The Dispossession of Women

A Marxist examination of new evidence on the origins of women's oppression

Pat Brewer

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Introduction

Since Frederick Engels wrote *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* in 1884, much data has been gathered by archaeologists and anthropologists which confirms the Marxist idea that the first human communities were not divided into social classes and were gender egalitarian.

Engels presented an analysis of how these social relations were overturned as a result of a radical change in humanity's productive forces — the domestication of cattle. According to Engels, the new wealth that animal husbandry created for prehistoric tribal communities increased the social standing of men at the expense of women, because men managed the herds. The rise in men's contribution to tribes' wealth eventually led to the exclusion of women from social production and the conversion of traditional female tasks such as food preparation and crafts into private household services.

However, Engels himself admitted that he was, given the evidence available at the time, unable to explain how the herds of cattle were converted from the property of the tribe to the property of individual men.

This pamphlet is a contribution to answering that question. It surveys new scientific evidence which fills in some of the gaps in our understanding of how the production process and relations of production shifted as a result of the development of plough agriculture. It outlines how the greater productivity of agriculture compared to horticulture; the declining need for men to hunt; the fact that the ploughing process was individual work and heavier than horticulture; the difficulty of combining this individualised work with the care of infants; and the development of trade based on the greater quantity and variety of food and other products that animal domestication

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made possible, all contributed to the isolation of women into households and their exclusion from the main food production, the basis of their equal status and power in preceding societies.

The latest evidence, in filling in some of the gaps in Engels' and other Marxists' explanation of this pivotal stage of social development, also affirms the Marxist explanation of the development of private property and the oppression of women in class society. It is therefore of enormous importance to all those who are battling to expose the increasingly pervasive biological determinist explanation of gender inequality as "natural" and unchangeable for the pseudo-scientific, reactionary ideology that it is.

'[Marxists] argue that women have not always been oppressed. This oppression arose at a particular stage of social development and was institutionalised through the family … women's oppression is social, not biologically determined, and has evolved over time.'

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Biology as Ideology

Why are women still second-class citizens? Why do they have to choose between being "good" mothers or "selfish" career seekers? Why does the capacity to give birth to a child limit the range of choices and options available to women while the capacity to sire a child does not similarly restrict men? Why has the family become such an important issue in neoliberal politics? Why is the distribution of economic and social power so unequal between men and women?

For centuries there has been debate about what determines human behaviour: is it something inherent in our nature or does it arise from the social and physical environment in which we live and interact? Recently, a spate of theories have claimed to explain human behaviour in terms of "nature", increasingly meaning the biological. Biological determinists argue that our biology not only shapes the behaviour of individual human beings, it also determines the social and economic inequalities that characterise class societies.

Inequalities of race, ethnicity, class and particularly gender are due to our individual genetic make-up, according to the latest variant of sociobiology, evolutionary psychology. Its proponents argue, for example, that our genes determine our sexual behaviour and relations in order to maximise their chances to reproduce successfully in the next generation. This would mean that gender roles, marriage, legal practices and the institution of the family are all driven by the genetic imperative to reproduce.

While such theories pretend to scientific validity, they are in fact partial and distorted viewpoints — ideological justifications for the status quo. They attempt to justify systems of inequality and exploitation as inevitable, inescapable and unchangeable, and therefore natural and moral.

Biological determinism is not the first attempt to impose naturalness, unchangeability and moral rightness on the existing social order. Nor, unfortunately, will it be the last. But its prominence in the natural sciences is growing.

The nuclear family as 'natural'

While cruder scientific theories of the 19th century have been invalidated and some religious ideologies of "God's will" have lost much of their explanatory power, the pervasiveness of "the natural" as *the* explanation of social phenomena has a deep cultural significance that gives weight to any new variant. Just think of the way the nuclear family is projected as the natural social unit, despite the variety of social relations between individuals and children that exist today.

It is reflected in the stories we tell our children. Take the three bears, for example: daddy, mummy and baby bear all live happily together in a little house until disturbed by a sneak thief named Goldilocks. The nuclear family is so "natural" that its form is supposedly replicated in the animal kingdom. This is called anthropomorphism — the attribution of human behaviour to other species.

The reality is very different. Female and male bears come together briefly to mate. The female goes away to give birth in solitude and raises the cubs by herself. If "daddy" bear should comes along, he'd see the cubs as a good meal, not as the carriers of his genes. So much for the genetic imperative!

Just as Western culture is full of these familial projections onto the animal world, it also projects the nuclear family historically and cross culturally onto other types of society, thus making it the "natural" basic unit of human society. This type of projection is called ethnocentrism, the attribution of a particular form of social organisation to all societies over time and place.

The form of this family is familiar: dad is the head of the family, the provider; mum is the carer and nurturer, whose main task is to keep the family in a social and emotional balance; and children are biologically related to one or both of these parents (with some exceptions for adoption) and are under the authority and care of both — in different ways of course.

This particular living arrangement is said to have existed since human beings came down from the trees and emerged as a new species. Its "naturalness" is argued from many positions: scientific, religious, legal, economic, etc. Man, the father, is dominant, the protector and head of the family group — the patriarch. Women are weaker and subordinate in this relationship, under the authority and protection of the man, as are all children until male children are adults and able to set up their own family units.

Women's subordinate role has been justified in terms of the functions they have to carry out in giving birth to and raising children; their subordination is seen as based on their biology, and is thus their destiny — it's "natural".

Evolutionary explanation

Marxists contest this. We argue that women have not always been oppressed. This oppression arose at a particular stage of social development and was institutionalised through the family. In other words, women's oppression is social, not biologically determined, and has evolved over time.

This pamphlet examines the evidence for this very different view of social formation and how it allocated women to second-class status and opened up institutionalised inequality on the broader scale of class divisions.

What is considered a "valid explanation" differs markedly between the sciences. Evolutionary theories are quite acceptable in biology, palaeontology and archaeology, but in the social sciences, (sociology and particularly anthropology), evolutionary explanations have been denigrated, denied, labelled unscientific, ridiculed or treated as taboo, unless of course they ground their explanation on some biological reductionism.

Efforts to trace the development of the human species and explain the variety of forms of social organisation have been dismissed as mechanistic and unscientific. For example, it is wrongly argued by many that evolutionary explanations must be unilineal (that is, that all societies go through a particular developmental line). Others argue that you can take only snapshots of different societies at different points in time (as structural/functionalists may do), but that you can't deal dynamically with how societies change, even between two points in time. If you do make comparisons between two points in time, they argue, you must not attempt to draw large historical generalisations or conclusions based on laws of development, but instead limit your observations to particulars and parallels.

Many of those who do examine social change, such as the diffusionist theorists, study it by drawing contact maps showing when society A came in contact with society B to explain why A and B have similar social practices. Of course, such contact does take place, but these theorists insist that this is the *only* way to explain social similarities, rather than accepting that contact is merely *one* of the ways that social change can take place.

Nowhere has evolutionary explanation been more sharply denigrated than when dealing with the question of gender difference and the origins of women's oppression. The Marxist anthropologist Evelyn Reed, in her book *Sexism and Science*, argues that the denigration of evolutionary explanations is not based on examination of evidence but is political — social scientists' rejection of the evidence gathered from societies organised very differently from their own. These differences posed questions that disturbed capitalist ideology, which presents capitalism as the pinnacle of human achievement and precludes any further development in societal type or form (an "end

of history" position).

