

# Primitive communism and women's role in its emergence

How did human evolution give rise to a species whose very survival is based on mutual confidence and solidarity? More particularly, what was woman's role in this process?

Jens

Submitted to LibCom on May 25, 2013

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# Part 1: Woman's Role in the Emergence of Human Culture

Why write about primitive communism today? The sudden plunge into catastrophic economic crisis and the development of struggles around the world are raising new problems for the working class, dark clouds are gathering over capitalism's future, and all the while the hope of a better world seems unable to break through. Is this really the time to study our species' social history in the period from its emergence some 200,000 years ago to the beginning of the Neolithic (about 10,000 years ago)?<sup>1</sup> For ourselves, we are convinced that the question is every bit as important for communists today as it was for Marx and Engels in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both in general for its scientific interest and as an element in our understanding of humanity and its history, and for our understanding of the perspective and possibility of a future communist society able to replace moribund capitalism.

This is why we can only welcome the publication in 2009 of a book titled *Le communisme primitif n'est plus ce qu'il était* ("Primitive communism is not what it was") by Christophe Darmangeat; and indeed it is even more encouraging that the book is already in its second edition, which clearly indicates a public interest in the subject.<sup>2</sup> This article will try, through a critical review, to return to the problems posed by the question of the first human societies; we will profit from the opportunity to explore the ideas put forward some twenty years ago by Chris Knight,<sup>3</sup> in his book *Blood Relations*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A social history which, for some human populations, has continued to the present day.

<sup>2</sup> Editions Smolny, Toulouse, 2009. We became aware of the publication of the second edition of Darmangeat's book (Smolny, Toulouse, 2012) just as this article was about to go to press, and we obviously wondered whether we would have to rewrite this review. After reading through the second edition, it seems to us that we can leave this article essentially in its original state. The author himself points out in a new preface that he has not "modified the text's essential ideas, nor the arguments on which it is based", and our reading of this new edition confirms this. We have therefore limited ourselves to elaborating some arguments on the basis of the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Unless otherwise noted, the quotes and page references are taken from the first edition.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Knight is an English anthropologist and member of the "Radical Anthropology Group". He has taken part in the debates on science at the 19<sup>th</sup> ICC Congress, and we have published his article on "Marxism and Science" on our web site (<http://en.internationalism.org/icconline/2011/07/marxism-and-science-chris-knight>)

<sup>4</sup> Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1991.

Before we get into the meat of the subject, one thing should be clear: the question of primitive communism, and of humanity's "species being", are scientific questions, not political ones. In this sense, it is out of the question for a political organisation to adopt a "position" on human nature, for example. We are convinced that a communist organisation should stimulate debate and a thirst for scientific knowledge amongst its militants, and more generally in the working class, but the aim here is to encourage the development of a materialist and scientific view of the world, based on an awareness of modern scientific theory, at least as far as this is possible for non-scientists, as most of us are. The ideas presented cannot therefore be considered the "positions" of the ICC: they are the responsibility of the author alone.<sup>5</sup>

## Why is the question of our origins important?

Why then is the question of the origin of our species, and of the first human societies, an important one for communists? The terms of the problem have changed considerably since the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Marx and Engels discovered with enthusiasm the work of the American anthropologist Lewis Morgan. In 1884, when Engels published *The origins of the family, private property, and the state*, science had barely escaped the clutches of an epoch where the estimates of the age of the planet, or of human society, were based on Bishop Ussher's biblical calculations.<sup>6</sup> As Engels wrote in his 1891 preface: "Before the beginning of the 'sixties, one cannot speak of a history of the family. In this field, the science of history was still completely under the influence of the five books of Moses. The patriarchal form of the family, which was there described in greater detail than anywhere else, was not only assumed without question to be the oldest form, but it was also identified – minus its polygamy – with the bourgeois family of today, so that the family had really experienced no historical development at all".<sup>7</sup> The same was true of notions of property, and the bourgeoisie could still object to the working class' communist programme that "private property" was intrinsic to human society itself. The idea of the existence of a social condition of primitive communism was so unknown that in 1847 the *Communist Manifesto* could open with the words "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." (a declaration that Engels thought it necessary to correct with a note in 1884).

Morgan's book *Ancient Society* greatly helped in dismantling the ahistorical view of a human society eternally based on private property, even though his contribution was often hidden or passed over in silence by official anthropology, especially in Britain. As Engels notes, again in his Preface: "Morgan filled the measure to overflowing by

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<sup>5</sup> That said, the author is deeply indebted to the discussions within the organisation, without which it would certainly have been impossible to develop these ideas.

<sup>6</sup> Bishop Ussher was a prolific 17<sup>th</sup> scholar who calculated the age of the Earth on the basis of biblical genealogies: he gave a date for the planet's creation in 4004 BC.

<sup>7</sup> <http://marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/preface2.htm>

not merely criticizing civilization, the society of commodity production, the basic form of present-day society, in a manner reminiscent of Fourier, but also by speaking of a future transformation of this society in words which Karl Marx might have used.”

Today, in 2012, the situation is very different. A succession of discoveries have pushed man’s origins further and further back in time, so that today we know not only that private property is not society’s eternal foundation, but on the contrary that it is a relatively recent invention, since agriculture and so private property and the division of society into classes only date back some 10,000 years. Certainly, as Alain Testart has shown in his work *Les chasseurs-cueilleurs ou l’origine des inégalités*, the formation of wealth and classes did not take place overnight; a long period must have elapsed before the emergence of fully fledged agriculture, during which the development of storage techniques encouraged the emergence of an unequal distribution of accumulated wealth. Nonetheless, it is clear today that by far the longest period of human history is not that of class struggle, but of a society without classes: a society that we are justified in calling primitive communism.

The objection to the idea of a communist society that we hear most today is no longer that it violates the eternal principles of private property, but that it is supposedly contrary to “human nature”. “You can’t change human nature”, we are told, and by that is meant the supposedly violent, competitive and egocentric nature of man. Capitalist order is thus no longer eternal, but merely the logical and inevitable result of unchanging nature. Nor is this argument limited to right-wing ideologues. Humanist scientists, following as they believe the same logic of a genetically determined human nature, reach similar conclusions. The *New York Review of Books* (a left leaning intellectual journal) gives us an example of this reasoning in its October 2011 edition: “Humans compete for resources, living space, mates, social status, and almost everything else. Each living human is at the apex of a lineage of successful competitors that extends back to the origin of life. We are nothing if not fine-tuned competitors. The compulsion to compete enters into nearly everything we do, whether we recognize it or not. And the best competitors among us are often the best rewarded. One needs to look no further than Wall Street for a flagrant example [...] The human predicament of overpopulation and overexploitation of resources is fundamentally driven by the primordial impulses that drove our ancestors to achieve above-average reproductive success.”<sup>8</sup>

This argument appears unanswerable at first sight: one hardly need look far to find endless examples of cupidity, violence, cruelty and egoism in today’s society, and in history. But does it follow that these defects are determined – as we would say today – genetically? Nothing could be more uncertain. If we can risk an analogy, a tree growing on a windswept cliff will grow twisted and stunted. Yet this is not wholly inscribed in its genes: under better conditions the tree would grow straight and tall.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/oct/13/can-our-species-escape-destruction>

Could we say the same of human beings? It is a truism that features often enough in our articles, to say that the world proletariat's resistance to capitalism's crisis does not correspond to the violence of the attacks to which it is subjected. Communist revolution has perhaps never seemed so necessary, and yet at the same time so difficult. One of the reasons for this is certainly – in our view – because the workers not only lack confidence in their own strength but in the very possibility of communism. “It's a nice idea”, people say to us, “but you know, human nature...”.

To regain its self-confidence, the proletariat must not only confront the immediate problems of the struggle; it must also confront the greater historical problems posed by its potential revolutionary confrontation with the ruling class. Amongst these problems there is precisely that of “human nature”, and this problem can only be investigated in the spirit of science. We have no interest in “proving” that man is “good”. We hope to arrive at a better understanding of precisely what man is, in order to integrate this knowledge into communist political project. The communist goal does not depend on man's “natural goodness”: the need for communism is set in the given of capitalist society as the only solution to the social logjam which will undoubtedly lead us to a catastrophic future if capitalism does not give way before a communist revolution.

