

When all the crap began

Women's oppression, class, organised religion, war, and private property are not natural, writes Jack Conrad

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Humanity is a revolutionary species. According to the best available model,¹ we emerged in southern Africa thanks to a female-led coalition. Maybe 180,000 years ago, maybe even further back than that,² a hooting, jumping, gyrating, playful, empowering, threatening, gender-bending, ochre-painted ‘picket line’ was responsible for taking control of female sexual availability and therefore the production and reproduction of immediate life.³

The fetter of alpha male dominance, rivalry, jealousy and violence shattered under the impact of this portentous carnival of the oppressed. A socially constructed, matrilineal reverse-dominance burst through. And, having succeeded, the human revolution leapt from group to group.

To this day red ochre is applied as body paint by women in tribes such as the Himba and San in southern Africa. Anthropologists call it sham menstruation. Women colour themselves before what can, for good reason, be considered a monthly re-enactment of the human revolution. Eg, the eland bull dance involves women partying, displaying overt sexuality, pretending to be male, pretending to be animal, encircling a young menarcheal girl ... it can last for five days.⁴ The message is unmistakable: the community is in charge of “sexual contact.”⁵

Evidence of the preparation of ochre in the archaeological record surely indicates the presence of symbolic culture.⁶ Admittedly there are plenty of blank spaces in any attempt to put together a theoretically coherent picture of prehistory. Nonetheless, I think we are on safe ground when we say that our entire species once embraced a militant egalitarianism.

As Fredrick Engels recognised, the break with alpha male domination “was the first condition” for modern humans.⁷ Mistaken though he was in some of his conceptions, choice of data and conclusions — inevitable given that he was writing in the late 19th century and therefore reliant on an undeveloped archaeology, anthropology and primatology — Engels was capable of the most profound insights. Eg, the human revolution

¹ Though it is out of date in this or that respect, the groundbreaking study remains Chris Knight’s *Blood relations* (London 1991). A wonderful book, which mainstream academia has done its best to ignore. Much to its discredit, the same can be said of the leadership of the Socialist Workers Party. Having first mocked its central thesis, the organisation then proceeded to impose an outright ban on any further discussion. My work presented here is in part an attempt to bring out the tremendous significance of Knight’s discoveries.

² It is not impossible that the human revolution began as far back as 750,000 years ago. Having attended one of his lectures, I believe that this is the contention of João Zilhão of Bristol University, a leading expert on the Neanderthals. In my view, however, the evidence is thin.

³ As the reader may recall, I authored a popular account of the human revolution, its preconditions and rippling consequences. See J Conrad, ‘Origins of religion and the human revolution’ *Weekly Worker* December 17 2009.

⁴ C Knight *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* March 1988.

⁵ C Power and I Watts *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* March 2001.

⁶ For an archaeological discussion on the dating of red ochre finds see *Science* January 30 2009.

⁷ K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 26, London 1990, p145.

produced what he called “primitive communism”.⁸ His remarkable reconstruction of ancient history, *The origin of the family, private property and the state*,⁹ was first published in 1884 and quickly came to be regarded as a Marxist classic.⁽¹⁾

It can usefully be added that a good case can be made for “our ice-age fellow humans”, the Neanderthals, too.¹⁰ Seemingly entirely apart from out-of-Africa humans,¹¹ at least for some of them, at least for some of the time, Neanderthals appear to have arrived at something closely approaching, or closely resembling, the human revolution. Eg, black, red and yellow pigments have been found at Neanderthal sites. The general opinion is that they too used it as body paint.¹² Camilla Power sees Neanderthal populations as oscillating between alpha male domination and a tentative egalitarianism, depending on shifts in climatic conditions.¹³

Anyhow, by symbolically locking the female menstrual cycle and the phases of the moon into a monthly re-enactment of the original human revolution, primitive communism was framed, celebrated and reasserted. As a consequence, the life of the whole community moved according to a female-driven, on-off lunar rhythm.

Let us begin with the ‘on’ from the male point of view. Hunting is best done by moonlight (hence the hunter’s moon). In the tropics the searing heat of the midday sun drains energy and can prove exhausting. Moonlight extends the working day. Hunters can both keep cool and keep track of intended prey. And because we lack nocturnal vision a bright moon has another advantage. Dangerous predators can be spotted ... and avoided or sent packing.

Now the ‘off’. Having returned to the campsite with raw meat, roughly in time for the full moon, there is cooking, feasting, dancing, ceremony, story telling and love-making. For a fortnight men become husbands, women wives (hence the honeymoon).

⁸ I shall be using this phrase throughout. By it I imply nothing derogative: rather early, ancient, original, primary, etc. It should be pointed out that because of its other connotations there are those who prefer ‘early communism’, or ‘communal mode of production’.

⁹ See F Engels, ‘Origins of the family, private property, and the state’ in K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 26, London 1990.

¹⁰ F Schrenk and S Müller *The Neanderthals* Oxon 2009, p88.

¹¹ Obviously hominids originated in Africa. So what I refer to here by ‘out-of-Africa humans’ are the two little population movements. The first which found its way into Palestine around 120,000 years ago and then appeared to die out, and then the second which crossed the Red Sea into the Arabian peninsula some 80,000 years ago and subsequently spread over every part of the globe.

¹² See *Radical Anthropology* No4, November 2010.

¹³ See cpgb.wordpress.com/category/resources

(1) Engels based himself in no small part on what is now commonly called Marx’s *Ethnological notebooks*. Marx was a voracious reader. He was also in the habit of putting down extensive extracts of what he had read into notebooks. They were accompanied by pithy comments and possible lines of thought. In this case, centrally, there is a synopsis, and re-arrangement, of Morgan’s *Ancient society*. There were, however, comments on other authors, observations and wider thoughts on anthropology (see L Krader [ed] *The ethnological notebook of Karl Marx* Assen 1972). One must presume that Marx was planning to incorporate his anthropological studies into the greater *Capital* (perhaps book four, on the state); that or he was thinking about an entirely separate work along the lines of Engels and his *Origin*.

But, with the last quarter of the waning moon, the system switches. Women's solidarity is back 'on'. Collectively they become sisters, ritualistically making themselves inviolable. They seclude themselves from their husbands. Meanwhile the men are obliged to leave their wives' households and become brothers and hunters again.¹⁴

This socially established cycle with its monthly 'sex strike' enforced a male-female division of labour and replaced the virtual sexual monopoly of the alpha male with group marriage between the tribal clans and their successive generations — the moiety. Immoral only for those with a "brothel-tainted imagination".¹⁵

Primitive communism triggered qualitatively higher levels of cooperation: language, totemic religion, myth, forward planning, art and long-distance hunting (the monthly female sex strike also helped calm male fears of being cuckolded, not least because the involvement of all able-bodied males in the hunt was a social expectation).

So successful was the new order that population numbers steadily grew and not only in Africa. Egalitarianism worked.

Despite that we now inhabit a grossly unequal society. A society far more polarised than anything prior to the human revolution. "Almost half the world's population lives on less than a dollar a day."¹⁶ Simultaneously the richest one percent of adults own 40% of global assets and the richest 10% of adults account for 85% of the world total.¹⁷ The United States alone boasts over a thousand billionaires. They "control more wealth than 90% of the US population".¹⁸

Logically, if humanity began as a revolutionary species, there had to be a turning point, a transition where revolution and egalitarianism gave way to counterrevolution and inequality. So where, when and why did "all the old filthy business" begin? (a phrase of Karl Marx's — otherwise translated as "all the old crap").¹⁹ Closely related questions I shall attempt to answer.

Over the years the left has mainly got it wrong — badly. The nearer to the present, the less the excuse. The Levellers of the 17th century fondly looked back to the ancient liberties of their Anglo-Saxon "predecessors".²⁰ In that spirit the Russian Narodniks banked on preserving the peasant *mir*. Here was their native socialism. James Connolly touchingly portrayed pre-conquest Ireland as owned by its people who were "knit together as in a family."²¹ Latin American anti-imperialists display the exact same

¹⁴ That is still the case for surviving social 'fossils' amongst the hunter-gatherers in central and southern Africa.

¹⁵ K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 26, London 1990, p154.