The doctrine of natural difference

The issue of biological necessity is central to explanations of the continuities and discontinuities in human development and of the emergence of dominance and inequality in human society.

There are two major versions of the "doctrine of natural difference" in biologically based theories. In the first version, society is regarded as a thin veneer (an epiphenomenal superstructure) built on a biological base. In the second, society is complimentary or "additive" to biology.

In the first, gender is determined by biology (the term "gender" is being used here to mean the social behaviour prescribed as appropriate for different sexes, although it is recognised that there are some problem areas in separating sex and gender). Such theories range from difference based in hormones, through the theory of lateralisation (that different abilities are located in different hemispheres of the brain) to Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox's human biogrammer theory (that a genetically based program predisposes humanity in certain ways which are not instincts, since they can be modified by culture, but are basic influences on human behaviour). Tiger and Fox argue that since 99.9% of human existence was spent as hunters and gatherers, where hunting was (allegedly) the most important basis of existence, men are more aggressive and dominant ("wired to hunt") based on hormones and this has led to them being the political leaders in modern society. Women, of course, are reproducers and carers.

Also in this category is the sociobiology of Edward Wilson and David Barash, which is based on Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection. It takes Darwin's theory to extremes by adding an explicit purpose and moral direction to the process of evolution.

Sociobiology argues that behaviour in animals and humans is genetically instructed to maximise the chances of passing on genes to future generations by having offspring that survive. Each sex employs a different strategy to maximise the chances of passing on its genes. Such theories provide the basis for evolutionary psychology. Barash, for example, says men produce millions of sperm while women produce only one egg at a time and about 400 in their lifetime. Therefore, men have an interest in impregnating as many women as possible to maximise their genes in the next generation while women, because they gestate the foetus in their body, go for quality, looking for the most genetically suitable partners.

This is said to generate different gender roles. Men are more promiscuous. Women can tolerate infidelity in their partners more readily than men because it costs little for women. If women are unfaithful, men may devote energy to raising someone else's

child. Since a woman knows the child is hers genetically, she is willing to devote attention to childcare. Thus, in modern society, she is more likely to become a housewife.

According to this view, women's search for the best male leads them to seek to marry men of higher social status. Men have to compete for access because women produce so few children, therefore larger and more aggressive males are more successful, which reinforces the dominance of men over women. In hunter-gatherer societies, the best hunters are the best providers. War and territoriality are rooted in men's attempts to gain access to women, and prevent access to other males. This theory poses not just a genetic imperative, but a gonad or ovum imperative as the basis of gender difference. It also ignores the fact that in hunter-gatherer societies, men hunt in groups, not individually.

In the second strand of biologically based theories, society is not constrained by biology but is additive to biology: society culturally elaborates the physical distinction between the sexes.

Functionalist sociologists are examples of this view. George P. Murdock argues that the sexual division of labour is related to biological differences: men have greater strength, women bear children and their different social roles are efficient reflections of these biological givens.

Talcott Parsons puts forward a theory in which women are "expressive" and men are "instrumental". Women in the nuclear family are responsible for the socialisation of the young, and the stabilisation of adult (male) personalities. Men are the breadwinners who compete in an achievement-oriented society that leads to stress and anxiety; they thus need women to restore the balance.

Radical feminism

The ideological character of these theories of natural difference was exposed by the second wave of the women's liberation movement as a blockage to changing women's economic and social position. But the strength and cultural embeddedness of the biologically based justifications for women's inequality in class society (and capitalism in particular) have allowed them to permeate sections of feminist theory.

Thus, radical feminists see gender difference as fundamental. Women's procreative and nurturing superiority is contrasted to men's nature as evil, abusive, violent and warlike. In the theory of patriarchy, it is asserted that male dominance is based on men's violent and coercive sexuality. Because radical feminists don't provide any social explanation of this sexuality, their theory rests on an assertion of essential difference that can only be biologically based.

Several early radical feminist theorists explicitly asserted biological causality. Susan

Brownmiller advocated a biological structural theory of sexual difference. Shulamith Firestone presented a biological functional reproductive theory. Kate Millet put forward a male power theory without a clear social explanation of its basis.

Some radical feminists claim that they have rejected biological determinism, but they fail to provide any alternative explanation for the oppression of women. Instead, in their practice of prioritising activities centred on sexuality, reproductive technology, rape and sexual violence, and in their assertion that their theory is women-based, unsullied by male minds, male theories or male culture, radical feminists exhibit a blindness to the dangers of "gendered natural difference", which, in the absence of another explanation, rests on some biological base.

Ecofeminist theory draws on a similar explanatory basis. It argues a parallel exploitation of nature and women by male-dominated society, and that women are more closely associated with nature through their childbearing and socialising roles. As nature has been "raped" and exploited by men, so too have women.

The metaphor "Mother Earth" is taken quite literally by strands of ecofeminist theory, which link women's capacity to give birth to the metaphor of earth as a life-giving womb. This closeness to nature, or naturalness, is said to give greater moral worth to women, who have an intuitive and mystical relationship with nature based on the shared "experience" of exploitation. This enables women to be the strongest "voice" for nature against "male" science and exploitation.

The importance of Darwin

All of these theories of natural difference flow out of the types of explanation which developed as the natural and social sciences emerged in the 19th century.

In the 19th century, the ideological character of explanation was different to today. Explanations of social development remained more within religious, rather than scientific, frameworks. Creationist explanations dominated: God created human society which had existed for as long as written history (4000 BC), so early Egypt was the beginning, or the five books of Moses were taken as the basic reference.

Eurocentrism, in which capitalist Europe was seen as the pinnacle of civilisation, led to the view that any society which differed, whether hunter-gatherer or feudal, was a degeneration, an indication of a decline towards an animal state. One variant of this position argued that a society's distance from the centres of civilisation (Europe) explained its level of degeneration. Such views provided some of the ideological justification for racial slavery and colonialism.

With the development of the sciences there was a shift away from the divine order explanation suitable for the agrarian aristocratic world which preceded industrial

capitalism and towards a type of explanation more appropriate to the competitive, urban industrial environment. The new explanation centred around the emerging debate about the place of humans in nature.

The impact of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution of the species through natural selection and variation was huge and controversial. His theory was relatively simple: organisms vary, and these variations are inherited (at least in part) by their offspring. Organisms produce more offspring than can possibly survive so, on average, offspring that vary most strongly in directions favoured by the environment will survive and propagate. Favourable variation will therefore accumulate in populations by natural selection.

Darwin's theory was based on his observations of domestic breeding and on his travels, particularly to the Galapagos Islands. He could not explain how the process took place other than to describe it materially, without reference to any divine intervention. However, his metaphors of natural selection and the survival of the fittest could be and were interpreted as if some entity was deciding who was fit and whom to select.