## Scientific method

Before continuing, we want to turn aside briefly to consider the question of scientific method, especially as it applies to the study of human history and behaviour. A passage at the beginning of Knight's book seems to us to pose the problem of anthropology's place among the sciences very well: “More than any other field of knowledge, anthropology taken as a whole spans the chasm which has traditionally divided the natural from the human sciences. Potentially if not always in practice, it therefore occupies a central position among the sciences as a whole. The crucial threads which – if joined – might bind the natural sciences to the humanities would have to run through anthropology more than through any other field. It is here that the ends join – here that the study of nature ends and that of culture begins. At which point on the scale of evolution did biological principles cease to predominate while other, more complex, principles began prevailing in their place? Where exactly is the dividing line between animal and human social life? Is the distinction here one of kind, or merely one of degree? And, in the light of this question, is it really possible to study human phenomena scientifically – with the same detached objectivity as an astronomer can show towards galaxies or a physicist towards subatomic particles?”

If this area of relationships between the sciences seems to many to be confused, it is only in part because of the real difficulties involved. Science may be rooted at one end in objective reality, but at the other end it is rooted in society and ourselves. It is for ultimately social and ideological reasons that modern science, fragmented and distorted under immense yet largely unacknowledged political pressures, has stumbled

upon its greatest problem and its greatest theoretical challenge – to incorporate the humanities and the natural sciences into a single unified science on the basis of an understanding of humanity’s evolution and place within the rest of the universe.”<sup>9</sup>

The question of the “dividing line” between the animal world, whose behaviour is determined above all by its genetic heritage, and the human world where behaviour depends to a far greater extent both on genes and on our cultural evolution, does indeed seem to us crucial to an understanding of “human nature”. Other primates are capable of learning, and up to a point of inventing and transmitting new behaviour, but this does not mean that they possess a “culture” in the human sense. These learned behaviours remain “marginal to the maintenance of social-structural continuity”.<sup>10</sup> What made it possible for culture to gain the upper hand, in a “creative explosion”,<sup>11</sup> is the development of communication amongst human groups, the development of symbolic culture based on language and ritual. Knight indeed makes the comparison between symbolic culture and language, which allowed human beings to communicate and so transmit ideas, and therefore culture, universally, and science, which is also founded on a common symbolism based on a planet-wide accord between all scientists, and potentially at least between all human beings. The practice of science is inseparable from debate, and the ability of each to verify the conclusions at which science arrives: it is therefore the sworn enemy of any form of esotericism which lives through secret knowledge, closed to non initiates.

Because it is a universal form of knowledge, and because since the industrial revolution it has been a productive force in its own right dependent on the associated labour, in both time and space, of scientists,<sup>12</sup> science is internationalist by nature, and in this sense the proletariat and science are natural allies.<sup>13</sup> This absolutely does not mean that there can be such a thing as “proletarian science”. In his article on “Marxism and science”, Knight quotes these words of Engels: “... the more ruthlessly and disin-

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<sup>9</sup> Knight, op.cit. p.56–7

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p11. We can draw an analogy here with commodity production and capitalist society. Commodity production and trade have existed since the dawn of civilisation, and perhaps even before, but they become determining factors only in capitalism.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.12

<sup>12</sup> See our article “Reading notes on science and marxism”, <http://en.internationalism.org/icconline/201203/4739/reading-notes-science-and-marxism>

<sup>13</sup> This is true of science as it is of other productive forces under capitalism: “The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together. Subjection of Nature’s forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam-navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalisation of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground — what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labour?[...] The productive forces at the disposal of society no longer tend to further the development of the conditions of bourgeois property; on the contrary, they have become too powerful for these conditions, by which they are fettered, and so soon as they overcome these fetters, they bring disorder into the whole of bourgeois society, endanger the existence of bourgeois property” (Marx and Engels, Communist Manifesto, Part I “Bourgeois and Proletarians”).

terestedly science proceeds, the more it finds itself in harmony with the interests of the workers.”<sup>14</sup> Knight continues: “Science, as humanity’s only universal, international, species-unifying form of knowledge, had to come first. If it had to be rooted in the interests of the working class, this was only in the sense that all science has to be rooted in the interests of the human species as a whole, the international working class embodying these interests in the modern epoch just as the requirements of production have always embodied these interests in previous periods.”

There are two other aspects of scientific thought, highlighted in Carlo Rovelli’s book on the Greek philosopher Anaximander of Miletos,<sup>15</sup> which we want to take up here because they seem to us fundamental: respect for one’s predecessors, and doubt.

Rovelli shows that Anaximander’s attitude towards his master Thales broke with the attitudes that characterised his epoch: either a total rejection in order to establish oneself as the new master, or a slavish devotion to the words of the “master” whose thought is maintained in a state of mummification. The scientific attitude on the contrary, consists in basing ourselves on the work of the “masters” who have gone before, while at the same time criticising their mistakes and trying to take knowledge further. This the attitude we find in Knight’s book with regard to Lévi-Strauss, and in Darmangeat with regard to Morgan.

Doubt is fundamental to science, the very opposite of religion which always seeks certainty and consolation in the invariance of eternally established truth. As Rovelli says, “Science offers the best answers precisely because it does not consider its answers to be absolute truths; this is why it is always able to learn, and to take in new ideas”.<sup>16</sup> This is especially true of anthropology and paleo-anthropology, whose data is often scattered and uncertain, and whose best theories can be upended overnight by new discoveries.

Is it even possible to have a scientific vision of history? Karl Popper,<sup>17</sup> who is a reference for most scientists, thought not. He considered history as a “unique event” which is therefore non-reproducible, and since the verification of a scientific hypothesis depends on reproducible experiment, historical theory cannot be considered scientific. For the same reasons, Popper rejected the theory of evolution as non-scientific, and yet it is obvious today that the scientific method has proved itself capable of laying bare the fundamental mechanisms of the evolutionary process to the point where humanity

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<sup>14</sup> Engels, “Ludwig Feuerbach and the end of classical German philosophy”. In K Marx and F Engels, *On Religion*. Moscow 1957, p. 266.

<sup>15</sup> *The first scientist : Anaximander and his legacy*, Westholme Publishing, 2011

<sup>16</sup> Our translation from the French, cited in an article published on our French site.

<sup>17</sup> Karl Popper (1902–1994) was born in Vienna, Austria. He became one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s most influential philosophers of science, and an unavoidable reference for any scientist interested in questions of methodology. He insists in particular on the idea of “refutability”, which states that any hypothesis, if it is to be considered scientific, must be able to propose experiments which would allow it to be refuted: should such experiments be impossible, then a hypothesis could not claim to be scientific. On this basis, Popper held that marxism, psychoanalysis, and – at least at first – Darwinism, could not claim to be scientific disciplines.



can now manipulate evolution through genetic engineering. Without going as far as Popper, it is nonetheless clear that to apply the scientific method to the study of history, to the point we can make predictions about its evolution, is an extremely hazardous exercise. On the one hand human history – like meteorology for example – incorporates an incalculable number of independent variables, on the other, and above all, because – as Marx said – “men make their own history”; history is therefore determined by laws, but also by the ability or otherwise of human beings to base their acts on conscious thought and on the knowledge of these laws. Historical evolution is always subject to constraints: at any given moment, certain developments are possible, others are not. But the manner in which a given situation will evolve is also determined by men’s ability to become conscious of these constraints and to act on the basis of this awareness.