¹⁶ www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/documentaries/2007/12/071227_dollar_a_day_1.shtml

¹⁷ JB Davies, S Sandstrom, A Shorrocks and Edward N Wolff *The world distribution of household wealth* July 2007: escholarship.org/uc/item/3jv048hx#page-1

¹⁸ www.cnbc.com/id/24791078

¹⁹ K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 5, London 1976, p49.

²⁰ C Hill *The world turned upside down* Harmondsworth 1975, p158.

²¹ J Connolly *The reconquest of Ireland* Dublin 1972, p2.

kind of romanticism. Eg, glowing references to “Inca communism” (which find eager sponsors in Evo Morales, Sendero Luminoso and Túpac Amaru).²²

The radical anthropologist, Lionel Sims, rejects such misconceived accounts — they disregard “all of what anthropology and archaeology have to say”. There was, he contends, a counterrevolution “long before” any of that.²³

I am entirely sympathetic to Sims and his argument. Indeed I am convinced he is right when he says that there was a counterrevolution “long before” either European high feudalism or the rise of Spanish colonialism.

That said, it must be appreciated that the prehistoric past is a highly contested subject, crucially in academia. There is no unanimity, no “all” about it. Eg, mainstream archaeology tends towards the utterly contemptuous when it comes to primitive communism.

Renfrew

Culture began, so we are told, with agriculture, fixed settlements, monumental building, social stratification and the vertical division of labour. Here was the *real* human revolution for *mainstream* archaeology ... and from then on things are reassuringly depicted as steadily ascending to ever greater heights of rationality, wealth and happiness. The Whig version of history. Neither primitive communism nor any counterrevolutionary overthrow comes into it.

In the immortal words of Colin Renfrew, aka Baron Renfrew of Kaimsthorn — former Disney professor of archaeology at Cambridge and now senior fellow at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research and perhaps the most prestigious of contemporary British archaeologists — “not a lot happened until the Neolithic”. A condescending attitude if there ever was one ... and, given his positions, prizes, gongs, lordly title and honorariums, testimony to the poverty of contemporary bourgeois thinking.

Renfrew posits a “sapient paradox”. A supposed gap between “genotype and take-off”. Our ancestors became visibly modern anatomically around 250,000 years ago — in Africa (Renfrew finds little to support the multi-regional hypothesis). However, according to the ermined professor, the cultural “take-off” only commences with the Neolithic a mere 12,000 years ago. Hence Renfrew brushes aside as “dogma” all theories which propose that the “great human behavioural revolution” began 100,000 years ago — and by definition any time before that.

The contention that *Homo sapiens* emerged with “full linguistic abilities, and with a different kind of behaviour” is rejected by Renfrew on the basis of what he claims is a lack of hard evidence. Reasonable, if true. But the undeniable fact is that human

²² For example, the influential writings of José Carlos Mariátegui (1894–1930). See www.neueinheit.com/english/extras/extra32e.htm

²³ L Sims ‘World-historic defeat of women’ *Weekly Worker* April 22 2010.

infants show a remarkable capacity for acquiring language. Many scientists, theorists and philosophers consider the learning of language an innate human quality. Hence the ‘language instinct’ and ‘language facility’.

More than that, throughout the world and throughout recorded history — no matter how ‘backward’ they are deemed to be — every human group exhibits a wonderfully creative mastery of language.

For any doubters, it ought to be pointed out that linguists insist that *all* the 5,000–10,000 languages spoken in the world today are *equally* capable of transmitting the full content of culture. John Lyons writes in his university primer: “The truth is that every language so far studied, no matter how primitive or uncivilised the society using it might appear to us in other respects, has proven on investigation to be a complex and highly developed system of communication.”²⁴

While there might still be people living something like a Stone Age-type existence, Lyons finds that “there is no such thing as a Stone Age-type of language”.²⁵ Indeed there is every reason to believe that there never was — if by that is meant a halfway house pidgin or quasi-language. Our ancestors probably had a communication system broadly similar to chimps, bonobos and gorillas ... and to all intents and purposes went straight from there to fully-fledged language. A dialectical leap from analogue to digital communication and simultaneously a dialectical leap from Darwinian evolution into human culture. Chris Knight considers song, laughter and play the vital behavioural portal.²⁶

Unmoved by that prodigious feat, what commands Renfrew’s admiration are not the hunter-gatherers of 30,000, 50,000 or 100,000 years ago. That though they almost certainly had fully articulated language, passed down powerfully explanatory stories from one generation to the next and had a real handle on nature (the group would have had intimate knowledge of their immediate environment, be able to predict the seasonal movement of animals, the coming of rains, etc).

Despite that, such people, in Renfrew’s opinion, ought to be studied by animal behaviourists. In effect, they ought to be classified as sub-human. Outwardly looking like us, they are not us inwardly. He goes further. As if from the pages of *Mein Kampf*, hunter-gatherers are ranked organisationally *below* the “social insects, including mound-building termites”.²⁷

Why such an asinine assessment? Apart from an abiding high Tory affection for the British empire and its patronising attitude towards the ‘childish’ native peoples, there is the seductive, widely held, but erroneous assumption that human intelligence undergoes linear progress and therefore, the further back one goes, the less intelligent people will be.

²⁴ J Lyons *Language and linguistics — an introduction* Cambridge 2002, p27.

²⁵ *Ibid* p28.

²⁶ See C Knight, M Studdert-Kennedy and JR Hurford (eds) *The evolutionary emergence of language*. Cambridge 2000.

²⁷ C Renfrew *Towards an archaeology of the mind* Cambridge 1982, p2.

In my opinion, Stephen Jay Gould convincingly demolished all such claims with his brilliantly argued book *The mismeasure of man* (1981). Fundamentally they result, he says, from a “deeply held prejudice” — namely equating biological evolution (ie, adaptation) with cultural progress. Note: evolution is not conceptually synonymous with progress.

The large brain is the biological *basis* for human intelligence and, with that, culture and cultural transmission. But, once culture and cultural transmission was in place, it ran ahead with little or no reference to Darwinian processes and genetics. We know that culture can progress at extraordinary speed (it can also go into a tumbling reverse). Hence differences between groups of people — ancient and modern — need to be explained in the realm of culture, not biology.²⁸

The eugenical agenda of Renfrew and his ilk — conscious or unconscious — is pretty transparent. Flatteringly, contemporary humans might be placed on a higher plane than fellow *Homo sapiens* in the past. Yet, even if only by implication, the western upper classes are classified as innately superior. Gregory Cochran and Henry Harpending give this story a particular ethnic twist with the claim that Ashkenazi Jews have the highest IQ of any ethnic group because of their “success in white-collar occupations” — a caste position with origins in medieval Europe.²⁹ But it amounts to the same thing. Hunter-gatherers, past and present, are classified as stupid and innately inferior.

Nonetheless, we are extraordinarily similar to our Palaeolithic ancestors and to each other. Whatever else might be questionable about their overall methodological approach, the sociobiologists Jerome Barkow, John Tooby and Leda Cosmides have the virtue of stressing the deep commonality between prehistoric and modern populations.³⁰ Contemporary human-to-human genetic variation is estimated to be no more than 0.5% (in other words, we are 99.5% “similar”).³¹ There is every reason to believe then that intelligence is extraordinarily similar too.

Not that we should rely on self-serving IQ tests with their well known cultural biases as our criteria for judging. The human mind is transcendently complex. The “highest product of matter” (Lenin). To reduce this unique marvel of nature to Gradgrindian numbers like weight or height is Mickey Mouse, not serious, science. In practise, intelligence is used to solve manifold problems and to exploit manifold circumstances to achieve manifold ends. Certainly intelligence is a particularly human way of dealing with the environment.

Not surprisingly Renfrew admires those societies which built temples, palaces and pyramids: eg, the mega-constructions of “Teotihuacán in Mexico, Giza in Egypt or

²⁸ SJ Gould *The mismeasure of man* London 1981.

²⁹ See G Cochran and H Harpending *The 10,000 year explosion* New York 2009.

³⁰ See J Barkow, L Cosmides and J Tooby (eds) *The adapted mind: evolutionary psychology and the generation of culture* New York 1992.