This interpretation was reinforced by the reliance Darwin placed on the 1798 population theory of English pastor Thomas Malthus, who argued that poverty and social inequality were inevitable due to the geometric rate at which population increased in comparison with the arithmetic rate of food production. According to Malthus, social reforms to reduce inequality were doomed and he specifically opposed measures to alleviate suffering among the poor, aged or sick since this would encourage them to survive and breed. While improvements in food production proved Malthus' theory wrong, his ideas on "fitness" in the population became the basis for eugenic programs in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Darwin interpreted and illustrated his theory of natural selection in line with the bleak picture outlined by Malthus of competition and bloody struggle between species for scarce resources. But reproductive success through natural selection can work in a variety of ways, not just through competition. Cooperation, symbiosis and mutual aid are also possibilities, just as changes in climate and migration alter the context in which natural selection occurs.

Thus the question of humans' place in nature was answered in a sharply ideological context. Instead of a divine order based on harmony in nature and society, where everything and everyone had their proper place, the view of God changed to one in which the deity was identified with self-acting laws of nature in which inequality was explained in terms of a biological hierarchy. Science didn't replace God, God became identified with the laws of nature.

The metaphor was extended so that society was understood as a biological organism: the structure of human groups mirrored the natural forms, and the natural laws inherent in those forms. This justifies the domination of one group by another based on differences that are seen as natural, inescapable and therefore moral. Thus the Eurocentric, bourgeois assumptions about the moral progress of civilisation were translated into an evolutionary hierarchy of the social worth of peoples.

The mechanisms underlying species evolution were clarified in the 20th century by the discoveries of genes, chromosomes and DNA, and the genetic variation of sexual reproduction and the accidental effects of mutation. But while genes, chromosomes or DNA provide the building blocks for life, to argue that they consign people to their social and economic position is to wield biology as a social weapon. Such theories are ideology hiding behind the mantle of science.

In fact, individuals are products of complex interactions between genetic heritage, environment and accidental events that are neither genetic nor environmental. Justifying differences in status, wealth and power by blaming obvious but superficial differences in skin colour or sex organs masks systemic social inequality.

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Engels & the Evolution of Humans

Despite its limitations, Darwin's theory pushed the question of the origin of the human species into a scientific framework. Anthropologists like Lewis Morgan, Edward Tylor, Jacob Bachofen and James Fraser began to develop theories of the evolution of human society, studying prehistoric society from its beginnings, not just from the civilised phase (when written culture appeared).

Morgan, for example, distinguished three great epochs of social development, which he called savagery, barbarism and civilisation. Each was marked by decisive advances in the level of economic activity, that is, in the way in which people procured their means of subsistence. While each stage contained sub-stages, broadly defined, savagery was based on hunting and food gathering, barbarism on food production through horticulture and stock raising, and civilisation on literacy and agriculture.

There is an important difference in emphasis within evolutionary theory between Marxism and other theories like Darwinism. Darwin stressed the continuities within the development of species differentiation, looking more at quantitative changes and stressing the slow pace of change. Frederick Engels, on the other hand, considered as well the qualitative changes, the discontinuities that emphasise what was special in the development of human beings as a species.

This is the difference between gradualism and a dialectical approach. Darwin's theory, while it explains some aspects of evolution, tells only part of the story. It fails to explain rapid changes in the fossil evidence record, such as the Cambrian explosion, when there was a huge, rapid and, historically speaking, contemporaneous appearance of new species, rather than the slow evolution of species from a common ancestor.

When Darwin demonstrated that humans had evolved out of the animal world and shared a common ancestor with the higher apes, he described critical features of that change (an enlarged brain and the acquisition of speech), but he failed to explain how this change took place. Engels, in his unfinished essay *The Part Played by Labour*

in the Transition from Ape to Man, took on this task.

Humans as a product of labour

Both Engels and Darwin noted that higher apes possessed the essential biological preconditions for the transition: upright posture, stereoscopic vision, prolonged infancy and maternal care, vocal organs and a freed hand with an opposable thumb. But Engels developed an interactive relational theory of development based on labour and the increasing use of tools into a long process that shaped the physical changes that transformed some higher apes into a different species.

Instead of accepting the widespread view that the development of the brain was the primary and most important step in the evolution of humans, Engels argued that the first step must have been a descent from trees, with subsequent evolution to upright posture. The adoption of an erect posture and biped motion freed the hand and this increased its ability in tool making and tool use. Over time, this led to further changes in the structure of the hand so that it was not only the "organ of labour" but also the "product of labour".

Whereas animals' tools (claws, jaws, beaks, etc.) are mainly part of the physical make up of the species and animals' interaction with nature is in the form of direct responses to environmental stimuli (there are some specific instances of simple tool making, such as chimpanzees' use of twigs to catch termites, but this is sporadic and not central to the animals' sustenance), tool making and tool use in humans is a species-specific activity which transformed the relationship of humanity to nature. Without the practice of labour and the instruments of labour, humans would not have originated, survived or developed as a distinct species. As Engels said:

> Mastery over nature began with the development of the hand, with labour, and widened man's horizon at every new advance. He was continually discovering new, hitherto unknown, properties of natural objects. On the other hand, the development of labour necessarily helped to bring the members of society closer together by multiplying cases of mutual support, joint activity, and by making clear the advantage of this joint activity to each individual. In short, men in the making arrived at the point where they had something to say to each other.[1]

Speech provided the necessary symbolic apparatus with which to begin to organise, preserve and transmit the collective labour experience of humans. Engels outlined a relationship of positive feedback between the general development of mental facilities and the continuous increase in efficiency and quality of human labour. Speech and labour generated the growth of the brain.

As planning of future activities, the identification of the properties of objects, and

the division of tasks within the labour process slowly came into being, they did so within an increasingly social and cooperative context. The species became humanised through labour. The feedback was not merely positive but cumulative; labour activity provided the starting point for general human advance.

This dialectical and materialist explanation reflects Marx and Engels' general thesis that the production and reproduction of immediate life is the determining element of social life, and includes both biological and economic production: the production of the means of existence (food, clothing, shelter, tools necessary for that production) and the production of human beings themselves. Therefore, the form taken by a society at any point in its historical development is "determined by both kinds of production: by the stage of development of labour on the one hand, and of the family on the other".[2]

From this understanding, Engels analysed the development of society and, at a particular stage, the subjugation of women.

Development of the family & women's historic defeat

In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels built on the work of Morgan and the other 19th century evolutionary anthropologists. He accepted Morgan's general outline of three main stages of social evolution but clarified the difference between primitive society and civilisation by explaining that the latter is the stage of social development in which the division of labour and the commodity exchange between individuals arising from it is developed. Only at this stage was the subjugation of women fully manifested.

Before going into Engels' theory, it is worth noting that there are two modes of gathering. There is the pre-hominid mode of acquiring subsistence — individual foraging — in which you eat as you gather, and the hominid mode of acquiring subsistence — collective gathering (with the systematic use of tools) — in which the food is taken back and shared in the social group.

The epoch of savagery covers three periods. In the first, human ancestors appropriated natural products, foraged on fruits, nuts, roots etc., in a tropical or subtropical climate, but had not developed speech. In the second there was the use of seafood, and the development of fire which freed human ancestors from dependence on climate. This allowed for migration and the development of early stone tools widened the range of food production into hunting and gathering. In the third period, hunting was fully developed, settlement in villages began, wooden utensils were developed, and finger weaving, basket weaving and polished stone tools appeared.