It is thus particularly bold on Knight’s part to accept the full rigour of the scientific method and to subject his theory to experimental test. Obviously, it is impossible to “reproduce” history experimentally. Knight therefore makes predictions on the basis of his hypotheses (in 1991, the date when *Blood Relations* was published) as to future archaeological discoveries: in particular, that the earliest traces of human symbolic culture would reveal an extensive use of red ochre. In 2006, 15 years later, it would seem that these predictions have been confirmed by the discoveries in Blombos Cave (South Africa) of the first known vestiges of human culture;<sup>18</sup> these include engraved red ochre, pierced sea-shells apparently used for body decoration, and even the world’s first paint-pot, all of which fits into the evolutionary model that Knight proposes (to which we will return later). Obviously, this is not a “proof” of his theory, but it seems to us undeniable that it strengthens the hypothesis.

This scientific method is very different from that followed by Darmangeat who remains, or so it seems to us, restricted to the inductivist method which brings together known facts to try to extract from these some common factors. This method is not without value in scientific historical study: after all, any theory must conform to known reality. But Darmangeat seems to be very reticent about any attempt to go further and this seems to us an empirical rather than a scientific approach: science does not advance through induction from observed fact, but through hypothesis, which must certainly be in conformity with observation but must also propose an approach (experimental if possible), which would make it possible to go further towards new discoveries and new observations. String theory in quantum mechanics gives us a striking example of this method: although it is in accord, as far as possible, with observed fact, it cannot today be verified experimentally, since the particles (or “strings”) whose existence it postulates are too small to be measured with existing technology. String theory thus

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<sup>18</sup> See the work of the Stellenbosch conference published in *The cradle of language*, OUP, 2009, and the article published in the November 2011 issue of *La Recherche* (<http://www.larecherche.fr/content/recherche/article?id=30891>).

remains a speculative hypothesis – but without this kind of bold speculation, science would be unable to advance.

Another problem with the inductivist method is that it must, inevitably, pre-select its observations from the immensity of known reality. This is how Darmangeat proceeds, when he bases himself solely on ethnographic observation and leaves aside any consideration of the role of evolution and genetics – which seems to us an impossibility in a work which aims to lay bare “the origin of the oppression of women” (as Darmangeat’s book is sub-titled).

## Morgan, Engels, and the scientific method

After these very modest considerations on the question of methodology, let us now return to Darmangeat’s book, which is this article’s starting-point.

The book is divided into two parts: the first examines the work of the American anthropologist Lewis Morgan on which Engels based his *Origins of the family, private property and the state*, while the second takes up Engels’ question as to the origins of the oppression of women. In this second part, Darmangeat concentrates on attacking the idea that there once existed a primitive communism based on matriarchy.

The first part seems to us especially interesting,<sup>19</sup> and we can only agree wholeheartedly with Darmangeat when he rounds on a supposedly “marxist” position which raises the work of Morgan (and *a fortiori* Engels) to the status of untouchable religious texts. Nothing could be further from the scientific spirit of marxism. While we should expect marxists to have a historical view of the emergence and development of materialist social theory, and so to take account of previous theories, it is absolutely obvious that we cannot take 19<sup>th</sup> century texts as the last word, and ignore the immense accumulation of ethnographic knowledge since then. Certainly, it is necessary to maintain a critical view in this respect: Darmangeat, like Knight, rightly insists on the fact that the struggle against Morgan’s theories was far from being waged on the basis of “pure”, “disinterested” science. When Morgan’s contemporary and later adversaries pointed out his mistakes, or when they highlighted discoveries that did not fit his theory, their aim was not in general neutral. By attacking Morgan, they attacked the evolutionary view of human society, and tried to re-establish bourgeois society’s patriarchal family and private property as the “eternal” categories of all human society, past present and future. This was perfectly explicit for Malinowski, one of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century’s greatest ethnographers, who said in a 1931 radio interview: “I believe that the most disruptive element in the modern revolutionary tendencies is the idea that parenthood can be made collective. If once we come to the point of doing away with the individual family as the pivotal element of our society, we should be faced with a

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<sup>19</sup> Ironically, in the second edition Darmangeat has moved the book’s first part to an Appendix, apparently for fear of discouraging the non-specialist reader with its “aridity”, to use the author’s own term.

social catastrophe compared with which the political upheaval of the French revolution and the economic changes of Bolshevism are insignificant. The question, therefore, as to whether group motherhood is an institution which ever existed, whether it is an arrangement which is compatible with human nature and social order, is of considerable practical interest".<sup>18</sup> We are a long way, here, from scientific objectivity...

Let us move on to Darmangeat's critique of Morgan. This is of great interest in our view, if only because it begins with a fairly detailed summary of Morgan's theories, making them readily accessible for the non expert reader. We especially appreciate the table which aligns the different stages of social evolution used by Morgan and the anthropology of his epoch ("savagery", "barbarism", etc.) and those in use today (Palaeolithic, Neolithic, etc.), which makes it easier to place oneself in historical time, and the explanatory diagrams of different kinship systems. The whole section abounds in clear, didactic explanations.

The foundation of Morgan's theory is to bring together the type of family, kinship systems, and technical development, in a series of evolutionary steps which lead from "the state of savagery" (the first stage of human social evolution, which corresponds to the Palaeolithic), to "barbarism" (the Neolithic and the age of metals), and finally to civilisation. This evolution is supposedly determined by technical development, and the apparent contradictions that Morgan noted among many peoples (the Iroquois in particular) between the systems of family and kinship, represented for him the intermediary stages between a more primitive and a more advanced economy and technology. Sadly for the theory, when we look more closely this turns out not to be the case. To take only one of Darmangeat's many examples, according to Morgan the "punaluan" kinship system is supposed to represent one of the most primitive technical and social stages, and yet it is to be found in Hawaii, in a society which contains wealth, social inequality, an aristocratic social stratum, and which is on the point of evolving into a full-blown state and class society. Family and kinship systems are thus determined by social needs, but not in a straight line from the most primitive to the most modern.

Does this mean that the marxist view of social evolution should be thrown into the bin? Not in the least, says Darmangeat. However, we need to dissociate what Morgan, and Marx and Engels after him, tried to bring together: the evolution of technology (and therefore of productivity) and family systems. "... Although modes of production are all qualitatively different, they all possess a common quantity, productivity, which makes it possible to order them in a rising series, which moreover roughly corresponds to their chronological order [...] [For the family] there is no common quantity which could be used to establish a rising series of different forms".<sup>20</sup> It is obvious that the economy is the determining factor "in the last instance", to use Engels term: if there were no economy (ie the reproduction of everything necessary to human life), then there would be no social life either. But this "last instance" leaves a great deal of space

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<sup>20</sup> p136 of the first edition. The translation from the French is ours' throughout.

for other influences, be they geographical, historical, cultural, or other. Ideas, culture – in its broadest sense – are also determining factors in society. At the end of his life, Engels himself regretted that the pressing need, for Marx and himself, to set historical materialism on a sure footing, and to fight for its defence, left them too little time to analyse other historically determining factors.<sup>21</sup>

## The critique of anthropology

In the second part of his book, Darmangeat puts forward his own thoughts. We find here two basic themes, so to speak: on the one hand a historical critique of anthropological theory on the position of women in primitive societies, on the other we have the exposition of his own conclusions on the subject. This historical critique is focused on the evolution of what, for Darmangeat, is the marxist – or at least marxist-influenced – vision of primitive communism from the standpoint of women’s place in primitive society, and is a vigorous denunciation of “feminist” attempts to defend the idea of a primeval matriarchy in the first human societies.

