, I do not think we should simply agree because Engels wrote this, but it is interesting to assess to what extent Engels thought this was important. He writes in *The origins of the family*: “The rediscovery of the original mother-right gens ... has the same significance for the history of primitive society as the theory of evolution had for biology, and Marx’s theory of surplus value had for political economy. It enabled Morgan to outline for the first time the history of the

family ... Clearly this opens a new era in the treatment of the history of primitive society.”

Engels even goes as far as to say that mother right has become the pivot around which his entire science turns — he thought it was absolutely central. If you are a scientist, you will come to the conclusion that the form of society, the form of kinship, which emerged out of the human revolution stood the logic of primate dominance on its head. In other words what came out of the revolution was the opposite of what was going on before — which is, of course, what you would expect from a revolution.

Well, the logic of primate society is dominance. Dominance is defined as the ability to displace a rival from a valued spot. That may be a hunting or breeding spot. If you can elbow out those occupying that place you have dominance, and monkey and ape social life is based on that.

Reverse dominance

Christopher Boehm’s *Hierarchy in the forest* — an absolutely lovely, and relatively simple read — argues that wherever you have dominance you will get counter-dominance. In other words, if you are a monkey and someone is pushing you out of the way, you are not going to be too happy about it and you will push back.

What Boehm argues is that counter-dominance is necessarily collective. If you have a dominant ape or monkey — usually male, of course — pushing others around, those that are being pushed around, in resisting, are going to need each other, to need more solidarity. And what this book argues is brilliant: that at a certain point in the course of human evolution counter-dominance arrived at a tipping point where it became what Boehm calls “reverse dominance”.

The first hunter-gatherers live by reverse dominance. This means there is something dominant, but it is the collective. Only the collective is allowed to use violence. This is the only approved form of violence in the hunter-gatherer community, and it is used to counter individual violence. So counter-dominance culminates in reverse dominance, where everyone is striving, in a kind of competitive system, to prove how useful they are to the collective. Boehm argues that this hunter-gatherer reverse dominance can only come out of a revolution.

The arguments around the emergence of early human society all gravitate around the idea of the minimisation of violence, and increasing cooperation. But the establishment of human levels of cooperation meant overthrowing the previous dominance of the individual by the use of violence against everybody else.

Let me quote from Engels, when he talks about how early human societies must have evolved and emerged. He looks at monkey and ape social systems to get some idea of a society before the transition to human society took place: “...animal societies have, to be sure, a certain value in drawing conclusions regarding human societies, but only in a negative sense. As far as we have ascertained, the higher vertebrates know

only two forms of the family: polygamy or the single pair. In both cases only one adult male is permissible. The jealousy of the male, representing both tie and limits of the family, brings the animal family into conflict with the horde” — that is, the collective.

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

So what Engels is saying is that — instead of doing what the Darwinians do when looking at ape society to find intimations of human society — we must look for the negation of human society, since human society emerged out of the consistent negation of what was there previously. He more or less goes on to say what I am advocating here: “For evolution out of the animal stage, for the accomplishment of the greatest advance known to nature, an additional element was needed: the replacement of the individual’s inadequate power of defence by the united strength and joint effort of the horde.”

For Engels sexual jealousy of the male prevented that from developing. Therefore that jealousy had to be transcended, broken, prevented: “Mutual toleration among the adult males, freedom from jealousy, was, however, the first condition for the building of those large and enduring groups in the midst of which alone the transition from animal to man could be achieved. And indeed, what do we find as the oldest, most primitive form of the family, of which undeniable evidence can be found in history, and which even today can be studied here and there? Group marriage, the form in which whole groups of men and whole groups of women belong to one another, and which leaves but little scope for jealousy.”

People’s hair stand on end when you talk of “group marriage”, particularly in the west. There are immediately thoughts of the brothel and that image is the thing which stops people even conceptualising that group marriage could be a very civilised way of living. Group marriage is about a legal contract. It does not mean everyone is partying and having sex with everyone else. It means that the group of men would legally call the collective of women their wives. Obviously whether you have sex with them is up to the participants to decide. But the actual legal contract is between one group and another group.