The epoch of barbarism dates from the introduction of pottery and the development of cattle breeding, followed by land cultivation, which increased the

productivity of nature. At this point, a differentiation took place between the Old World (Africa/Europe/Asia) and the New World (the Americas) because of the different natural endowments of the continents, including the range of plants for agriculture, animals for domestication and metals for smelting. This period ends in the Old World with the smelting of iron, the development of the iron ploughshare drawn by cattle that led to larger-scale agriculture, a rapid population increase, urban concentrations and the development of crafts and trades.

The epoch of civilisation was characterised by the specialisation of crafts, separation of town and country, commodity production and the emergence of social classes, private property, the monogamous father-headed family and the state.

Gender inequality began to emerge during the second epoch, and reached its full development in the epoch of civilisation.

Engels drew from the anthropological data of Morgan and others which showed that primitive society exhibited egalitarian social and sexual relations and was characterised by collective production and communal ownership of property. He also drew from Morgan's retrospective reconstruction of the history of the family — the social and sexual relations of particular societies as they developed historically.

The basic unit of savage society was a maternal clan composed of a community of mothers, their brothers and the children of the mothers. Morgan used the term

'The overthrow of mother right was the *world-historic defeat of the female sex.'*

— Frederick Engels

primitive to describe this stage. He outlined gender relations' development from free sexuality and social organisation based on tracing kinship through the maternal line, to what he called a variety of family forms based on whom one could have sexual relations with and which kin formed one's primary social group.

The first exclusions for sexual intercourse were between parent and child, then with siblings, then with particular categories of siblings traced through the maternal (matrilineal) line. This led, in the final stages of savagery and the first stages of barbarism, to pairing relationships based on mutual agreement in which each partner had the ability to dissolve the bond. Engels characterised this "pairing family" as natural and saw it as the final stage of family relations' evolution through natural selection.

The domestication of animals and development of stock breeding enabled a greater accumulation of wealth and this led to new social relations that changed gender relations. The ownership of the wealth began to shift from clan (gens) ownership into private ownership in the family. Other forms of property also accumulated (metal utensils, luxury items) and the demand for human labour increased.

Women, as the source of new human beings, began to be exchanged as valued property and other human beings began to be used as slaves. This extra labour allowed for further developments in trades and crafts like weaving, pottery and field cultivation. This process was accompanied by a shift to emphasising the importance of paternity and the father in the kinship line, as well as a shift to monogamy in sexual relations.

The increase in wealth gave more status to the man in the family and provided the stimulus to overthrow matrilineal inheritance to establish the institution of patriliny. Engels argued that this gender revolution took place in prehistoric times, before the invention of writing, therefore exactly how and when it took place is unknown, but it can be demonstrated ethnographically.

Engels stated, "The overthrow of mother right was the *world-historic defeat of the female sex*".[3] Men seized control over the households, women became degraded and slaves to men's lust, and were the instruments for reproducing more children. In fact, the word family comes from the Latin terms *famulus*, which means household slave, and *familia*, the totality of slaves belonging to one man, the patriarch, who inherited all the wealth and wielded absolute power over all members of the household.

In brief, then, unlike biological determinism of whichever variety, Marxist analysis rejects a male-dominated view of evolution and allows female primates and hominids to have played an important role in the development of humanity.

NOTES

1 Engels, 1934, p. 173. **2** Engels, 1970, p. 191. **3** Engels, 1970, p. 233.

The Test of New Evidence

There are some terminological confusions in Engels' analysis which are particularly relevant to the way debate around the origins of women's oppression has developed this century and so must be clarified in order to examine how well the Marxist theory of human development stands up to the evidence available today.

First, Engels uses the term "family" to denote the social organisation of reproduction and production of daily life at all stages of human society. Reed argues convincingly that this confuses the family institution of class society with the very different type of social organisation in pre-class society, better expressed in kinship terms as tribe, clan, horde and gens.

Secondly, Engels' use of the term "natural" in reference to the first free-bonding paired couple is a different use of natural than the doctrine of natural difference which sees natural as unchanging and biologically determined. Marx and Engels saw the natural as part of a dialectical interconnection between human society and nature. Engels stated:

> Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory nature takes its revenge on us. Each victory, it is true, in the first place brings about the results we expected, but in the second and third places it has quite different, unforeseen effects which only too often cancel the first. The people, who, in Mesopotamia, Greece, Asia Minor, and elsewhere, destroyed forests to obtain cultivable land, never dreamed that by removing along with the forests the collecting centres and reservoirs of moisture they were laying the basis for the present forlorn state of those countries … Thus at every step we are reminded that we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside nature — but we, with flesh, blood and brain, belong to nature and exist in its midst and that all our mastery of it consists in the fact that we have the advantage over all other creatures of being able to learn its laws and apply them correctly.[1]

Marx and Engels stressed both the uniqueness of human society and its relatedness to the natural world, unlike the Cartesian view of human separation and superiority over

nature. The content of "nature" can't be taken for granted as self-explanatory: what counts as nature is varied and culturally produced. So, an open stretch of parkland may be included in nature in comparison to a factory, but it is just as much a product of human intervention and manipulation. Today, the impact of capitalist social production (for example, global warming and climate change) make the human/nature categorisation even harder.

Marx and Engels based their explanations of social development on the archaeological and anthropological evidence available in their day. This was very limited since these sciences were relatively new. Historical time lines had been shifted out of the realm of the biblical time span, but were still very constrained by the lack of accurate dating technology.

Marx and Engels relied heavily on ethnographic material that described societies organised very differently from those in the Europe of their time, as well as written historical records which could be translated. Engels and the other social evolutionists made considerable use of "survivals" — social practices that appeared in historical and ethnographic records which didn't have any apparent relevance for the society under study. It was surmised that these survivals were remnants of previous forms of social organisation which had been surmounted and changed over time.

How does Engels' theory of the emergence of the species and the social development of the subordination of women stand up to the evidence today? (Engels himself stressed that the theory has to stand the test of material evidence and experience.) While there are shortcomings, many resulting from the paucity of knowledge available in the 19th century, the Marxist explanation stands up well.

What counts as evidence today? Technological advances and the discovery of much more evidence offer a detailed if fragmentary view of the past. There are the skeletal remains, usually fragmentary, which allow some guesses at the social action the individual engaged in. There is the archaeological evidence of settlements, tools and burial sites. There is biological analysis of bone matter, as well as molecular evidence and genetic analysis. There is the fossil record which reveals some things about diet and the effects of environmental shifts. There is the study of languages to reconstruct the pace of change, often related to environmental factors which led to migration.

There are also the studies of the behaviour of primates in the wild (primatology), as well as comparisons with modern peoples organised in different productive relations which are similar in pattern to those of the past, for example hunting and gathering (ethnography). But we need to be very cautious about drawing evolutionary conclusions from primatology and ethnography. Modern primates and modern peoples living in

less technologically complex societies have evolved as well, so comparisons with the past have to be treated with caution.