This choice is not unreasonable, nonetheless in our view it is not always a happy one, leading the author to ignore some marxist theoreticians who belong in such a study, and to include others who have no business there at all. To take just a few examples, Darmangeat criticises Alexandra Kollontai<sup>22</sup> over several pages, yet says almost nothing about Rosa Luxemburg. Now, whatever Kollontai’s role in the Russian revolution and in the resistance to its degeneration (she played a leading role in the “Workers’ Opposition”), Kollontai never played a great part in the development of marxist theory, and still less in that of anthropology. Luxemburg on the other hand, was not only a leading marxist theoretician, she was also the author of an *Introduction to political economy*, which devotes an important part to the question of primitive communism, on the basis of the most up to date research of the day. The only justification for this imbalance is that Kollontai played an important part, first in the socialist movement, then in early Soviet Russia, in the struggle for women’s rights, whereas Luxemburg never took a close interest in feminism. Two other marxist authors who have written

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<sup>21</sup> “Marx and I are ourselves partly to blame for the fact that the younger people sometimes lay more stress on the economic side than is due to it. We had to emphasise the main principle vis-à-vis our adversaries, who denied it, and we had not always the time, the place or the opportunity to give their due to the other elements involved in the interaction. But when it came to presenting a section of history, that is, to making a practical application, it was a different matter and there no error was permissible. Unfortunately, however, it happens only too often that people think they have fully understood a new theory and can apply it without more ado from the moment they have assimilated its main principles, and even those not always correctly. And I cannot exempt many of the more recent “Marxists” from this reproach, for the most amazing rubbish has been produced in this quarter, too...” (Engels, letter to J Bloch, 21<sup>st</sup> September 1890: [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90\\_09\\_21.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90_09_21.htm))

<sup>22</sup> In the second edition, Kollontai even has her own sub-section.

on the theme of primitive communism are not even mentioned: Karl Kautsky (*Ethics and the materialist conception of history*) and Anton Pannekoek (*Anthropogenesis*).

Amongst the unfortunate “inclusions” we find, for example, Evelyn Reed: this member of the American Socialist Workers’ Party (a Trotskyist organisation which gave its “critical” support to participation in World War II), is included for having written in 1975 *Feminism and anthropology*, a work which enjoyed a certain success in left-wing circles at the time. But as Darmangeat says, the book was almost completely ignored by anthropologists largely because of the poverty of its arguments, which were pointed out even by sympathetic critics.

We find the same absences amongst the anthropologists: Claude Lévi-Strauss, one of the most important figures in 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropology and whose theory of the passage from nature to culture is founded on the idea of the exchange of women between men, only gets a walk-on part, while Bronislaw Malinowski does not appear at all.

Perhaps the most surprising absence is that of Chris Knight. Darmangeat’s book is focused especially on the situation of women in primitive communist societies, and on the critique of theories which belong to a certain marxist, or marxist-influenced tradition. In 1991, the British anthropologist Chris Knight, who considers his work to lie explicitly within the marxist tradition, published a work – *Blood Relations* – which deals with precisely the issue that concerns Darmangeat. One would expect that Darmangeat would pay it the closest attention, all the more so since he himself recognises the work’s “great erudition”. Yet nothing of the sort is to be found in Darmangeat’s book, quite the reverse. He devotes barely a page (p321) to Knight’s thesis, where he tells us that it “reiterates the serious methodological errors of Reed and Briffault (Knight says nothing about the former, but quotes the latter abundantly)”, which could leave the francophone reader with no access to a book available only in English, with the impression that Knight does no more than follow behind people who Darmangeat has already demonstrated are not to be taken seriously.<sup>23</sup> Yet a mere glance at Knight’s bibliography is enough to show that while he does indeed cite Briffault, he

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<sup>23</sup> The critique of Knight’s work is no more extensive in the second edition, with the exception of a reference to a critical review by Joan M Gero, a feminist anthropologist and author of *Engendering archaeology*. This review seems to us somewhat superficial and politically partisan. Here is a typical example: “What Knight puts forward as an ‘engendered’ perspective on the origins of culture is a paranoid and distorting view of “female solidarity,” featuring (all) women as sexually exploiting and manipulating (all) men. Male-female relations are characterized forever and everywhere as between victims and manipulators; exploitative women are assumed always to have wanted to trap men by one means or another, and indeed their conspiring to do so serves as the very basis of our species’ development. Readers may similarly be offended by the assumption that men have always been promiscuous and that only good sex, coyly metered out by calculating women, can keep them at home and interested in their offspring. Not only is the scenario unlikely and undemonstrated, repugnant to feminists and non-feminists alike, but the sociobiological reasoning dismisses all the nuanced versions of social construction of gender relations, ideologies, and activities that have become so central and fascinating in gender studies today”. In short, we are invited to reject a scientific thesis not because it is wrong – Gero has nothing to say about this and takes no trouble to demonstrate it – but because it is “repugnant” to certain feminists.

gives a good deal more space to Marx, Engels, Lévi-Strauss, Marshall Sahlins... and many more. And if one takes the trouble to consult his references to Briffault, one finds immediately that Knight considers the latter's work (published in 1927), whatever its merits, to be "outdated in its sources and methodology"<sup>24</sup>

In short, our feeling is that Darmangeat leaves us rather "sitting on the fence": we end up with a critical narrative which is neither a real critique of the positions defended by marxists, nor a real critique of anthropological theory, and this sometimes gives us the impression of witnessing Don Quixote's joust with the windmills. This choice of structure seems to us to obscure more than anything else, an argument which in other respects is of considerable interest.

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<sup>24</sup> Darmangeat, *op.cit*, p. 328.

## Part 2: Women’s role in primitive society

In the first part of this article, published in the *International Review n°150*, we considered the role of women in the emergence of culture among our species *Homo sapiens*, on the basis of a critique of Christophe Darmangeat’s book *Le communisme primitif n’est plus ce qu’il était*.<sup>1</sup> In this second, and final, part we propose to examine what we feel to be one of the most fundamental problems posed by primitive communist society: how did the evolution of the genus *Homo* produce a species whose very survival is based on mutual confidence and solidarity, and more particularly what was woman’s role in this process. In doing so, we are basing ourselves substantially on the work of the British anthropologist Chris Knight.

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What then, according to Christophe Darmangeat, is women’s role and situation in primitive society? We cannot here repeat the entire argument contained in his book illustrated by a solid knowledge of the ethnography and striking examples. We will limit ourselves to a summary of its conclusions.

A first observation, which might seem to be obvious but in reality is not, is that the sexual division of labour is a universal constant of human society until the appearance of capitalism. Capitalism remains a fundamentally patriarchal society, based on exploitation (which includes sexual exploitation, the sex industry being one of the most profitable in modern times). Nonetheless, by directly exploiting the labour of women workers, and by developing machinery to a point where physical strength no longer plays a significant part in the labour process, capitalism has destroyed the division between “masculine” and “feminine” roles in social labour; in doing so, it has laid the foundations for a true liberation of women in communist society.<sup>2</sup>

The situation of women varies enormously among the different primitive societies which anthropologists have been able to study: in some cases, women suffer from an oppression which can bear more than a passing resemblance to class oppression, while in others they benefit not only from social esteem, but, hold a real social power. Where

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<sup>1</sup> Éditions Smolny, Toulouse 2009 et 2012. Unless otherwise stated, quotes and page references are taken from the first edition.

<sup>2</sup> Darmangeat puts forward some interesting ideas on the increased importance of physical strength in determining sex roles following the invention of agriculture (ploughing for example).

such power exists, it is based on the possession of rights over production, amplified by society's religious and ritual life: to take just one example, Bronislaw Malinowski (in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*) tells us that the women of the Trobriand Islands not only have a monopoly on the work of horticulture (of great importance in the islands' economy), but also over certain forms of magic, including those considered to be the most dangerous.<sup>3</sup>

However, while the sexual division of labour can cover very different situations from one people and mode of existence to another, there is one rule which is applied almost without exception: everywhere, it is men alone who have the right to bear arms and who therefore have a monopoly of warfare. As a result, they also have a monopoly over what one might call "foreign relations". As social inequality began to develop, first with food storage then from the Neolithic onwards with full-blown agriculture and the emergence of private property and social classes, this specific situation of men allowed them little by little to dominate the whole of social life. In this sense, Engels was doubtless right to say in *Origins of the family* that "The first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male".<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, one needs to avoid a too schematic view here, since even the first civilisations are far from being homogeneous in this respect. A comparative study of several early civilisations<sup>5</sup> shows us a broad spectrum: while the situation of women in meso-American and Inca societies was an unenviable one, amongst the Yoruba in Africa for example, women not only owned property and exercised a monopoly over certain industries, they also carried out large-scale trade on their own account and could even command diplomatic and military expeditions.