³¹ www.jcvi.org/cms/press/press-releases/full-text/article/first-individual-diploid-human-genome-published-by-researchers-at-j-craig-venter-institute

Ur in Iraq, or indeed Stonehenge.’³² In his reckoning fully articulated language comes about with the Neolithic (beginning in the fertile crescent of the Middle East and the Indus valley roughly 12,000 years ago). Presumably it then trickled down to benighted hunter-gatherers from the villages and towns of class society.

Hence what *archeologically* establishes, what *archeologically* sustains, what *archeologically* vindicates Renfrew’s prejudice is a vulgar materialism: ie, the self-evident fact that hunter-gatherers leave behind the lightest of footprints. They go from here to there during the course of the year and generate precious little material detritus: baselessly interpreted as indicating cognitive inferiority.

Apart from exceedingly rare human skeletal fragments, the odd jumble of butchered animal remains, occasional barely detectable campsites and a limited range of stone tools, their Palaeolithic counterparts offer next to nothing that can triumphantly be unearthed and put on media-grabbing display. Lack of interest by archaeologists who presumably aspire to be celebrated alongside Heinrich Schliemann, Arthur Evans and Howard Carter follows.

Counterrevolution

Using the studies of Lewis Henry Morgan³³ and other anthropological trailblazers, undertaking his own historical researches and bringing to bear the dialectical and materialist method, Engels successfully located the human revolution in its essentials. An event — albeit possibly spread over thousands of years — which resolved the contradiction between the “jealousy of the male” and the group or collective. What he called the “horde”.³⁴ Engels shows a corresponding ability to locate the essential conditions which made the counterrevolution. In the last analysis, he roots both revolution and counterrevolution in two main determinates: the production and reproduction of the means of subsistence (“food, clothing and shelter”) and the production and reproduction of human beings themselves (the “family”).³⁵

Let us revisit Engels’ argument (and where necessary see how it stands up in light of contemporary research and theory). Engels situates the counterrevolution against egalitarianism in the Neolithic and the seemingly benign conditions brought about by the “domestication of animals and the breeding of herds”.³⁶ He is convinced that before this epochal shift hunter-gatherers lived a noble life, but often stood on the edge of starvation. Periods of plenty alternated with periods of famine. Infanticide, premature death, malnutrition and group extinction were presumed to be common occurrences.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ See in particular LH Morgan *Ancient society* Gloucester, Mass, 1974.

³⁴ K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 26, London 1990, p145.

³⁵ *Ibid* p132.

³⁶ *Ibid* p162.

The Neolithic provided a permanent surplus product for the first time. From here Engels reasons that the private ownership of herds “must have developed at a very early stage”. Given the sexual division of labour, those owners would doubtless be male. They were the hunters, the providers of meat. Obviously cattle originated in their sphere. From the growth of male-owned herds — and thus the growth of private property — Engels derives the appearance of war, slavery, the state and the patriarchal family.

What was the first form of private property must have been the first form of theft. Opposites which, of course, constitute a single whole. Grazing lands, watering places, cattle themselves would have constantly been fought over, not least due to the social power they conferred. Private property therefore leads to war. Archaeologists find evidence of homicidal violence: eg, enloded spear blades and arrow heads in human remains, which first appear alongside “the emergence of leaders” in the Mesolithic, but especially with the Neolithic.³⁷ Hastily dug pits in which massacre victims were unceremoniously dumped have been found. For instance, in 1983–84 excavators uncovered a “communal grave containing the remains of 34 individuals” dating from around 5,000 BCE. Bodies were “piled on top of one another ... all having suffered a violent death”.³⁸

War captives come as a by-product of war. Instead of being summarily butchered they were more and more enslaved: males used as routine labourers and to tend ever expanding herds; females as cooks, nurses, weavers, etc (or with the most attractive as second wives, concubines, prostitutes, etc). It was quickly realised that their work produced a surplus. What slaves delivered to their masters proved to be worth considerably more than required for their maintenance. Subsequently, war became a means of gaining slaves. War captives were no longer a by-product of war, but became one of its prime aims. People were stolen and traded because they could be exploited. Such were the beginnings of civilisation.

The greater the number of slaves, the more society cleaved into classes. The ownership of slaves certainly fouls, perverts and corrupts all traditional social relationships. A few get richer and richer. Meanwhile, the mass of people are steadily reduced to a position that approached or was barely distinguishable from servitude. And, once society is characterised by rich and poor, free and slave, oppressors and exploited, antagonisms become irreconcilable. The state is invented.

In essence the state consists of armed men, though it has other coercive adjuncts — in our day courts, judges, prosecutors, prisons, etc. The state exists to prevent social chaos and disintegration. Purporting to stand above society, in actual fact it keeps class struggles within safe limits. Hence the state is the state of the ruling class and serves as an apparatus for dominating, subduing and if need be crushing the oppressed and exploited. It ought to be added, to the degree that class antagonisms become acute,

³⁷ J Guilaine and J Zammit *Origins of war* Oxford 2005, p77.

³⁸ *Ibid* p86.

and other neighbouring states compete, the state can assume such proportions that it swallows society itself.

Women

What of the family? The old sexual division of labour remained unaltered and yet the new conditions turned domestic relations upside down. Though women occupied the first place in the household, that very position ensured that their status declined compared with men.

The owners of herds (and slaves) grew ever more wealthy, influential and ambitious. Their spouses benefited in part, of course, but they had no ownership stake. Inevitably the time came when men seized control over the household. No longer were they to occupy second place. No longer would they perform bride service. From now on men were to be in charge.

Rich men purchased wives from their fathers in exchange for cattle (bride price). And the women were treated as such. Henceforth, they became the “slave of the man’s lust, a mere instrument for breeding children”. A degraded, humiliated position only seriously challenged in the 19th century with the rise of the socialist working class.

Understandably, better-off males would have been strongly inclined to reverse matrilineal tradition. And inheritance, previously traced exclusively through the female line, was indeed successively “overthrown” in one group after another. In its place “inheritance from the father was instituted”.³⁹ Herds were then passed down through the patriarch. As a direct concomitant the wife had monogamy imposed on her. Alone she was expected to be faithful.

Engels famously dubs this change the “world-historic defeat of the female sex”.⁴⁰ Hence the “first class antithesis” coincides with the “development of the antagonisms between man and woman in monogamian marriage”, and the “first class oppression with that of the female sex by the male”.⁴¹ The antagonisms of class society therefore find cellular expression in the family.

A far-reaching revolution happened with the domestication of animals, polished stone tools and then the subsequent cultivation of crops, a sedentary existence, pottery, etc — a technological package which significantly boosted labour productivity. Nevertheless, this revolution allowed, paralleled, cemented a social counterrevolution.

As one would expect, far from being simple, the transition to class society was extraordinarily complicated, with all manner of experimental dead ends, partial reverses and hybrid formations.

One thing is quite clear, however. The Neolithic counterrevolutionary revolution resulted from definite social and cultural factors. Therefore, we can confidently say that

³⁹ K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 26, London 1990, p165.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid* p173.

inequality, male domination and private accumulation are not natural, not biologically determined — as claimed by Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) and his present-day pseudo-scientific equivalents.

Abundance

Nowadays, the idea that hunter-gatherers endure a life of extreme poverty is considered untenable by anthropologists. Engels was badly wrong here. Back in 1966 Marshall Sahlins paved the way for a thorough-going intellectual reassessment with his “original affluent society” thesis.⁴²

Hunter-gatherers should not be thought of as bourgeois ladies and gentlemen with inferior tools and lazy habits, who survive by no more than the skin of their teeth. A solipsistic notion derived from Adam Smith and his “economic man”.⁴³ No, far from suffering terrible deprivation, hunter-gatherers are usually more than able to satisfy all their needs. Sahlins boasted considerable experience as a field researcher ... and one can justifiably project from his contemporary insights directly back to the middle Palaeolithic. His full-scale study, *Stone Age economics*, was first published in 1974.

Hunter-gatherers have no interest in the endless accumulation of things. That would be to more and more hobble and immobilise themselves. Moreover, what they hunt, what they gather, is overwhelmingly shared with others in the community through what Sahlins calls the domestic mode of production and the system of gift-exchange. Suffice to say, hunter-gatherers enjoy a wonderful variety of foodstuffs — a variety only approached under capitalism with supermarket chains such as Tesco, Sainsbury’s and Waitrose.