The first humans

What time scale are we talking about? All primate fossils so far discovered belong to forms that lived during the last 70 million years or so (the Cenozoic era), as do all fossils of mammals except for a very few primitive mammals which first appeared in the preceding era, the age of the dinosaurs.

Until recently it was thought the earliest non-anthropoid fossils (*Ramapithecus*) date back some 14 million years, but there has been much debate about whether these remains fit into the hominid line and it is now believed that *Ramapithecus* was an ancestor of one section of the modern great apes (see Figure 1).

The earliest stages in the development towards human evolution seem to have taken place in the Great Rift Valley in East Africa, where the first recognisable beings with upright posture split from other African primates around 5-7 million years ago. The first skeletal evidence dates between 4 and 3 million years ago (*Australopithecus*). The earliest tools found are around 2½-2 million years old and brain size expansion appears to have taken place at the same time.

The earliest remains of those with fully upright posture, labelled *Homo erectus*, are around 2 million years old. *Homo erectus* migrated out of Africa into Asia around 1¾ million years ago. Major tool advances were made around 1½ million years ago and evidence of regular meat eating is strong from this time on.

By around 1 million years ago, the several species of *Australopithecus* had become extinct. The first use of fire was around 700,000 years ago and a major advance in tool manufacture occurred around 200,000 years ago. Modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) appear to have originated in Africa about 100,000 years ago (see Figure 2).

The earliest period of prehistory, the Palaeolithic (or Old Stone Age), spanned roughly 2-2½ million years, about 250 times as long as the rest of the prehistoric period.

During the Upper Palaeolithic, which ended around 35,000 years ago, the great ice sheets that covered the northern continents began to retreat. This period was characterised by a major development in the range and sophistication of stone tools, the use of ivory and antlers, artistic flowering with sculptures, cave paintings and probably the invention of string-based technology for nets, snares, etc.

The archaic *Homo sapiens* appeared around a half a million years ago and coexisted with Neanderthals who appeared around 135,000 years ago and died out around 35,000 years ago.

The first humans who looked similar in all ways to us, *Homo sapiens*, appeared about 100,000 years ago.

The Neolithic (New Stone Age) is the period during which horticulture began to be practiced in Europe, from 8500 BC in the Near East to its spread to Europe in 7000-6000 BC.

Physical developments

Evidence of the development of spoken language is much harder to trace. The indicators of language facility are mainly soft tissue, which deteriorates quickly. Some skull bone evidence seems to indicate that a wider range of sound production began with *Homo erectus* 2 million years ago, but the earliest that the shape of the base of the skull (basicranium) is fully flexed isn't until around 300,000-400,000 years ago, in archaic *Homo sapiens*. However, this was less developed in Neanderthals. So, while skeletal evidence indicates that simple language usage may have developed gradually, the range and complexity of tool development may be a better indicator of full language usage (see Figure 3).

It isn't until the great cultural leap of the Upper Palaeolithic in Europe (35,000 years ago), characterised by greater breadth of artefact production, technological innovation, artistic imagination, consciousness and ordering, that the emergence of regular language communication is implied.

Using skeletal remains, molecular and genetic analysis and evidence of the effects of climate change on vegetation, it's possible to trace evolutionary pathways. Around 15 million years ago, Africa was covered with dense forest. This began to change with shifts in the Earth's crust as the tectonic plates thrust up a line of mountains from the Red Sea through Ethiopia to Mozambique, creating great highland areas.

This changed not only the topography but also the climate, in particular the rainfall. Land to the east was deprived of rain and began to lose its dense forest cover, leaving a mixture of forest patches, woodland and shrub land, but very little grassland.

About 12 million years ago, further tectonic activity changed the environment with the formation of the Great Rift Valley, combining cool forested highlands with hot dry lowlands and forming barriers to animal movement. Consequently, new species emerged and others disappeared.

The development of bipedalism in one of the large variety of apes in the continent at that time would have been an advantage and opened the way for further shifts in the pattern of primate evolution (see Figure 4). Besides freeing the hands for new uses, upright posture had major consequences for group behaviour and the development of new patterns of cooperation which in turn provided a basis for reciprocal social

obligations, many focused around the changes in female and infant behaviour.

The skeletal changes necessary for bipedal locomotion led to changes in foot shape, changing the means of carrying infants. Young apes have a big toe for clinging to their mothers; this began to disappear as the foot adapted for walking.

Biped walking narrowed the pelvis, leading to alterations in the shape of the birth canal. Human young are born at a much earlier stage of development than apes and are consequently dependent for much longer.

Larger brain size would also have increased the pressure to give birth earlier. *Australopithecus*' brain size was around 400 cubic centimetres, while *Homo erectus*' brain ranged from 650 to 800 cubic centimetres. Modern humans' brains average 1350 cubic centimetres. The increase in brain size coincided with the first evidence of stone tools and indicates full bipedal locomotion.

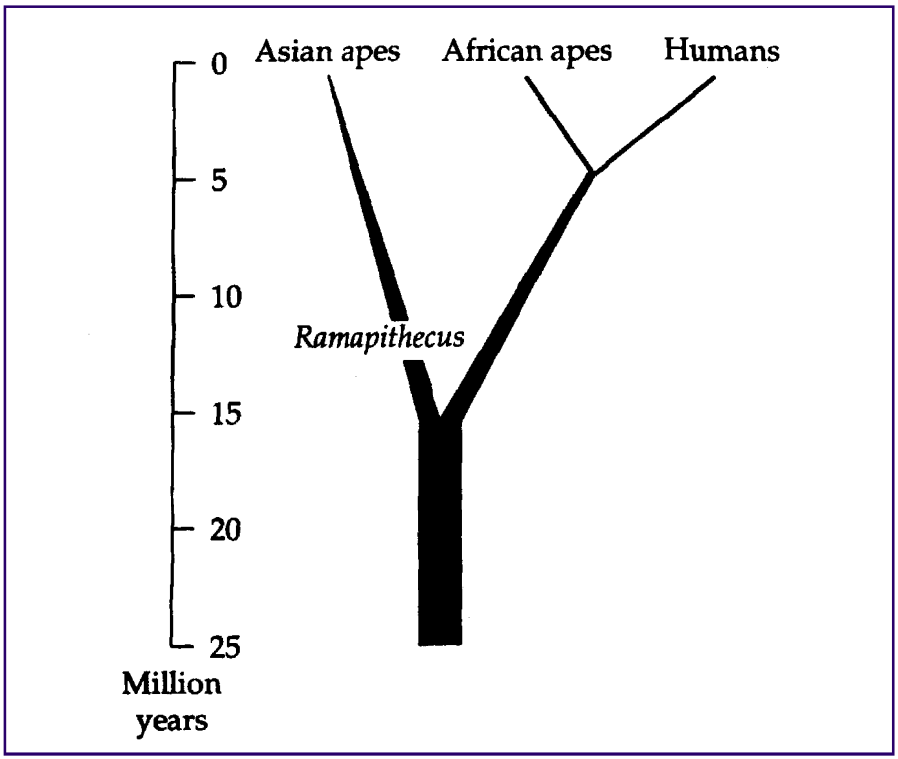

Figure 1: *Evidence now shows the evolutionary divergence between apes and humans to have occurred around 5 million years ago.*

The development from *Australopithecus* to early *Homo* coincided with a change in teeth type from grinding molars to teeth which were also adapted for meat eating. It was also characterised by changes in sexual dimorphism. In *Australopithecus*, males were taller (average 1.52 metres to 1.22 metres) and twice the weight of females, but this large difference disappears with genus *Homo*.