## The question of mythology

Up to now we have remained, with Darmangeat, in the domain of the studies of "historically known" primitive societies (in the sense that they have been described by literate societies, from the ancient world to modern anthropology). This can teach us about the situation since the invention of writing in about the 4<sup>th</sup> millenium BCE, at best. But what are we to say of the 200,000 years of anatomically modern Man's existence that precede it? How are we to understand the crucial moment when nature gave way to culture as the main determining factor in human behaviour, and how are genetic and cultural elements combined in human society? To answer this question, a purely empirical view of known societies is clearly inadequate.

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<sup>3</sup> Darmangeat insists, no doubt rightly, that involvement in social production is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for ensuring women a favourable situation in society.

<sup>4</sup> In the section on "The monogamous family".

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Trigger, *Understanding early civilizations*.



One of the striking aspects of the study of early civilisations cited above, is that however varied the image they present of women's condition, they all have legends which refer to women as chiefs, sometimes identified with goddesses. All of them have also seen a decline in women's situation over time. One is tempted to see a general rule here: the further we go back in time, the more social authority women possess.

This impression is confirmed if we consider more primitive societies. On every continent, we find similar or even identical myths: once, women held power but since then men have stolen it, and now it is they who rule. Everywhere, women's power is associated with the most powerful magic of all: the magic based on women's monthly cycle and their menstrual blood, even to the point where we often encounter male rituals where men imitate menstruation.<sup>6</sup>

What can we deduce from this ubiquitous reality? Can we conclude that it represents a historical reality, and that there once existed a first society where women had a leading, if not necessarily a ruling role?

For Darmangeat, the answer is unequivocal and negative: "the idea that when myths speak of the past, they necessarily speak of a real past, however deformed, is an extremely bold, not to say untenable hypothesis" (p167). Myths "tell stories, which have meaning only in relation to the present situation which they have the function of justifying. The past of which they speak is invented solely in order to fulfil this objective" (p173).

This argument poses two problems.

The first, is that Darmangeat claims to be a marxist who remains faithful to Engels' method while updating his conclusions. Yet while Engels' *Origins of the family* is based extensively on Lewis Morgan, it also attributes considerable importance to the work of the Swiss jurist Johann Bachofen, who was the first to use mythology as a basis for understanding the relations between the sexes in the distant past. According to Darmangeat, Engels "is clearly cautious in his adoption of Bachofen's theory of matriarchy (...) although he abstains from criticising the Swiss jurist's theory, Engels only gives it a very qualified support. There is nothing surprising here: given his own analysis of the reasons for one sex's domination of the other, Engels could hardly accept that before the development of private property, men's domination over women was preceded by women's domination over men; he envisaged the prehistoric relation between the sexes much more as a certain form of equality" (pp150-151).

Engels may well have remained prudent as to Bachofen's conclusions, but he has no hesitation as to Bachofen's method, which uses mythological analysis to uncover historical reality: in his Preface to the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of *Origins of the family* (in other words, having had plenty of time to restructure his work and include any corrections he thought necessary), Engels takes up Bachofen's analysis of the Orestes myth (in particular the version of the Greek tragedian Aescylus), and concludes with this com-

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<sup>6</sup> Knight's book devotes a section to "male menstruation" (p428). Also available in PDF on Chris Knight's website.

ment: “This new but undoubtedly correct interpretation of the Oresteia is one of the best and finest passages in the whole book (...) [Bachofen] was the first to replace the vague phrases about some unknown primitive state of sexual promiscuity by proofs of the following facts: that abundant traces survive in old classical literature of a state prior to monogamy among the Greeks and Asiatics when not only did a man have sexual intercourse with several women, but a woman with several men, without offending against morality (...) Bachofen did not put these statements as clearly as this, for he was hindered by his mysticism. But he proved them; and in 1861 that was a real revolution”.

This brings us to the second issue: how are myths to be explained? Myths are part of material reality just as much as any other phenomenon: they are therefore themselves determined by that reality. Darmangeat proposes two possible determinants: either they are simply “stories” invented by men to justify their domination over women, or they are irrational: “During prehistory, and for a long time afterwards, natural or social phenomena were universally and inevitably interpreted through a magico-religious prism. This does not mean that rational thought did not exist; it means that, even when it was present, it was always combined to a certain extent with an irrational discourse: the two were not perceived as different, still less as incompatible” (p319). What more need be said? All these myths built around the mysterious powers conferred by menstrual blood and the moon, not to mention women’s original power, are merely “irrational” and so outside the field of scientific explanation. At best, Darmangeat is ready to accept that myths must satisfy the human mind’s requirement of coherence;<sup>7</sup> but if that is the case, then unless we accept a purely idealist explanation in the original sense of the term, we must answer another question: where does this “demand” come from? For Lévi-Strauss, the source of the remarkable unity of primitive societies’ myths throughout the Americas was to be found in the innate structure of the human mind, hence the name “structuralism” given to his work and theory;<sup>8</sup> Darmangeat’s “requirement of coherence” looks like a pale reflection of Lévi-Strauss’ structuralism.

This leaves us without an any explanation on two crucial points: why do myths take the form they do, and how are we to explain their universality?

If they are no more than “stories” invented to justify male domination, then why invent such unlikely ones? If we take the Bible, the Book of Genesis gives us a perfectly logical explanation for male domination: God created men first! Logical that is, as long as we are prepared to accept the unlikely notion, which anyone can see contradicted year in year out, that woman came out of the body of man. Why then invent a myth which not only claims that women once held power, but which is accompanied by the demand that men continue to carry out the rites associated with this power, to the

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<sup>7</sup> “The human mind has its requirements, one of which is coherence” (p319). We will not here go into the question of where these “requirements” come from, nor why they take their particular forms – questions which Darmangeat leaves unanswered.

<sup>8</sup> For a glowing, but critical account of Lévi-Strauss’ thinking, the reader can refer to Knight’s chapter on “Levi-Strauss and ‘The Mind’”.

point of imagining male menstruation? This practice, attested throughout the world amongst hunter-gatherers where male domination is powerful, consists of men making their own blood flow in certain important rituals, by lacerating their members and in particular the penis, in a conscious imitation of menstrual bleeding.

Were this kind of ritual limited to one people, or one group of peoples, one might accept that this was nothing but an accidental and “irrational” invention. But when we find it spread throughout the world, on every continent, then if we are to remain true to historical materialism we must seek its social determinants.

At all events, it seems to us necessary from the materialist standpoint to take the myths and rituals which structure society seriously as sources of knowledge about it, something that Darmangeat fails to do.

## The origin of women’s oppression

We can summarise Darmangeat’s thinking as follows: at the origins of women’s oppression lies the sexual division of labour, which systematically reserves to men big game hunting and the use of arms. However interesting his work, this seems to us to leave two questions unanswered.

It seems obvious enough that with the emergence of class society, based necessarily on exploitation and so on oppression, the monopoly of weapons is almost a self-sufficient explanation for male domination in it (at least in the long term; the overall process is doubtless more complex than that). Similarly, it seems a priori reasonable to suppose that the monopoly of weapons played a part in the emergence of male domination contemporaneous with the emergence of social inequalities prior to the appearance of class society properly so-called.

By contrast, and this is our first question, Darmangeat is much less clear why the sexual division of labour should reserve this role to men, since he himself tells us that “physiological reasons (...) have difficulty explaining why women were excluded from the hunt” (p314-315). Nor is it clear why the hunt, and the food which is its product, should be more prestigious than the product of gathering or of gardening, especially when the latter is the major source of social resources.

More fundamentally still, where does the first division of labour come from, and why should it be sexually based? Here we find Darmangeat losing himself in his own imagination: “We can imagine that even an embryonic specialisation allowed the human species to acquire a greater effectiveness than if its members had continued to exercise every activity without distinction (...) We can also imagine that this specialisation operated in the same direction, by strengthening social ties in general, and ties within the family group in particular”.<sup>9</sup> Well of course, “we can imagine”... but is this not rather what was supposed to be demonstrated?