Indeed, so easy is their existence that hunter-gatherers are able to devote plenty of time to relaxing, gossiping, telling stories, debating, playing with the children and, all in all, thoroughly enjoying themselves. True, they have very little in the way of possessions and no conception of landed property, but because of their Zen-like “want not, lack not” philosophy they are “free”.⁴⁴

It must also be borne in mind that the few remaining African hunter-gatherer tribes we see today were pushed into the marginal, arid zones they now often inhabit only relatively recently — both by native Bantu and white European farmers (who combined to wipe out much of the larger local fauna, thereby making the bringing home of meat much more problematic).

We can, I think, quite reasonably infer that hunter-gatherers in the middle Palaeolithic lived the good life. In other words, under the initial conditions of primitive communism there was affluence (Marxists call it abundance).

⁴² See chapter one in M Sahlins *Stone Age economics* London 2004.

⁴³ A Smith *The wealth of nations* Harmondsworth 1986, p119.

⁴⁴ M Sahlins *Stone Age economics* London 2004, p14.

As will be readily understood, Sahlins and his theory contradicts the one-dimensional version of history promulgated by ‘official communism’ and ‘official Trotskyism’. The productive forces and their relentless development being venerated as the main, if not the sole, criterion for judging social progress. Any society which relies on the hand axe is therefore automatically ranked below one that glories in nuclear power stations, factory farms and space weapons. Human relationships, human development, human freedom pass unnoticed, are belittled or are simply denied.

Two illustrative examples

First: *Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism*, a Soviet textbook of the ‘red plenty’ era edited by Otto Kuusinen (1881–1964). We are meant to believe that the “primitive instruments of labour” provided “such a meagre subsistence” that there was “scarcely enough to feed each member of the commune”. The low level of technology supposedly produced people of a corresponding mental stature. They were “ruled by childish naive religious ideas” and lived in “blind submission to tradition and custom”.⁴⁵ Unlike *Homo Sovieticus*, of course.

Second: ‘official Trotskyism’. It is no better. In his *magnus opus* Ernest Mandel (1923–95) depicts prehistoric people as entirely absorbed in “seeking and producing food”.⁴⁶ Taking for granted this premise — courtesy of highly jaundiced accounts written by European explorers, missionaries and colonial administrators — Mandel says “primitive man” (sic) could not devote “himself” (sic) to any other activity. And, despite such all-engaging exertions, our ancestors apparently lived “on the brink of famine”, and that for “thousands of years” ... that is, until the Neolithic revolution came to their rescue. This, declares Mandel, is the “most important economic revolution man (sic) has known since his (sic) appearance on earth”.⁴⁷ Leave aside the sexist language — still the norm in most leftwing circles even in the mid-1970s, when my edition was published. The fact of the matter is that his argument was already discredited when the first edition of this version of his book came off the presses in 1968.

While Mandel celebrates the Neolithic counterrevolutionary revolution, the original human revolution simply passes him by. Sexual contradiction and sexual politics do not appear to have entered his mode of thinking about the prehistoric world. Nor seemingly could he comprehend the idea that people who possess next to nothing in terms of property can have full and rewarding lives.

⁴⁵ O Kuusinen *Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism* Moscow 1961, p155.

⁴⁶ E Mandel *Marxist economic theory* London 1977, p28.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Coevolution

Lionel Sims is convinced by the “original affluent society” thesis. During the middle Palaeolithic there was, he says, “abundance”. That said, the underlying condition which sustained primitive communism was the presence of teeming herds of large animals: eg, elephant, zebra, wildebeest, buffalo, giraffe, hippo and antelope. Through coordinated, long-distance hunting expeditions they provided the meat in plenty which made primitive communism hugely advantageous ... and not only for the cohesion of the group, but for the well-being of each and every constituent individual too.

In general such animals and humans unproblematically coexisted. While hunting techniques slowly improved, there evolved a corresponding instinctive, or quickly learnt, mistrust of humans. Hence humans and megafauna not only coexisted: they coevolved. The hunting of hunters and the reproduction of the hunted proceeded in rough equilibrium.

However, as modern *Homo sapiens* spread out from Africa into Palestine and the Arabian peninsula around 80,000 years ago, then headed into southern Asia, south-east Asia and China, then into Australasia some 60,000 years ago, then into Europe 45,000 years ago, into the Americas 20,000 years ago, finally reaching the Tierra del Fuego tip of South America around 10,000 years after that, problems mounted up. The relationship between hunted and hunters proves unsustainable. Consumption eats into reproduction to the point of wide-ranging animal extinctions. Primitive communism therefore increasingly malfunctions.

Numerous authors have sought explanation for mass animal extinctions in climate change. Continents drift and weather patterns shift with global wobbles, sunspots, etc. Every secondary school student knows that. As a concomitant, ice sheets advance and retreat, and sea levels rise and fall. The last glacial maximum was around 20,000 years ago. There followed a global warming which 5,000 years later saw deserts once again expanding in northern Africa, central Asia and Australia. Eg, 7,000 years ago the great lakes of the Sahara were visibly drying up.⁴⁸ A to-and-fro pattern repeated over millions of years. The argument being that, as established habitats disappeared, so did associated megafauna (an animal weighing over 100lbs).

How does that thesis stand up to criticism? Even rapid climate change, despite its title, surely moves far too slowly to see off most big land animals. Why should even a sudden climate transition — one taking no more than a few decades — result in their demise? Surely they, or at least some of them, would migrate or adapt? That is what they have done over the dozen or so known ice ages that have occurred during the last two million years. And we are, after all, discussing continents with varied climate zones. Not islands such as Iceland, Britain or New Zealand. In short, climate change fails to convince when presented as the overriding explanation for the mass extinctions which happened in what were far removed times and places.

⁴⁸ See www.geog.ox.ac.uk/research/climate/projects/bodex/bodele_shorelines.pdf

Take Australia.⁴⁹ The fossil record shows that its megafauna survived and evolved through numerous climatic shifts over 55 million years (following the Australia-Antarctica split and the break-up of the Gondwana supercontinent). However, its big animals went extinct round about the same time in the late Palaeolithic — and not only in the dry interior, but in lush zones too, such as the south-east and New Guinea (joined to Australia in the Megalania continent during the last glacial maximum). Apart from middle-sized red and grey kangaroos and crocodiles, the megafauna died out in each and every climate zone (as did a whole range of smaller animals). Ergo, in explanatory terms, climate change surely fails.

Mass extinction of megafauna is increasingly explained by a combination of human entry and animal naivety. Paul Martin presented what he called the “blitzkrieg hypothesis” in 1984. From my admittedly limited reading on the subject, I would call this the established consensus nowadays.

In Australia and the Americas megafauna are thought to have possessed no instinctive, or quickly learnt, mistrust of humans ... till for most of them it was too late. Hunters killed the unsuspecting, slower animals and on a huge scale. Easy meat. Incidentally, to this day in the Galápagos and Antarctic birds and mammals, which evolved in the absence of humans, “are still incurably tame”.⁵⁰ If conservationists had not vigorously campaigned to get governments to agree protectionist measures, doubtless they would have been annihilated too.

It appears that within a few hundred years of the estimated time of human arrival most of the megafauna were under severe pressure in Australasia and the Americas. Only those already evolved to move fast, fly or hide survived. The rest plunged into extinction. An observation not to the liking of those with a sentimental attachment to first peoples. Nevertheless, facts are facts. A whole range of animals, especially the largest — ie, those that could feed the most people with the least effort expended by hunters — died out in a remarkably short period of time.

Do not imagine that each and every individual animal was killed, butchered, cooked and eaten. Rather hunting rates overtook reproduction rates — and perhaps only by a narrow margin at that. It might be assumed that there would be nothing more threatening than lowering population densities. Overhunting can, though, tip what is often a delicate balance and bring about a sudden, crunching, headlong extinction. A phenomenon known as “critical slowing down” in the relevant literature.⁵¹

Computer simulations produce “serious decline” and “eventual extinction” with predation rates of no more than four or five percent.⁵² Carnivores which find their natural prey disappearing through over-hunting by another species face doomsday — that is for sure. No doubt breeding patterns and other biologically determined patterns of be-

⁴⁹ The best available book on this subject is Tim Flannery’s *The future eaters* Melbourne 1994.