Prolonged childhood and the extension of the mother-child relationship indicates a growth of culture. Grouping together to protect the young, probably with siblings of the female generation, would lead to food sharing, and gathering rather than scavenging.

No cling-toe means the mother has to carry the infant. This could encourage the use of skins, plant fibres, etc., for carrying, freeing up the hands and facilitating gathering. While the only archaeological evidence available is stone tools, there is no reason to doubt that tools made of fibres and wood (such as digging sticks) were not used; these are typical tools of modern hunter-gatherers.

It is now clear that early human beings did not hunt in the manner that has been portrayed in the past. There is no evidence of a gender division of labour: both males and females seem to have collected small game and plant food, and scavenged from kills by other species. It wasn't until around 100,000 years ago that the tools and techniques for hunting large animals began to appear. Some put the date for systematic hunting even more recently, at around 45,000 to 35,000 years ago.

While contemporaneous hunter-gatherer societies divide labour by sex and age, 60-80% of the society's diet is supplied by women's gathering activity rather than the sporadic big game hunts by men, so assumptions about the historic role of "man the hunter" are not justified.

Genetic evidence now provides more detailed information concerning the migration of the evolving *Homo* genus. Until recently, it was thought that we were descended from primitive humans who migrated out of Africa less than 2 million years ago. But DNA evidence shows that the human species emerged from ancestors who migrated out of Africa only 200,000 years ago and moved out into the rest of the world as recently as 100,000 years ago. The previous waves of migration and the variety of the *Homo* genus died out prior to the later migration, just as the Neanderthals died out by 35,000 years ago, leaving only *Homo sapiens*.

Over the next 20,000 years little changed except that migration spread into the Americas and around the world. Human life was very similar. People lived in small, mobile bands of about 25 to 30 individuals. These bands interacted, forming a social network linked by customs and language. The bands occupied temporary camps from which they pursued their daily search for food. Cooperation appears more likely than aggression and competition when comparisons are made to the social life of other

primates.

So how does the evidence line up for Engels' theory? Quite well, particularly in comparison with that put forward by Darwin. The bipedal posture, freed hands, tool development, brain enlargement and language evolution of Engels' dialectical theory are supported by the evidence available today. The time scales are different, but that is to be expected given the paucity of dating techniques and archaeological and geographic information in Engels' time.

Darwin, on the other hand, argued that the distinguishing features of humans — bipedalism, technology and an enlarged brain — evolved in concert, so that humans were distinct from apes right from the start and the human species differentiation was abrupt and ancient. The evidence doesn't support this. There is a major shift between *Australopithecus* and *Homo erectus* and another apparent leap 40,000 years ago when the ice begins to recede and there is a period of climatic change. This period led to

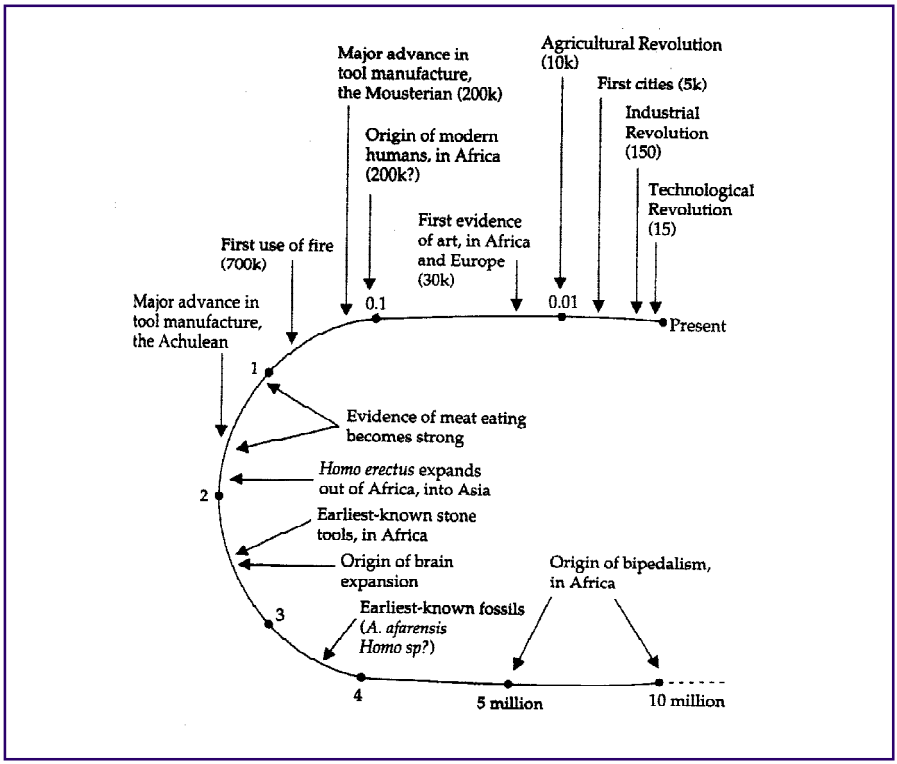

Figure 2: *Evolutionary time line (from Leakey, 1994).*

migration into broader geographic regions and different ecologies with different plants and animals. Overall, the evolutionary line was much more complex, marked by extinctions as well as developments, than the theory put forward by Darwin.

Women's early role

Engels' theory emphasises the role played by females in the social evolution of human groups. It identifies women as central to social cooperation and the organisation of social groups, and gender equality as dominating the vast period of pre-history — the epoch of savagery. The subordination of women took place quite recently, beginning in the epoch of barbarism and was fully developed by the onset of the epoch of civilisation.

The epoch of savagery coincides with the archaeological period of the Palaeolithic up until around 12,000 years ago, when rapid changes in production, technology and settlement took place. The beginning stages of Engels' epoch of barbarism lie in the Neolithic (New Stone Age, featuring ground stone tools), and encompass the beginning of metal working, including the Bronze Age up to the development of iron tools starting around 1000 BC.

Speculation about the development of early hominid social groups is based on fairly sparse evidence, but it seems that the old insistence on monogamous male-female bonding, where males went out to hunt and women stayed at home minding the babies, can be substantially challenged.

It has been estimated that more than 90% of people who have ever lived have been gatherers in small groups spread over sparsely populated large areas, able to choose the most favourable environments available. Today, less than 0.003% of the world's population live as hunter-gatherers and they live in isolated, extreme environments and under pressure from more technologically complex societies, so data from these societies has to be treated with caution. But it is very clear that the gender relations within these modern hunter-gatherer societies are much more egalitarian than in other societies. There is a division of labour based on sex and age, but women's contribution to the group as a whole, and their status in general, is high.