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<sup>9</sup> C. Darmangeat, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, pp214-215

As for the question “why the division of labour came about on the basis of sex”, for Darmangeat this “does not seem very difficult. It seems obvious enough that for the members of prehistoric society, this was the most immediately obvious difference”.<sup>10</sup> We can object here that while sexual differences must certainly have seemed “immediately obvious” to the first human beings, this is not a self-sufficient explanation for the emergence of a sexual division of labour. Primitive societies abound in classifications, notably those based on totems. Why should the division of labour not be based on totemism? This is obviously a mere flight of fancy – but no more so than Darmangeat’s hypothesis. More seriously, Darmangeat makes no mention of another extremely obvious difference, and one which is everywhere important in archaic societies: that of age.

When it comes down to it, Darmangeat’s book – despite its rather ostentatious title – does not enlighten us much. Women’s oppression is based on the sexual division of labour. So be it. But when we ask where this division comes from, we are “reduced to mere hypotheses, we can imagine that certain biological constraints, probably linked to pregnancy and breast-feeding, provided the physiological substrate for the sexual division of labour and the exclusion of women from the hunt” (p322).<sup>11</sup>

## From genes to culture

At the end of his argument, Darmangeat leaves us with the following conclusion: at the origin of women’s oppression lies the sexual division of labour and despite everything, this division was itself a formidable step forward in labour productivity, even if its origins lie hidden in a far-off and inaccessible past.

Darmangeat seeks here to remain faithful to the marxist “model”. But what if the problem has been posed back to front? If we consider the behaviour of those primates that are closest to man, chimpanzees in particular, we find that it is only the males that hunt – the females are too busy feeding and looking after their young (and protecting them from the males: we should not forget that male primates often practice infanticide of other males’ children in order to gain access to the mother for their own reproductive needs). There is thus nothing specifically human about the “division of labour” between males who hunt and females who do not. The problem – what demands explanation – is not why the hunt is reserved to the male of *Homo sapiens*, but why it is the male sapiens, and only the male sapiens, that shares the produce of his hunt. What is striking, when we compare *Homo sapiens* to its primate cousins, is the range of often very strict rules and taboos, to be found from the burning deserts of Australia to the Arctic ice, which require the collective consumption of the product of the hunt.

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<sup>10</sup> Idem.

<sup>11</sup> Oddly enough, Darmangeat himself only a few pages previously points out that in certain North American Indian societies, under special conditions, “women could do everything; they mastered the whole range of both feminine and masculine activity” (p314).

The hunter does not have the right to consume his own product, he must bring it back to camp for distribution to others. The rules that govern this distribution vary considerably from one people to another, but their existence is universal.

It is also worth pointing out that *Homo sapiens*' sexual dimorphism is a good deal less than that of *Homo erectus*, which in the animal world is generally indicative of more equal relations between the sexes.

Everywhere, sharing food and collective meals are at the foundations of the first societies. Indeed, the shared meal has survived to modern times: even today it is impossible to imagine any great moment in life (birth, marriage, or burial) without a collective meal. When people come together in simple friendship, as often as not it is around a common meal, whether it be round the barbecue in Australia or around the restaurant table in France.

This sharing of food, which seems to come down to us from time immemorial is an aspect of human collective and social life very different from that of our far-off ancestors. We are confronted here with what the Darwinologist Patrick Tort has called the "reverse effect" of evolution, or what Chris Knight has described as a "priceless expression of the 'selfishness' of our genes": the mechanisms described by Darwin and Mendel, and confirmed by modern genetics, have generated a social life where solidarity plays a central part, whereas these same mechanisms work through competition.<sup>12</sup>

This question of sharing seems fundamental to us, but it is only a part of a much broader scientific problem: how are we to explain the process which transformed a species whose changes in behaviour were determined by the slow rhythm of genetic evolution, into our own, whose behaviour – although of course it is still founded on our genetic heritage – changes thanks to the much more rapid evolution of culture? And how are we to explain that a mechanism based on competition has created a species which can only survive through solidarity: the mutual solidarity of women in childbirth and childrearing, the solidarity of men in the hunt, the solidarity of the hunters towards society as a whole when they contribute the product of the chase, the hale in solidarity with the old or injured no longer able to hunt or to find their own food, the solidarity of the old towards the young, in whom they inculcate not only the knowledge of nature and the world vital for survival, but the social, historical, ritual and mythical knowledge which make possible the survival of a structured society. This seems to us the fundamental problem posed by the question of "human nature".

This passage from one world to another took place during a crucial period of several hundred thousand years, a period which we could indeed describe as "revolutionary".<sup>13</sup> It is closely linked to the evolution of the human brain in size (and presumably in structure, though this is obviously much more difficult to detect in the archaeological record). The increase in brain size poses a whole series of problems for our evolving

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<sup>12</sup> See the article on Patrick Tort's L'effet Darwin, and Chris Knight's article on solidarity and the selfish gene.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. "The great leaps forward" by Anthony Stigliani

species, not the least of which is its sheer energy consumption: about 20% of an individual's total energy intake, an enormous proportion.

Although the species undoubtedly gained from the process of encephalisation, it posed a real problem for the females. The size of the head means that birth must occur earlier, otherwise the baby could not pass through the mother's pelvis. This in turn implies a much longer period of dependence in the infant born "prematurely" compared to other primates; the growth of the brain demands more nourishment, both structural and energetic (proteins, lipids, carbohydrates). We seem to be confronted with an insoluble enigma, or rather an enigma which nature solved only after a long period during which *Homo erectus* lived, and spread out of Africa, but apparently did not change very much either in behaviour or in morphology. And then comes a period of rapid evolution which sees an increase in brain size and the appearance of all the specifically human forms of behaviour: language, symbolic culture, art, the intensive use of tools and their great variety, etc.

There is another enigma to go with this one. We have noted the radical changes in the behaviour of the male *Homo sapiens*, but the physiological and behavioural changes in the female are no less remarkable, especially from the standpoint of reproduction.

There is a striking difference in this respect between the female *Homo sapiens* and other primates. Amongst the latter (and especially those that are the closest to us), the female generally signals to males in the clearest possible way her period of ovulation (and hence of greatest fecundity): genital organs highly visible, a "hot" behaviour especially towards the dominant male, a characteristic odour. Amongst humans, quite the opposite holds true: the sexual organs are hidden and do not change appearance during ovulation, while the human female is not even aware of being "on heat".

At the other end of the ovulation cycle, the difference between *Homo sapiens* and other primates is equally striking: an abundant and visible menstrual flow, the contrary to chimpanzees for example. Since loss of blood implies a loss of energy, natural selection should in principle operate against abundant blood flow; it could be explained by some selected advantage – but what?

Another remarkable characteristic of human menstrual flow is its periodicity and synchronicity. Many studies have shown the ease with which groups of women synchronise their periods, and Knight reproduces a table of ovulation periods among primates which shows that only the human female has a period that perfectly matches the lunar cycle: why? Or is it just a coincidence?

One might be tempted to put all this to one side as irrelevant in explaining the appearance of language, and human specificity in general. Such a reaction, moreover, would be in perfect conformity with current ideology, which sees women's periods as something, if not exactly taboo, at least somewhat negative: think of all those advertisements for "feminine hygiene" products which boast their ability to render the period invisible. To discover, in reading Knight's book, the immense importance of menstrual blood and everything associated with it in primitive human society, is thus all the more startling for us as members of modern society. And the belief in the enormous power

– for good and evil – of women’s periods, seems to be a universal phenomenon. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that menstrual flows “regulate” everything, up to and including the harmony of the universe.<sup>14</sup> Even among peoples where there is strong male domination, and where everything is done to devalue women, their periods inspire fear in men. Menstrual blood is considered “polluting” to a point which seems barely sane – and this is precisely a sign of its power. One is even tempted to conclude that men’s violence towards women is directly in proportion to the fear that women inspire in men.<sup>15</sup>

The universality of this belief is significant and demands explanation. We can imagine three possible ones:

- It might be the result of structures set in the human mind, as Lévi-Strauss’ structuralism suggested. Today, we would say rather that it is set in the human genetic heritage – but this seems to contradict everything that is known about genetics.
- It might be put down to the principle of “same cause, same effects”. Societies that are similar from the point of view of their relations of production and their technique produce similar myths.
- The similarity of myths might, finally, be put down to a common historical origin. If this were the case, given that the different societies where menstrual myths are expressed are widely separated geographically, the common origin must belong to a far distant past.