⁵⁰ J Diamond *Guns, germs and steel* London 1998, pp42-43.

⁵¹ JM Drake and BD Griffen *Nature* online, September 8 2010.

⁵² S Mithen *After the ice* London 2003, p254.

haviour were amongst the contributing factors. Eg, in general, the bigger the animal, the more impoverished the environment, the slower the rate of reproduction.

In Australia monotremes, the diprotodon, zygomaturus, palorchestes, euowenia, eu-rycoma, etc had all gone extinct by around 46,000 years ago (dates are far from certain). That is, big birds, big mammals and big reptiles. In North America a similar mass extinction was completed around 11,500–10,000 years ago. The horse, glyptotherium, musk ox, mammoth, bison antiquus, giant beaver, ground sloth, maerauchenia, mastodon, camel, etc all disappeared. In South America the horse, ground sloth, mastodon, mammoth, camel, arctodus, etc went the same way.

The *best* explanation joining these widely dispersed mass extinction events is human colonisation. Hunters would stroll up to an unconcerned giant herbivore, like the eight-ton megatherium ground sloth, and spear the poor beast to death. In a similar manner hungry European sailors exterminated the dodo when they landed to reprovision on Mauritius in the 17th century.

The influx of modern humans into continental northern Siberia likewise probably accounts for the extinction of the steppe bison and woolly mammoth around 12,000–10,000 years ago (a dwarf version of the mammoth survived on Wrangel Island in the Russian Arctic ocean and St Paul Island in the north Pacific, which were only colonised by humans a few thousand years ago).

In Australia 93% of the larger mammals were lost with the coming of humans and this seems to have had far-reaching ecological consequences. Giant herbivores consumed vegetation on an industrial scale. The “continuous” wet and dry forests which covered thousands of miles in northern and eastern Australia were as a result variegated, full of open spaces and young growth. With the removal of the megafauna, the undergrowth thickened, fallen leaves accumulated ... till lightning struck.

What had once been light and localised seasonal burnings were transformed into raging, giant, murderous bushfires.⁵³ Many medium and small animals were killed as a result ... to the point of species extinction. Moreover, with much of the flora reduced to charcoal, thin, ancient, dry, mineral-poor soils were blown or washed away. Australia’s biomass underwent a severe crash. Fire-resistant eucalypts flourished and came to dominate. But they did so in an ecosystem *maintained* by Aboriginal fire-stick ‘farming’ ... an eco-system sent further crashing by European colonisation some 200 years ago.

If the optimal condition for primitive communism was the hunting of megafauna, their steady reduction in Eurasia and almost total elimination in Australia and the Americas was bound to trigger a profound social crisis. Exported versions of primitive communism became more and more prone to breakdown.

⁵³ T Flannery *The future eaters* Melbourne 1994, p228.

Degenerate communism

Our ancestors came out of Africa not only as anatomical moderns, but as a communist vanguard. They also took with them — as they moved along coasts, up river valleys and then into continental interiors — the hunting techniques inherited from Africa (deadly to all slow, flightless and naive animals outside the coevolved environment). We can surmise that groups would move primarily through division. Some stay and socially adapt: eg, turn to fishing or gardening. Others — perhaps the younger adults, those without children — head off in search of better conditions and maybe the old ideal.

Of course, that pursuit was sometimes more than well rewarded. At least to begin with. As humans entered new areas, they encountered megafauna that they could kill with astonishing ease. Nevertheless, precisely because of that, the megafauna was either quickly reduced or totally destroyed. Superabundance gave way to chronic shortage. In extremis cannibalism serves as a substitute means of obtaining protein (eg, the Maoris).

Such a model, despite being very broad-brush, has the advantage of both explaining the rapid spread of human populations (maybe at an average of one mile per year) and the degenerate forms of primitive communism still found dotted here and there throughout the planet.

Of course, there is degeneration and degeneration. Best habitat conditions plus the revolutionary conservatism of women — allied to their sons and brothers — can sustain something resembling pristine primitive communism. Eg, to varying degrees certain tribes in the Amazon jungle still hold the land in common, give over what they kill to the collective and in other ways remain militantly egalitarian too. So, it must be emphasised, there is a dynamic relationship between objective and subjective factors, which explain particular social formations.

However, in the most fragile, most rapidly deteriorating, most testing habitats males would have reorganised themselves into much smaller hunting parties. Say from 20 to five. The extinction of the megafauna and increased difficulties experienced in killing even small animals would have provided an inescapable impetus. Obviously, the already discussed Australian land mass comes to mind (with the partial exception of west Arnhem land in the north-east).

Under such squeezed circumstances wives would have had to follow husbands — if they were to ensure meat for themselves and their offspring. Paradoxically, a dependent attachment which engenders separation — and not only of women from their mothers and sisters, but from matrilineal brothers too. Muscle in disputes with husbands is thereby lost. Hence distance renders ineffective a once key socio-political relationship. Roving family units come together in the tribal whole, but only infrequently — eg, the corroborees. Apart from such occasions women could no longer call upon their matrilineal brothers for help. Nor could they easily return to their mothers. Female opposition to male domination is thereby undermined through loss of these vital supports.

The old social order brought out of Africa proved untenable in Australia. Atomised into small family units, women see their power shrivel. Attempts to observe the monthly sex strike would have been made completely obsolete by the rapidly deteriorating natural conditions — that is for sure (the original social relationships being vaguely recalled in the dreamtime stories of the ancestors).

Men could no longer afford to hunt for a fortnight and then party with the women, according to the rhythm of the moon. Hunting had to be done whenever the opportunity arose. And the kill would no longer be handed over to the wife's extended family. They were far, far away. Frequently, however, the men returned to the campsite crestfallen and empty-handed. The guaranteed hunt had long gone. Though less problematic, gathering roots, fruits, nuts and bugs took considerably more time too; in the denuded environment the women and children had to range much further afield.

Men would have felt themselves compelled to act. And that is exactly what they appear to have done. To borrow a phrase, “If we want *things* to stay as they are, *things* will have to *change*” (Giuseppe Tomasi). Breaking through tradition within tradition is achieved by giving a new content to existing religious forms. To preserve the sacred rituals associated with social cohesion men take over the symbolic role of women ... necessarily that involves oppression, albeit said to be for the common good. (They also took over control of marriage — elder men thereby gaining multiple younger wives.) Nonetheless, men freely admit, at least to each other, that in the beginning women were central to the social order. That they had been usurped.

However, it was not only women who paid the price. In order to stand in for them — and display their commitment to their new role — men have to menstruate. Eg, an excruciatingly painful subincision is performed as an integral part of male initiation ceremonies over wide areas of Australia. The underside of the penis being cut “from the urethral opening in the glans to the base of the shaft where it meets the scrotum”.⁵⁴ A kind of vagina in the penis results. Much blood flows ... and not only during initiation. Men bleed in unison from their penises and other wounds whenever tradition dictates.

Not that too much sympathy should be extended to the men. Any woman caught trying to discover their closely guarded secrets risks horrible punishment: ie, death by gang rape. Men are determined to retain their status as the ruling sex.

Cattle

If men collectively managed to preserve social cohesion and egalitarianism — to the extent that was possible in the much reduced circumstances — the substitution of domesticated animals such as sheep and goats, but especially cattle, for increasingly rare megafauna allowed a small minority to elevate themselves above their fellows.

⁵⁴ wiki.bmezine.com/index.php/Subincision

The domestication of cattle is dated to the early Neolithic: that is, approximately 11,000 to 12,000 years ago. From the fertile crescent and the Indus valley cattle herding then spread, through migration, exchange and emulation, over the ensuing five or six thousand years.⁵⁵ Not throughout the world, true, but into Egypt, the Sahara, Sudan, Ethiopia, China, southern India and Europe.

Cattle served as a primitive form of money. Revealingly, the terms ‘cattle’, ‘chattel’ and ‘capital’ are closely related in Indo-European languages. Ownership of expanding herds generated a corresponding desire for numerous wives, luxury and power in the first ruling class. Suffice to say, for the great majority every advance of such wealth meant retrogression; ie, fear, want and overwork.

Doubtless new values, moral codes and religious belief systems helped galvanise the few. Post-processual (interpretative) archaeology has in recent years usefully highlighted the role of ideas, when it came to hatching the social elite and moving to agriculture and a settled existence (that despite its postmodernist associations and connotations).