The skeletal implications of bipedalism and growing brain capacity for birth and long infant dependency add weight to Engels' view that the earliest hominid social groups clustered around adult females and their infants. Cooperation to successfully raise infants could lead to a process of domestication of the human species itself, where the choice of cooperative, rather than aggressive and disruptive, males as partners would reinforce sharing and social bonds. This type of choice has been observed amongst female chimpanzees.

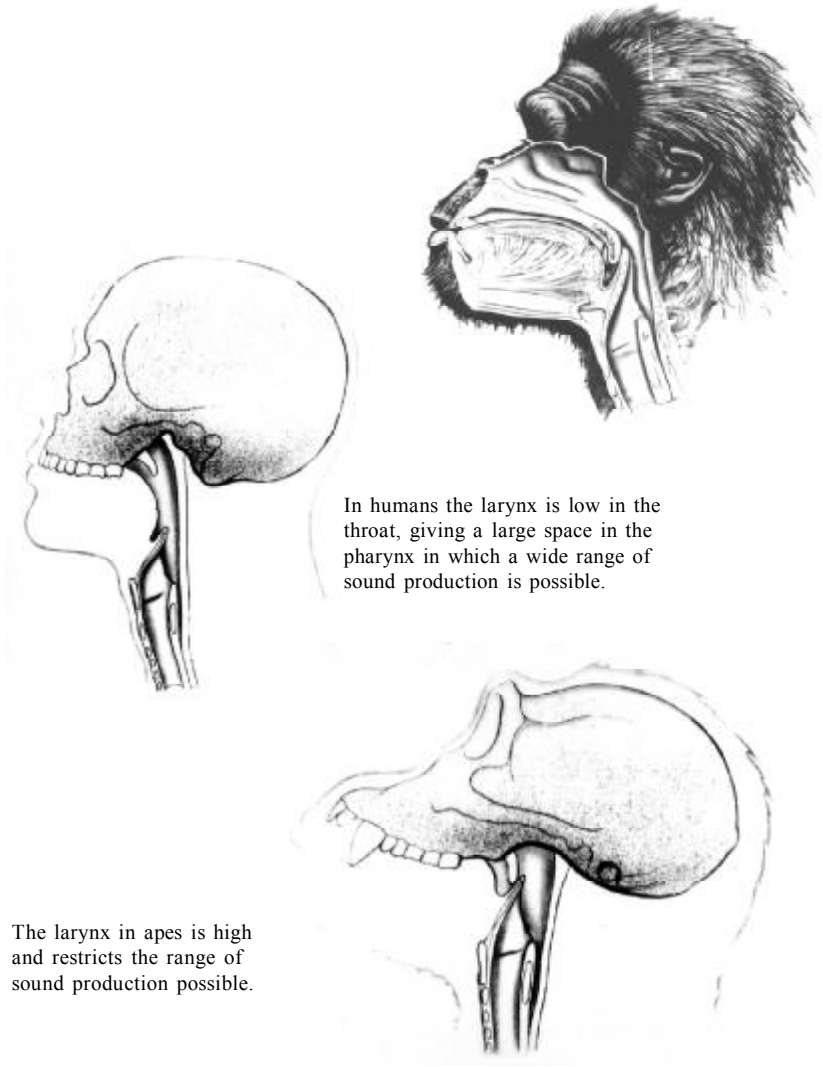

FIGURE 3: *Vocal tract (from Leakey, 1994).*

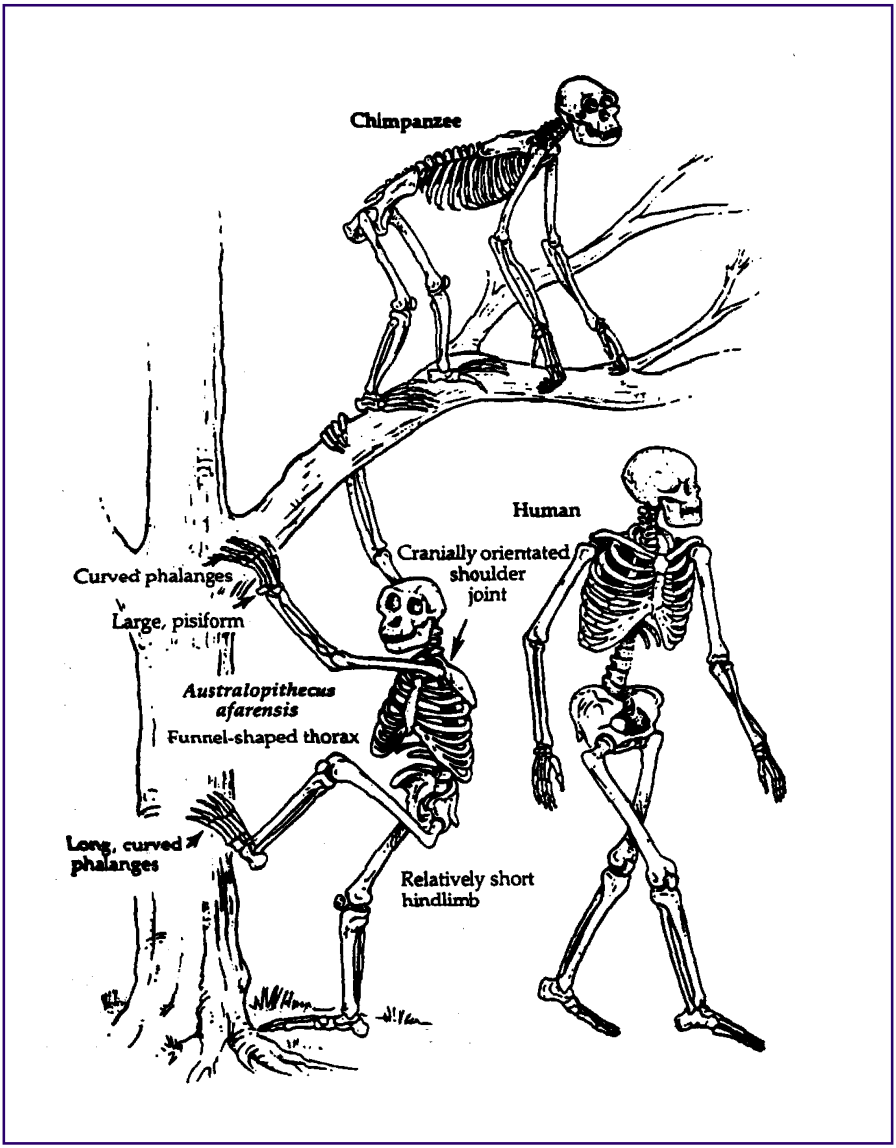

Figure 4: *Upright posture (from Leakey, 1994).*

The dependency of infants and the length of child-rearing would impact also on the patterns of food sharing that form the basis of social interaction. Evidence from primate groups like chimpanzees shows that food sharing takes place with matrifocal (mother-centred) groups rather than between sexual mates. The stronger tie between offspring and mother would lead to this primary bond being supplemented with older siblings, strengthening the relationship between siblings, with the mother at the centre. The primary role of the mother in encouraging increased sociability and as the main teacher of technological innovation flows from the extended child dependency.

The pressure to carry both infants and food back to be shared by the group would reinforce this process, as well as provide an impetus for developing artefacts and tools like containers, digging sticks, etc. These tools are a feature of contemporaneous gathering activities.