Knight favours the third explanation: he does indeed see the universal mythology around menstruation as something that is very old, going right back to the very origins of humanity.

## The emergence of culture

How are these different questions linked together? What can be the link between women’s menstruation and collective hunting? And between the two and other emergent phenomena: language, symbolic culture, a society based on shared rules? These questions seem to us fundamental because all these “evolutions” are not isolated phenomena, but elements in a single process leading from *Homo erectus* to ourselves. The hyper-specialisation of modern science has the great disadvantage (largely recognised

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<sup>14</sup> It is interesting to note that in French (and Spanish) the word for a woman’s period is “les règles” (or, “la regla”), which also means “the rules”.

<sup>15</sup> This is a theme which recurs throughout Darmangeat’s book. See amongst others the example of the Huli in New Guinea (p222, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition).

by scientists themselves) of making it very difficult to understand an entire process which cannot be encompassed by any single specialisation.

What we find most remarkable in Knight's work is precisely this effort to bring together genetic, archaeological, paleontological and anthropological data in a "theory of everything" for human evolution, analogous to the efforts of the theoretical physicists who have given us super-string or quantum loop gravity theory.<sup>16</sup>

Let us therefore attempt to summarise this theory, known today as "sex strike theory". To simplify and schematise, Knight hypothesises a modification in the behaviour, first of Homo females confronted by the difficulties of childbirth and childrearing: the females turn away from the dominant male to give their attention to secondary males in a sort of mutual help pact. The males accept to leave the females for the hunt, and to bring back the product of the chase; in return, they have an access to females, and therefore a chance to reproduce, that was denied to them by the dominant male.

This modification in the behaviour of the males – which at the outset, let us remember, is subject to the laws of evolution – is only possible under certain conditions, and two in particular: on the one hand, it is not possible for the males to find an access to females elsewhere; on the other, the males must be confident that they will not be supplanted in their absence. These are therefore collective behaviours. The females – who are the motive force in this evolutionary process – must maintain a collective refusal of sex to the males. This collective refusal is signalled visibly to the males, and other females by the menstrual flow, synchronised on a "universal" and visible event: the lunar cycle and the tides which accompany it in the semi-aquatic environment of the Rift valley where mankind first appeared.

Solidarity is born: amongst the females first of all, then also amongst the males. Collectively excluded from access to the females, they can put into practice an increasingly organised collective hunt of large game, which demands a capacity for planning and solidarity in the face of danger.

Mutual confidence is born from the collective solidarity within each sex, but also between the sexes: the females confident in male participation in childrearing, the males confident that they will not be excluded from the chance to reproduce.

This theoretical model allows us to resolve the enigma that Darmangeat leaves unanswered: why are women absolutely excluded from the hunt? According to Knight's model, this exclusion can only be absolute, since if some females – and in particular those unencumbered by any young – were to join the hunt with the males, then the latter would have access to fertile females and would no longer be forced to share the product of the hunt with nursing females and their young. For the model to function, the females are obliged to maintain a total solidarity amongst themselves. From this starting point, it is possible to understand the taboo which maintains an absolute separation between women and the hunt, and which is the foundation for all the other taboos that revolve around menstruation and the blood of the hunt, and which forbid

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<sup>16</sup> And better still, to have rendered this theory readable and accessible to the non expert reader.



women from handling any cutting tool. The fact that this taboo, from being a source of women's strength and solidarity, should in other circumstances become a source of social weakness and oppression, may seem paradoxical at first sight: in reality, it is a striking example of a dialectical reversal, one more illustration of the deeply dialectical logic of all evolutionary and historical change.<sup>17</sup>

The females who are most successful in imposing this new behaviour amongst themselves, and on the males, leave more descendants. The process of encephalisation can continue. The way is open toward the development of the human.

Mutual solidarity and confidence are thus born, not from a sort of beatific mysticism but on the contrary from the pitiless laws of evolution.

This mutual confidence is a precondition for the emergence of a true capacity for language, which depends on the mutual acceptance of common rules (rules as basic as the idea that a single word has the same meaning for me as it does for you, for example), and of a human society based on culture and law, no longer subjected to the slow rhythm of genetic evolution, but able to adapt much more rapidly to new environments. Logically, one of the first elements of the new culture is the transfer from the genetic into the cultural domain (if we can put it like this) of everything that made the emergence of this new social form possible: the most ancient myths and rituals thus turn around women's menstruation (and the moon which guarantees their synchronisation), and its role in the regulation not only of the social but also the natural order.

## A few difficulties, and a possible continuation

As Knight says himself, his theory is a sort of "origins myth" which remains a hypothesis. This obviously is not a problem in itself: without hypothesis and speculation, there would be no scientific advance; it is religion, not science, which tries to establish certain truths.

For ourselves, we would like to raise two objections to the narrative that Knight proposes.

The first concerns elapsed time. When *Blood Relations* was published in 1991, the first signs of artistic expression and therefore of the existence of a symbolic culture capable of supporting the myths and rituals which are at the heart of his hypothesis, dated back a mere 60,000 years. The first remains of modern humans dated back about 200,000 years: so what happened during the 140,000 "missing" years? And what could we envisage might be the precursor of a full-blown symbolic culture, for example among our immediate ancestors?

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<sup>17</sup> Hence, when Darmangeat tells us that Knight's thesis "says not a word about the reasons why women have been systematically and completely forbidden to hunt and to handle weapons", we cannot help wondering whether he has read the book to its conclusion.

This does not so much put the theory into question, as pose a problem which calls for further research. Since the 1990s, excavations in South Africa (Blombos Caves, Klasies River, Kelders) seem to have pushed back the use of art and abstract symbolism to 80,000 or even 140,000 BCE;<sup>18</sup> as far as *Homo erectus* is concerned, the remains discovered at Dmanisi in Georgia in the early 2000s and dated back to about 1.8 million years, seem already to indicate a certain level of solidarity: one individual lived for several years without teeth, which suggests that others helped him to eat.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, their tools were still primitive and according to the specialists they did not yet practice big game hunting. This should not surprise us: Darwin in his day had already established that human characteristics such as empathy, the appreciation of beauty, and friendship, all exist in the animal realm, even if at a rudimentary level when compared to mankind.

Our second objection is more important and concerns the “motive force” pushing towards the increase in human brain size. Knight is more concerned with determining how this increase was possible, and so this question is not a central one for him: according to his interview at our congress, he has basically adopted the “increasing social complexity” theory, of human beings having to adapt to life in ever larger groups (this is the theory put forward by Robin Dunbar,<sup>20</sup> and also taken up by J-L Dessalles in his book *Why we speak*, whose arguments he presented at our previous congress). We cannot go into the details here, but this theory seems to us not without its difficulties. After all, the size of primate groups may vary from a dozen in the case of gorillas, to several hundred for *Hamadryas* baboons: it would therefore be necessary both to show why the hominins had social needs over and above those of baboons (this is far from being achieved), and to demonstrate that hominins lived in ever larger groups, up to the “Dunbar number” for example.<sup>21</sup>

On the whole, we prefer to tie the process of encephalisation and the development of language to the growing importance of “culture” (in the broadest sense) in human ability to adapt to the environment. There is often a tendency to think of culture solely in material terms (stone tools, etc.). But when we study the lives of hunter-gatherers in our own epoch, we are more than anything impressed by their profound knowledge of their natural surroundings: animal behaviour, the properties of plants, etc. Any hunting animal “knows” the behaviour of its prey, and can adapt to it up to a certain point. With human beings, however, this knowledge is not genetic but

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<sup>18</sup> See the Wikipedia article on Blombos Cave

<sup>19</sup> See the article published in *La Recherche*: “Etonnants primitifs de Dmanisi”

<sup>20</sup> See for example Dunbar’s *The human story*. Robin Dunbar explains the evolution of language through the increase in the size of human groups; language appeared as a less costly form of grooming, through which our primate cousins maintain their friendships and alliances. “Dunbar’s number” has entered anthropological theory as the greatest number of close relationships that the human brain is capable of retaining (about 150); Dunbar considers that this would have been the maximum size of the first human groups.