And actually that is what happened with hunter-gatherers. The contracts are built, not around weddings, but instead around initiation rights. In the book I mentioned earlier, *Early Human Kinship*, all that is made absolutely clear. The idea of private individual marriage is very recent. It is not what hunter-gatherers do. The actual sexual relationships may be, to a point, fairly intimate and private, but every now and again what happens with hunter-gatherers is, as soon as they get the chance, the women take advantage of their legal rights. There are very explicit descriptions by anthropologists of women taking advantage of their legal rights with a number of different husbands.

What happens with many South American native groups is that a woman will believe that her baby will do best if it has lots of dads. So when she is pregnant she will choose extra males to father her baby. The argument is that sperm from one man does not make a very strong foetus. What my colleague at the University of East London, Paul Valentine, has done is to test out whether this theory is scientific or not. Believe it or not, it is a very good scientific theory.

If you believe Trotsky and Engels that the proof of the pudding is in the eating, that science is knowledge that gives us power, the theory that having more than one father is good for the baby is true. They have measured it. They have got the statistics and found that a child with just one dad has less likelihood of surviving to adulthood than a child that has two. If a child has four or five dads that is probably too much of a good thing, but two is definitely a lot better than one and three is not bad either. That is simply a single father can go wandering off or get killed in the hunt, but if you have several dads, you have several providers of meat.

Also the men all think of themselves as having a share in several children. So the child will regard a number of different men as fathers, and a number of different men will be tolerant of each other's children. That is exactly what Engels was saying: for us to escape the primate system, where one male jealously guards his female and his offspring, you need mutual toleration between the males. Exactly what has been described as the basic underlying system in South America completely vindicates Engels.

Human revolution

In a way, everyone who believes in the human revolution — and that includes most archaeologists — kind of got it wrong, as I did. We got the dates and also the place wrong. We all thought the human revolution happened in Europe about 40,000 years ago. The reason for that was the earliest evidence we had for art, personal imitation, etc came from Europe in what was called the upper paleolithic revolution, which culminated about 30,000 years ago. The human revolution was identified with that distinctively European explosion.

In my book *Blood Relations* I was to some extent escaping from that by suggesting that these events in Europe must have been preceded by events in Africa, but I linked the human revolution with those events to too great an extent. That is the only thing I got wrong in the book, I believe. I made a prediction which was that the evidence for the revolution, wherever it was found, would take the form of cosmetics, of red ochre. I wrote a lot about that in *Blood Relations*.

What happened was, my student and colleague, Ian Watts, challenged the timing. He said I had got it all wrong and that it all happened much earlier, in Africa. I remember saying to Ian, 'OK then, go to Africa, do some digging, and find out about it.' But I predicted that there would be plenty of red ochre as the signature of the

revolution. So Ian went to South Africa, to the Blombos cave, and discovered evidence of the world's earliest art.

Some people think that art is something you put on a wall. That is a bourgeois concept. If hunter-gatherers are going to imitate animals they are going to dance as those animals, so they will paint their bodies. Thus art takes the form of singing, dancing, moving art, as well as the two-dimensional variety. If you have colours you will put them on your body and be the giraffe, or antelope, or whatever. The art discovered at the Blombos cave by the team Ian is a part of is the earliest evidence we have. It dates to somewhere around 70,000 or 80,000 years ago. So now we think the human revolution could go back much earlier.

Why red ochre? It is about solidarity. Essentially, as I mentioned earlier, in the chimpanzee social system, as soon as the female shows indications that she may be fertile all the males go on a rampage, fighting for access to her. In the course of human evolution ovulation has been concealed. Why is that? What is the point? If you are the pope, and think sex is only for reproduction, it does not make any sense to conceal the correct time for getting pregnant. Well, the human female hides that moment. Why?

Because in the case of the human female there was no desire to save time on sex, to have it quickly in order to get pregnant and get on with other things. Instead they aimed to spend time on sex, because if the male is spending time on sex maybe he will do other useful things as well. The more you can 'waste time' on sex, the more energy can be extracted from the male.