Put in the words of foundational Marxism: “within the old society, the elements of a new one have been created, and ... the dissolution of the old ideas keeps even pace with the old conditions” (*Communist manifesto*).⁵⁶ Of course, ideas have a certain autonomy. There is never an exact correspondence between ideas and social conditions. There is a complex determination. Ideas are shaped by social conditions, but they also *shape* social conditions.

Suffice to say, the consolidation of a ruling class did not neatly follow the hoof prints of cattle. The evidence we have reveals a prolonged, chequered and highly contested transition from classless to class society. There were a “variety of trajectories”, we are reliably told.⁵⁷ Archaeologists find what appear to be class societies alongside the continuation of hunter-gathering and classless societies, alongside newly domesticated crops and animals. So, while the rise of class and the rise of agriculture were closely related phenomena, they were not equivalents.⁵⁸

Monumental constructions doubtlessly proclaim an elite. Göbekli Tepe in southern Anatolia, as present knowledge stands, is widely credited with being the earliest stone temple in the world. Unmistakably grand and unmistakably the site of collective religious ritual, the whole site covers 25 acres and dates from approximately 9,500 BCE; that is, probably just before full-blown farming cultures and somewhat before permanent villages, towns and cities. One can therefore hazard that those who planned, constructed, ran and worshipped at Göbekli Tepe belonged to a transitional social formation which stood on the cusp of agriculture.⁵⁹ Thus far no evidence of domesti-

⁵⁵ See RM Blench and KC MacDonald *The origins and development of African livestock* Oxon 2005.

⁵⁶ K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 6, New York 1976, p503.

⁵⁷ N Yoffee *Myths of the archaic state* Cambridge 2005, p2.

⁵⁸ See I Kuijt (ed) *Life in Neolithic farming communities* New York 2000.

⁵⁹ Stephen Mithen argues that Göbekli Tepe itself provided the opportunity for people going from “gathering wild cereals” in order to feed those who “worked and gathered for religious ceremonies” to the

cated cattle or domesticated cereals have been excavated. Despite that, slightly later sites in the region clearly show that people had started to raise sheep, pigs and cattle.

Because of its age and fame Göbekli Tepe has been subject to much wacky theory-mongering: eg, alien builders visiting from outer space. Nonsense aside, let us begin by considering the geographical/ecological context.

The surrounding area lies north of the Zagros mountains, on the edge of the Anatolian plateau and between the upper reaches of two great rivers — the Tigrus and Euphrates. At the time when Göbekli Tepe functioned the whole region would have been green and fertile. There were fields of wild wheat and barley, numerous streams, stands of fruit and nut trees, and surviving herds of gazelle. Hence Göbekli Tepe has, well foundedly, at least in my opinion, been associated with the original Garden of Eden story.⁶⁰ The book of Genesis specifically mentions the Tigrus and Euphrates when describing the land of Eden.⁶¹

As ‘disguised history’ the myth can easily be interpreted. While the lifestyle of hunter-gatherers was generally easy, fulfilling and happy, the turn to agriculture led to unremitting hard labour, inequality and a greatly impoverished diet (skeletons of early agricultural peoples show damage from being forced to adopt a constant crouching position and mineral and other such dietary deficiencies).⁶² Hence the transition from one mode of existence to another could be seen by those who experienced or could recall it, albeit via oral transmission, as a punishing expulsion from paradise.

Göbekli Tepe went through a number of design reconfigurations. However, the basic pattern consists of an inner series of T-shaped pillars arranged into an oval, the highest around nine-foot tall, which are surrounded by a series of circular walls with a maximum diameter of 100 feet. At least seven other walled and pillared structures have been located within the immediate site — all smaller, but clearly related.

Pillars are carved with abstract shapes and what are stunningly realistic images of lions, deer, boars, foxes, gazelles, asses, birds and snakes. And archaeologists have unearthed numerous bones of wild animals — presumably eaten during communal feasts.

One can safely suppose a priestly elite, which not only presided over ceremonies, but the mobilisation of the population from the surrounding area. Constructing Göbekli Tepe took a lot of people a lot of time. It is estimated that “up to 500 persons were required to extract the 10–20 ton pillars (in fact, some weigh up to 50 tons) from local quarries and move them 100 to 500m to the site”.⁶³

cultivation of “domestic strains” (S Mithen in H Whitehouse and LH Martin [eds] *Theorising religions past* Walnut Creek, California, 2004).

⁶⁰ Although I find it hard to take much of what they say seriously, I am referring to David Rohl, Andrew Collins, etc.

⁶¹ Genesis ii, 14.

⁶² See A Belfor-Cohen *Annual Review of Archaeology* 1991, pp167-86.

⁶³ www.archaeology.org/0811/abstracts/turkey.html

As stated above, I think we must hypothesise a complex transition from primitive communism to class society ... a contested one too. There are signs, both negative and positive, of what has been interpreted as social resistance to the kind of elite that we presume oversaw Göbekli Tepe. Eg, Çatalhöyük (circa 7,500–5,500 BCE) — also in southern Anatolia, but further to the west. At its peak it is *conservatively* estimated that Çatalhöyük had a population of 3,500 to 8,000. Other archaeologists put the number at around 10,000 — though even the lowest figure is amazingly high, given the date. Çatalhöyük appears to be another example of a transitional social formation. Its people not only hunted and gathered; they tended herds and cultivated crops too.

Fascinatingly, those excavating Çatalhöyük — most recently Ian Hodder — have found no “evidence of large public buildings, ceremonial centres, specialised areas of production or cemeteries”.⁶⁴ None of the houses that have been investigated so far show any significant variation in size. The whole settlement consists of a “myriad” of tightly packed “small, mud-brick dwellings” — entered through rooftop skylights. And it surely follows: if you cannot prove that a society is unequal then it isn’t (here I follow the archaeologist, Norman Yoffee).

Ancestors were buried beneath the floor of houses. They appear to have been venerated religiously. Houses being regularly demolished and new ones built over the old according to the same design configuration. So houses were not only places to live in, but a means of “imagining, remembering and interacting” with past generations.⁶⁵ Not that those buried in that domestic fashion are thought to be privileged.⁶⁶ Skeletons are not accompanied by jewels, weapons or other high-status grave goods. Nor do remains show discernable differences brought about through diet and lifestyle.

Given all this, there is every reason to conclude that there were no elites and therefore no classes. Nor, it is argued, are there overt signs of women’s oppression. Archaeologists have found numerous cattle motifs and clay figurines. But when it comes to the human form, female figures predominate. The most famous being a fat, seated woman (a goddess?), whose arms rest on two leopards.

Çatalhöyük has been celebrated on the left as confirming the existence of a “Neolithic communism”.⁶⁷ Overenthusiasm perhaps. Despite that, given the model I am advocating, we can postulate a popular *revolutionary* movement founding or taking over the settlement by overthrowing an exploitative elite.

Because of the evidence — albeit in the form of absence — I think the egalitarian claims made about Çatalhöyük ought to be cautiously accepted. The discovery of big temples and big houses in the “12 successive layers of occupation” would, of course, shatter the hypothesis.⁶⁸ Yet the fact of the matter is that nothing of the kind has been unearthed. Nevertheless, while the origins of Çatalhöyük remain murky, there

⁶⁴ I Hodder (ed) *Religion in the emergence of civilisation* Cambridge 2010, p3.

⁶⁵ *Ibid* p17.

⁶⁶ *Ibid* p278.

⁶⁷ www.urkommunismus.de/catalhueyuek_en.html

⁶⁸ *Science* November 20 1998.

are roughly contemporaneous settlements — populations were numbered in the several hundreds. They were, it would seem, dominated by a ruling class.

Çayönü is typical. The few top-range houses occupy twice the floor space of others. There was animal and ... human sacrifice. Surely a sign of social crisis. Blood has been extracted from a one-ton, cut and polished ‘offering block’ and Çayönü’s “gloomy” temple contains the remains of nearly 300 people. There is also evidence of what might well be class struggle. Around about 7,200 BCE elite houses were burnt and the main temple demolished, the site being turned into a rubbish dump. A “new Çayönü” was built ... without mansions.