<sup>21</sup> The Hominins (the branch of the evolutionary tree to which modern humans belong) diverged from the Panins (the branch containing chimpanzees and bonobos) some 6–9 million years ago).

cultural, and must be transmitted from generation to generation. While mimicry may allow the transmission of a certain limited degree of “culture” (monkeys using a stick to fish for termites for example), it seems obvious that the transmission of human (or indeed proto-human) knowledge demands something more than mimicry.

One may also suggest that the more culture replaces genetics in determining our behaviour, the transmission of what we might call “spiritual” culture (myth, ritual, the knowledge of sacred places, etc.) takes on ever greater importance in maintaining group cohesion. This in turn leads us to link the development of language to another external sign, anchored in our biology: women’s “early” menopause followed by a long period where they are not reproductively active, which is another characteristic that human females do not share with their primate cousins.<sup>22</sup> How then could an “early” menopause have been favoured by natural selection, despite apparently limiting female reproductive potential? The most likely hypothesis seems to be that the menopausal female helps her daughter to better ensure the survival of her own grand-children, and therefore of her own genetic heritage.<sup>23</sup>

The problems we have just discussed concern the period covered by *Blood Relations*. But there is another difficulty which concerns the period of known history. It is obvious that the primitive societies of which we have knowledge (and which Darmangeat describes) are very different from Knight’s hypothetical first human societies. Just to take the example of Australia, whose aboriginal society is one of the most primitive known on the technical level, the persistence of myths and ritual practices which attribute great importance to menstruation goes side by side with complete male domination over women. If we suppose that Knight’s hypothesis is broadly correct, then how are we to explain what appears to be a veritable “male counter-revolution”? In his Chapter 13 (p449), Knight proposes a hypothesis to explain this: he suggests that it is the disappearance of the megafauna – species such as the giant Wombat – and a period of dry weather at the end of the Pleistocene, which disturbed hunting patterns and put an end to the abundance which he considers to be the material condition for primitive communism’s survival. In 1991, Knight himself wrote that this hypothesis remains to be tested in the archaeological record, and his own investigation is limited to Australia. At all events, it seems to us that this problem opens up a wide field of investigation which would allow us to envisage a real history of the longest period of humanity’s existence: from our origins to the invention of agriculture.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> cf. “Menopause in non-human primates” (US National Library of Medecine).

<sup>23</sup> See this summary of the “grandmother hypothesis”.

<sup>24</sup> Some work has already been done in this direction, in a country at the antipodes of Australia, by the anthropologist Lionel Sims, in an article titled “The ‘Solarization’ of the moon: manipulated knowledge at Stonehenge” published in the Cambridge Archaeological Journal 16:2.

## The communist future

How can the study of human origins clarify our view of a future communist society? Darmangeat tells us that capitalism is the first human society which makes it possible to imagine an end to the sexual division of labour, and equality for women – an equality which is today set in law in a few countries, but which is nowhere an equality in fact: “while capitalism has neither improved nor worsened women’s lot as such, it is by contrast the first system which has made it possible to pose the question of their equality with men; and although it has proved unable to make this equality a reality, it has nonetheless brought together the elements which will bring it into being”.<sup>25</sup>

Two criticisms seem to us in order here: the first is that it ignores the immense importance of women’s integration into the world of wage labour. Despite itself, capitalism has given working-class women, for the first time in the history of class society, a real material independence from men, and hence the possibility of taking part on an equal footing with men in the struggle for the liberation of the proletariat, and so of humanity as a whole.

The second concerns the very notion of equality. This notion is stamped with the mark of the democratic ideology inherited from capitalism, and it is not the goal of a communist society which will, on the contrary, recognise the differences between individuals and – to use Marx’s expression – “inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!”.<sup>26</sup> Now, outside the domain of science fiction, women have both an ability and a need that men will never have: to give birth.<sup>27</sup> This capacity has to be exercised, or human society has no future, but it is also a physical function and therefore a need for women.<sup>28</sup> A communist society must therefore offer every woman who desires it the possibility of giving birth with joy, in confidence that her child will be welcomed into the human community.

Here perhaps we can draw a parallel with the evolutionist vision that Knight proposes. Proto-women launched the process of evolution towards *Homo sapiens* and symbolic culture, because they could no longer raise their children alone: they had to oblige the males to provide material aid to childbearing and the education of the young. In

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<sup>25</sup> Darmangeat, op.cit., p426.

<sup>26</sup> It is not for nothing that Marx wrote, in his Critique of the Gotha programme, “Right, by its very nature, can consist only in the application of an equal standard; but unequal individuals (and they would not be different individuals if they were not unequal) are measurable only by an equal standard insofar as they are brought under an equal point of view, are taken from one definite side only — for instance, in the present case, are regarded only as workers and nothing more is seen in them, everything else being ignored”.

<sup>27</sup> One of today’s very rare original science fiction writers, Iain M Banks, has created a pan-galactic society (“The Culture”) which is communist in all but name, where humans have reached such a degree of control over their hormonal functions that they are able to change sex at will, and therefore to give birth also.

<sup>28</sup> Which does not of course mean that all women would want, still less should be obliged, to give birth.

doing so, they introduced into human society the principle of solidarity among women occupied by their children, among men occupied by the hunt, and between men and women sharing their joint social responsibilities.

Today, we are confronting a situation where capitalism reduces us more and more to the status of atomised individuals, and childbearing women suffer most as a result. Not only does the “rule” of capitalist society reduce the family to its smallest expression (mother, father, children), the general disintegration of social life means that more and more women find themselves bringing up even their very young children alone, and the need to find work often distances them from their own mothers, sisters, or aunts who once used to be the natural support network for any woman with small children. The “world of work” is pitiless for women with children, obliged to wean their infants after a few months at best (depending on the maternity holidays available, if any) and to leave them with a nurse, or – if they are unemployed – to find themselves cut off from social life and forced to look after their babies alone on the most limited resources.

In a sense, working class women today find themselves in a situation analogous to their distant ancestors – and only a revolution can improve their situation. Just as the “revolution” that Knight hypothesises allowed women to surround themselves with the social support first of other women, then of men, for the bearing and education of their children, so the communist revolution to come must put at its heart the support for women’s childbearing, and the collective education of children. Only a society which gives a privileged place to its children and youth can claim to offer a hope for the future: from this standpoint, capitalism stands condemned by the very fact that a growing proportion of its youth is considered “surplus to requirements”.

The Ted K Archive

Jens

Primitive communism and women's role in its emergence

How did human evolution give rise to a species whose very survival is based on mutual confidence and solidarity? More particularly, what was woman's role in this process?

Submitted to LibCom on May 25, 2013

International Review no.150 and 151. <[en.internationalism.org/internationalreview/201212/5422/womans-role-emergence-human-culture](http://en.internationalism.org/internationalreview/201212/5422/womans-role-emergence-human-culture)> &

<[en.internationalism.org/content/6964/womens-role-emergence-human-solidarity](http://en.internationalism.org/content/6964/womens-role-emergence-human-solidarity)>

This is a review of Christophe Darmangeat's recent book, '*Primitive Communism is Not What it Was*'.

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