The human female is living in larger and larger groups, with lots of social complexity. Needing to give birth to burdensome babies requires two things: first to get support in childcare from other females, but also to make the males earn their keep. Instead of having sex and going off the females aimed to get something out of them in terms of investment. And the more the female concealed ovulation, the more it forced the male to hang around if he was to have any chance of making her pregnant. So concealed ovulation made a lot of sense.

But there is one signal that gives the game away and threatens complete disaster, and that is menstruation. Males looking for a female among the group who can be got pregnant will target anyone who shows signs of being on her menstrual cycle. That will be at the expense of other females, resulting in complete chaos. So somehow, very late in evolution, that problem had to be dealt with.

And it was dealt with through the use of cosmetics. If every time the female menstruates the other females supervise and bond with her, and everyone paints up with brilliant red cosmetics as if all the females are fertile — if you want one of us, you have got to have all of us — that potential vice, where only the females undergoing menstruation are sought after, could be avoided.

Ian's discovery of red ochre in Africa — some pieces carefully shaped like lipstick, clearly designed with the intention of being applied to the body — was evidence that my prediction had been correct.

The 2007 book, *Rethinking the human revolution*, by Paul Mellars, Chris Stringer and

others, was all about recognising that the revolution was not just something which happened in Europe 40,000 years ago, but was a much more gradual thing that began in Africa. Because it was more gradual a school of thought has emerged which has tried to get rid of the revolution altogether. So there is a chapter in this book called H: 'Down with the revolution', which argues that, because the change was gradual and earlier, maybe it was not a revolution at all.

Mostly, however, this book argues that it was a revolution. Of course, it was not a sudden, overnight thing, there had been a build-up and it would have taken a long time for the new, revolutionary social order, based on the matrilineal clan, to take root. When it did become stable, there was a fairly sudden movement of human beings from Africa across the globe.

Spiral

I started from the proposition that we need to put science first. I then said that putting science first means putting the big picture together. The bourgeoisie cannot do this, as they are part of the problem, and as soon as you start asking questions about why they have their power and whether it is legitimate and so forth they will crack down on extending science into that domain. But Marxists can put science first because we stand outside society as it is currently organised.

The dialectic is the method you have to use to put the blueprint together and solve all the different contradictions. The dialectic is little more than saying, change happens through the build-up and then resolution of contradictions. It is also saying that, because change happens that way, there is a logic where, in a sense, the overall shape of evolutionary change is not a straight line, but is much better thought of as a spiral — every now and again you are back where you started except on a higher level.

Some people think of that as some kind of analogy. Maybe communism of the future will be a little like primitive communism. Maybe we can learn something from hunter-gatherers to teach us what communism in the future will be like. But I do not see it that way. I see the dialectic as deep. It is the underlying logic of evolutionary change, as Trotsky said. So the establishment of communism will be, if that is accepted, a repeat, on a higher level, of the revolution that made us human. So we can find out how hunter-gatherers looked after their kids, communicated and managed their landscape. We can learn from them about future communism.

In other words, although the technology is different, the social logic of future communism will be egalitarian, just as hunter-gatherers maintained egalitarianism through reverse dominance. More than that — and this is the extra step which Engels takes, but perhaps does not elaborate fully — actually getting to communism will need a revolution that in a sense we have won already.

I firmly believe that the best way to know in detail how the revolution is going to be won is to understand the whole picture, much as Marx and Engels were trying to

do. But to understand in particular that in a sense we have already won the revolution: the fact that we have language, we have culture, we can see ourselves as others see us, we have self-consciousness — all this proves that the revolution worked.

You can argue that the results of the English or French Revolution did not quite match up to the ideals that the revolutionaries had. The same can be said of the Russian Revolution. Well, the revolution which worked is the biggest revolution of all. It was the human revolution. And the difference between how we were as early hunter-gatherers and how we were before the revolution is a massive, qualitative difference.

Using the same logic, when we win a communist revolution, we will be as different from the way we are now under capitalism as the first fully human creatures were from the animal they had been before they managed to win the human revolution.

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Chris Knight

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