Bernhard Brosius has suggested that the social order established, or re-established, at the new Çayönü spread to places like Çatalhöyük and beyond that to the Balkans.⁶⁹ What this, and similar theories, point to is a prolonged period of intense class struggles.

It is highly significant then that Göbekli Tepe was not quietly abandoned and left to the elements. The whole complex was buried under 300–500 cubic metres of earth around about 8,000 BCE. An act of deliberate obliteration. The community would have had to expend a huge number of labour hours to achieve what was clearly a pre-planned goal. We might guess at one socio-religious system being replaced by another socio-religious system. The new wanting to blot out even the memory of the old.

Slightly later sites in the region have been located at Jerf el-Ahmar, Mureybet and Nevali Çori. All destroyed or abandoned. And, of course, Neolithic megaliths occur elsewhere. In Egypt the 12 foot-wide Nebta Playa stone circle is dated to the 5th millennium BCE. At the time the area was not desert, but savannah and contained a large wet-season lake. People tended herds of goats, sheep and cattle. Other, lesser known, stone circles have been discovered in south-western Egypt. Indeed stone and wooden circles, long ditched avenues and single standing stones appear almost everywhere Neolithic culture was adopted.

The British Isles, though more recent compared to Turkey, is far from unique. However, not only are there an estimated 1,000 megaliths: there is an added scale. West Kennet, Avebury, Silbury Hill and Stonehenge in southern England are truly massive. According to estimates, Avebury henge took 1.5 million hours of human labour to complete. Dwarfed by the 18 million needed for Silbury Hill and Stonehenge’s staggering 30 million.⁷⁰

There are a wide variety of theories purporting to explain the origin and function of these gigantic edifices. I shall ignore the plain crazy. Instead let me sample the plausible.

Klaus Schmidt, chief excavator of Göbekli Tepe since 1994, has suggested that it was the centre of a cult of the dead. Corpses were exposed on top of the big pillars till all flesh had been removed. Supporting evidence is certainly there in the form of murals

⁶⁹ www.urkommunismus.de/catalhueyuek_en.html

⁷⁰ C Renfrew, ‘Monuments, mobilisation and social organisation in Neolithic Wessex’ in C Renfrew (ed) *The explanation of culture change: models in prehistory* Pittsburgh 2003, pp539-58.

depicting twin sets of vultures descending onto T-shaped pillars. However, there is no body for them to devour. Schmidt's idea seems to be an obvious borrowing from the Zoroastrian towers of silence. Perhaps too obvious. Frustratingly, for Schmidt and his team, the surrounding area has revealed no graveyards, as might be predicted.

Cult of the dead theories have been used to explain other megaliths, Stonehenge included. However, in this particular case there are burials around the site (albeit few in number, the bodies are male and, as shown by grave goods, clearly members of the elite). Despite that archaeologists Timothy Darvill and Geoffrey Wainwright interpret the Stonehenge complex in an almost diametrically opposite fashion. Instead of death they see life-giving cure. Stonehenge was for them an ancient version of Lourdes. Perhaps another obvious borrowing.

People supposedly journeyed from far and wide not to ensure their place in the beyond, but to prolong a hold on this life. The smaller bluestones being credited with possessing particularly magical qualities. Supporting evidence is, however, rather flimsy: eg, the supposed “abnormal number” of remains found in tombs nearby which “display signs of serious disease” and teeth which show that about half the bodies there were “not native” to the local area.⁷¹ So people died from “serious disease” — they often do. And that many of them were not native to this part of Wiltshire hardly proves they came looking for a supernatural cure.

From Göbekli Tepe to Stonehenge, others see mass gathering places for fertility rituals. Yet the widest held theory about such sites is that they were astronomical devices for tracing the movement of the sun, moon, stars, etc. In our day, Druids, new agers, hippies, neopagans and the plain curious descend on Stonehenge on June 20–21 — the summer solstice — in their many thousands.

Astronomical theories must, however, be taken seriously. Solar, lunar and star alignments have been authoritatively claimed or authoritatively demonstrated. Eg, in a forthcoming publication Fabio Silvia shows that Neolithic dolmens (big stoned tombs) in Iberia have an unmistakable orientation towards the equinoctial full moon. Incidentally, astroarchaeology as a discipline was first given scientific rigour by Norman Lockyer (1836–1920) with his detailed investigation of Stonehenge. His 1909 classic study has recently been republished and despite occasionally getting sidetracked it is clearly a work of genuine scholarship.⁷²

Sky-watching

Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009) touched on what he called the “equinoctial concern” in the myths of the Mandan people of the North American plains. Indeed he

⁷¹ www.telegraph.co.uk/news/3046095/Stonehenge-birthdate-discovered-by-archaeologists.html

⁷² See JN Lockyer *Stonehenge and other British stone monuments astronomically considered*: www.forgottenbooks.co, 2007.

records similar notions occurring throughout the Americas, from Alaska to Terra del Fuego, in his *The origin of table manners* (1968).

In point of fact, ancient peoples on every continent were fascinated by the sun, moon and stars and seem to have made careful observations about their movements. A strong case for sky-watching dating back to the dawn of culture can be made.

Alexander Marshack (1918–2004) has found *material* evidence of what he believes are daily tallies recording the moon from the upper Palaeolithic: that is, around 30,000 years ago. Markings cut into bones, ivory and antlers prove not to be random or purely decorative. They appear to coincide with lunar phases, not just over a monthly period, but round the year. Marshack attributes meaning to the markings beyond the mere passing of time. They are not ancient versions of a calendar. Rather, as with Lévi-Strauss, he sees “narrative and myth”.⁷³

Obviously women have a particular link with the moon. Again let us limit ourselves to the *material* evidence of human understanding. The 25,000–30,000-year-old Cro-Magnon figurine, the so-called Venus of Laussel, not only displays female fertility, but cosmological awareness. She has a noticeably swollen belly and holds a horn. Thirteen distinct lines are carved onto it. Astroarchaeologists suggest that these 13 lines represent the 13 new-moon cycles in a solar year (women having around 13 menstrual periods during the same time).

Then there are the rock paintings of Lascaux. Dating from around 16,000 years ago, they appear to include the Pleiades star cluster above one of its famous bulls (known to archaeologists as ‘bull No18’). The whole rotunda of bison, deer, horses and aurochs (wild cattle) in the ‘great hall’ has been interpreted by Michael Rappenglueck as an astrological depiction of the night sky.⁷⁴ The idea that Palaeolithic peoples were feeble-minded savages, dull-witted and lacking culture is, of course, flatly contradicted by all such accounts.

If women suffered an historic defeat with the crisis of big-game hunting and a male minority came to dominance with cattle-herding and agriculture, then we would expect claims of continuity. Counterrevolutions rarely, if ever, announce themselves as counterrevolutions. Eg, Napoleon Bonaparte and Joseph Stalin kept themselves cloaked in the colours of the revolution. And yet, because the Neolithic social counterrevolution was bound up with the revolutionary transition to a new mode of living, the result in religious terms would inevitably be a multilayered combination of the old and the new.

Solar rhythms assume an ever growing importance with agriculture. After all, people would now labour while there was daylight and sow and harvest according to the solar-governed seasons. A new solar-orientated religion was bound to arise. I think we can also say that, once an elite emerges, *organised* religion would tend to follow. Or perhaps, more accurately, an elite would emerge *in conjunction with* organised religion.

⁷³ See A Marshack *The roots of civilisation* New York 1971.

⁷⁴ See news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/871930.stm

Anyhow, after shamans come priests. People who live off surplus product coaxed or squeezed from the community. Almost by definition that necessitates deception (and by increasing degrees).

Men begin the counterrevolution by attempting to fool women (backed by force). The religious elite go further and attempt to fool the entire population (they had every interest in fooling even themselves). Their new religion passes itself off as a continuation of the old — maybe that way exploitation could be legitimised. The historical record is chock-a-block with exploiters presenting their exploitation as being beneficial for the exploited. This culminates in the exploited being expected to thank, bless, pray for and even worship their exploiters (priests, prophets, chiefs, lords, monarchs, emperors). Religion thereby *categorically* ceases to be a system for investigating, deciphering and engaging with nature (science). It collapses into mere ideology (mystification).

Stonehenge

Neolithic megaliths surely need to be considered in that light. Stonehenge can be used as a test case. In the main, official archaeology considers it a device for observing the movement of the sun, predicting eclipses, etc. The standard approach is via a plan diagram: ie, as if seen from the air. Having calculated a centre point, lines are then projected outwards, spoke-like, which locate the sun at key times of the year: eg, summer solstice.

Showing how conventional they are, at least when it comes to Stonehenge, Druids, hippies, new agers and neopagans think within that paradigm. After travelling many miles to celebrate the summer solstice, they eagerly await the sunrise. When it finally shows there is joy, reverence, camaraderie and, of course, a conviction that long before them the ancients felt the exact same.

Obvious problems exist with this model. The fact of the matter is that Stonehenge has no centre; at least shown by a marker of any kind.⁷⁵ True, depending where you stand, any set of stones can be aligned with astronomical events. Eg, shuffle a little this way or little that way, close an eye and one can see the sun rise over the heel stone from somewhere in the centre. But nothing matches exactly. That much is clear.

Archaeologists have tried to explain away what they consider to be imperfections. Supposedly because Stonehenge's architects and builders were barely one removed from savagery, they made elementary blunders. Yet confounding such accounts, the lintels, the stone tops of the outer circle, prove to be "accurate to eight centimetres across a diameter of 30 metres".⁷⁶ An accuracy that many a modern builder would envy. I think we must conclude that the summer solstice sunrise theory fails to explain Stonehenge.

So what was the intention of its Neolithic architects? Lionel Sims provides a daring, but much more convincing theory. Think about Stonehenge neither from above nor

⁷⁵ See C Ruggles *Astronomy in prehistoric Britain and Ireland* Cambridge 1999.

⁷⁶ L Sims 'World-historic defeat of women' *Weekly Worker* April 22 2010.

by looking out from the centre. Hardly, he suggests, the way the Neolithic community would conceive, approach or emotionally engage with the complex.

On the contrary, having gathered on the bank of the river Avon, they head uphill to the site. That is why the two mile-long Stonehenge Avenue was made surely. With this orientation in mind, the configuration, purpose and significance of Stonehenge might be understood.

According to Sims, the monument served to preserve the lunar cosmology, along with an increasingly tenuous social link with hunting. Simultaneously, however, the old religion is “estranged” by the “emerging solar cosmology”.⁷⁷

From above Stonehenge is full of gaps between the stones. Yet to those heading up from the Avon it would have appeared almost as a solid wall. That is why there were 160 carefully arranged stones in what archaeologists call Stonehenge 3ii (to line up the summer solstice only two stones would be needed). There were, however, two gaps (windows). One on the upper left, the other on the lower right. Sims shows that one gap captured the *setting* sun, while the other captured the *setting* moon.

Presumably among the aims was to transpose onto the sun the religious significance previously held exclusively by the moon and, moreover, locate the monthly rhythm of the moon within the annual cycle of the sun. An extraordinarily powerful message for Neolithic viewers. And, as we have shown, the Neolithic architects would have been able to draw on a long tradition of observing and giving meaning to the sky.

What its priest-architects were intent on demonstrating was not the unity of the sun and moon during the longest day, the summer solstice. Rather the unity of the sun and moon that coincided with the longest *night* of the year. Winter solstice sees stars at their brightest. And even with thick cloud cover the outer bluestones of Stonehenge would glisten and glitter like stars. The sacredness of darkness, how it coincided with women’s magic and seclusion, was, one presumes, still fully internalised by the community. Now, however, it was firmly under the control of the priesthood, not least because of their mathematical, architectural, astronomical and other such special knowledge, which was displayed, affirmed and magnified to spellbinding effect through their monumental construction.

So the community reverentially approach Stonehenge before sunset, halt at some fixed point (the heel stone) and then await in expectation. They see the moon and sun appear in the two windows and, miraculously, while their light lasts, the sun and the moon are seemingly held still. Doubtless people were awestruck at the power of priests who could halt time itself.

One does not have to agree with every detail of the theory. Yet, despite a few nagging doubts, I am firmly convinced that Sims is on the right track. Damningly he describes Stonehenge, Avebury, Silbury Hill ... and that whole line of Neolithic

⁷⁷ homepages.uel.ac.uk/L.D.Sims/Lighting%20Up%20Dark%20Moon.pdf

monumental constructions going back to Göbekli Tepe, as “giant lying machines”.⁷⁸ Neolithic religion was out to intimidate, console and manipulate.

In Britain the hunter-gathering mode of production was steadily accumulating contradictions. Deer, elk, wild pigs, brown bears and aurochs were still present during the onset of the Neolithic, but were being overhunted (the horse had been driven to extinction by around 7,500 BCE).⁷⁹ Domestic animals, above all cattle, increasingly serve as a substitute. But, as we have seen, the benefit mainly goes to the few.

One can guess that the religious elite steps in to square the circle. They can be seen as continuing the old religion and *putting off* a social order entirely based on farming. The planting of crops seems to have been practised on a limited scale, but understandably full-scale agriculture held little or no attraction for the mass of the population. Farming requires endless back-breaking labour.

Not that the lunar-solar religion of the priesthood was an easy option. There are the labour hours needed to build and rebuild their huge monuments, added to which the priests would have expected and doubtless received tithes. Evidence also exists of human sacrifice, including children. However, in return the priests invented a “symbolic representation of communal cohesion”.⁸⁰ It is no accident that so many of their monuments were circular (conveying wholeness, inclusion, cycles, etc). Priests were in all likelihood also responsible for concocting rules which maintained the hybrid social formation. Eg, seasonal, geographic and other such restrictions on hunting.

The new and old are reconciled. Hunting and cattle-herding coexist, along with male private ownership, the continued role of women in the household, child-rearing, gathering plants, etc. The vital mediation being, of course, the priesthood and their *rival* monuments. We presume that Stonehenge and Avebury/Silbury Hill competed for allegiance and tribute — hence the constant rebuilding programmes and the striving after scale and novel special effects.

Neolithic cosmology seems to have been based on a binary unity of life and death, the past and the present, the earth and the sky. Despite that it was fractured in terms of time and space. The sun and moon had to be watched at a particular time — eg, the equinox and solstice — and in a particular place. One can also speculate that each complex wanted to give the impression that it was the centre of the universe. That the sun and the moon descended back into the earth via the ‘navel’ of these monuments.

However, the breakdown of the old order proved unstoppable. Between declining numbers of game animals and the rise of cattle-owning there was only one possible outcome. The dynamic pole being occupied by the male owners. Around about 1,600 BCE Stonehenge was abandoned (there are indications of desecration). The same is true of other such sites.

⁷⁸ L Sims ‘World-historic defeat of women’ *Weekly Worker* April 22 2010.

⁷⁹ www.phancocks.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/naturalhistory/holocene%20fauna.htm

⁸⁰ A Whittle *Europe in the Neolithic — the creation of new worlds* Cambridge 1996, p190.

Theocracy is replaced by chiefdoms and kinship based on “territory, or co-residence”. Chiefdoms were, to begin with, very small and highly “unstable”.⁸¹ One gave way to another in rapid succession ... but here we find the kernel of state and therefore state religion.

One presumes that priests — and their religion — had become thoroughly discredited in the popular mind. Perhaps they were blamed for the scarcity or disappearance of bigger wild animals and the suffering associated with the adoption of the full agricultural package and a sedentary existence.

Instead of monumental religious complexes there appear elaborate hill forts, aristocratic burials and signs of endemic armed conflict. The male elite clearly felt safe in overthrowing, or subordinating, the priesthood and founding a new social order. And, having done so, they proceed to make war their abiding concern, passion and means of exerting and expanding their power. The community divides into three ‘orders’: those who work, those who preside over worship and those whose profession is fighting. Needless to say, the warrior displayed no hesitation in rating himself above the specialist in prayer.⁸²

⁸¹ B Arnold and D Blair Gibson *Celtic chiefdom, Celtic state* Cambridge 1996, p15.

⁸² Here I am borrowing from the French medievalist Marc Bloch. See M Bloch *Feudal society* London 1965, p292.

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Jack Conrad

When all the crap began

Women's oppression, class, organised religion, war, and private property are not
natural, writes Jack Conrad

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