There is no uncontested evidence of a gender division of labour in tool use or food gathering until tools for hunting large game emerged around 100,000 years ago. The presence of small children would have been an impediment in this activity, but this still would not have prevented women without children from hunting and there is evidence of women as hunters in some modern societies (e.g., the Agta people in north-east Luzon in the Philippines).

As Margaret Ehrenberg states:

> It can therefore be argued that the crucial steps in human development were predominantly inspired by females. These include economic and technological innovations and the role of females as the social centre of groups. This contrasts sharply with the traditional picture of the male as protector and hunter, bringing food back to a pair-bonded female. That model treats masculine aggression as normal, assumes that long-term, one-to-one, male-female bonding was a primary development, with the male as the major food provider, and that male dominance was inherently linked to hunting skills. None of these patterns, however, accords with the behaviour of any but the traditional Western male. Other male primates do not follow this pattern, not do non-Western human groups, in particular those foraging [that is, gathering] societies whose lifestyle in many ways accords most closely with putative early human and Paleolithic cultural patterns.[2]

This argument supports the pattern outlined by Engels.

Settlement & domestication

The range and variety of evidence increases from the Neolithic onwards. As the ice sheets retreated, a vast tundra region opened up and animal herds retreated northwards. The herds were followed by many hunter-gatherers who thereby ventured into new

environments, new vegetation and different climatic conditions.

By the end of the Palaeolithic period 12-15,000 years ago there was a shift in the environment and in the pattern of relationships. In "the fertile crescent" around the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers (areas located today in Turkey, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Jordan and Israel), there is evidence of settlements and grain storage, but only of wild grain, from around 8500 BC. This wild grain flourished and peoples ceased migrating because they, and the animals they hunted, lived on the abundant grain. These sites contain evidence of the first domestic animal, the dog.

In time, these people began to domesticate the wild grain, either by planting seed accidentally by dropping it and seeing it grow or, increasingly, by planting it purposefully. This led to the modification of these plants: wild grain disperses easily when seeds break off, but on those plants with larger heads of grain the seed tended to cling to the stem. This made them easier to gather but also made their dispersal reliant on humans.

Animals, too, began to change. Meat had to be caught either daily or in major hunts, bringing problems of storage and carrying for hunter-gatherer societies. With settlement came different problems; if the kill was far from the settlement, the problem was how to transport the meat back. It was easier to bring live beasts back, pen them and feed them from the readily available fodder.

Domestication probably took place through nervous and aggressive beasts being killed and eaten first, while docile animals lasted longer and bred, leading to patterns of selection for captivity. The greater reliance on humans for protection from predators probably led to greater variability in animal colour and hair growth. These animals were used for meat and skin products only.

Plant and animal domestication provided constant food supplies plus a surplus for storage. The Neolithic grinding of stone surfaces coexists with the grinding of grain to prepare it for consumption. Bone deformities associated with heavy grinding are found in both female and male skeletons in the Near East, but grain grinding and stone querns are associated with women and found in women's graves in Europe, to where the technology spread.

Secondary food crops such as legumes, fruit and nuts were grown and women worked collectively to tend all crops by hoe agriculture — horticulture.

Settlement not only allowed food to be stockpiled, it overcame the constraint on hunter-gatherers of carrying capacity. Settlement enabled the accumulation of other goods, as well as the production of more children. But it also brought with it problems of sanitation, vermin and disease epidemics (cholera, typhoid, plague, diphtheria, etc.). Children were more vulnerable to disease so there was more pressure for more children.

While settlement changed the pattern of food production and accumulation, the social organisation on which it was based remained the matrilineal clan structure, organised in communities which varied depending on the climate and the need to contain animals and protect them from predators. This clan grouping of longhouses or clustering of matrilocal dwellings formed the core of cooperative labour on which the group survived.

The spread of settlement from the "fertile crescent" into Europe began around 6000 BC. As technology developed at a faster pace, settlement spread at an ever increasing rate (see Figure 5).

With wild grain in abundance, vast new supplies of fibres such as flax were available. Simple band weaving, which women used for straps and belts, led around 6000 B.C. to the development of two very different loom designs to weave wider pieces of cloth. In hot regions with a low rainfall, the horizontal ground loom, which was assembled outside, appeared first in Iraq from where it spread south and south-east. In colder, wetter climates, vertical warp weighted looms attached to rafters and assembled inside houses spread north and west through Europe.

There is no evidence of a gender division of labour in weaving, other than the artistic representations. It appears that women were the weavers but the structure of

'… the crucial steps in human development were predominantly inspired by females.'

— Margaret Ehrenberg

the looms and the time-consuming process of preparing the fibre and loom made the whole process a cross-gender collective one.

Around 6000 BC, pottery also developed in the Near East and spread to south-east Europe. Again, there is no evidence of gender divisions in pottery making, except in decoration and imagery, but it was probably work done by women since the vessels created were associated with work that women were doing in food production and storage.

Men's tasks began to change. Hunting continued because the number of domestic animals kept was small, but an adequate food supply was guaranteed by horticulture and the domestication of animals. Based on contemporary comparisons, care of these animals was more usually done by women.

Fishing and land clearing for crops became more common, along with trade for ornamental products like shells but more importantly for rare products like obsidian blades, which were sharper than flint and needed for grain harvesting. The growth of craft technology like weaving and pottery led to the emergence of petty commodity production and exchange. These trade networks spread along with the planting of domestic grain and new technological innovations. Defence was not a significant activity because the sparseness of population and the absence of great differences in wealth meant that war was not a significant problem.

A significant development of secondary animal products occurred Mesopotamia in around 4000 BC. Instead of using just meat and hide from animals like sheep, goats and cattle, the processing of milk foods and wool, and the use of the animals' muscle power, diversified the food range. Wool for weaving was developed: it was warmer and more resilient than linen, and easier to dye. Flock and herd growth reflected this development as mixed farming became more typical.

Even more significant was the shift that draft animals opened up for the social organisation of agriculture. Replacing collective horticulture, large animals were harnessed to ploughs enabling the digging of deeper furrows and the production of better crops. Draft animals also allowed for the more efficient threshing of grain and, with the invention of the wheel, the transportation of many more goods.

Plough agriculture, with an individual man working in isolation or with just a few assistants, replaced women's collective horticultural activity as the main source of food, and women's range of tasks increasingly took place inside the village or settlement compound. This shift was at the centre of the subordination of women.

NOTES

1 Engels, 1934, p. 180. **2** Ehrenberg, 1989, p. 150.

The Dispossession of Women

Engels argued that the source of the oppression of women was their exclusion from social production and the conversion of household tasks into a private service. Both resulted from the replacement of communal property ownership with private male ownership of the basic means of production. Engels speculated that this took place with the rise of animal domestication and the breeding of herds, which created new social wealth. This new wealth automatically belonged to male members of the clans.

Engels based this explanation on two incorrect premises. He thought that pastoral activities arose before agriculture and that men were the natural providers: "Gaining a livelihood had always been the business of the man; he produced and owned the means of production therefore. The herds were the new means of gaining a livelihood and their original domestication and tending was his work".[1]

On the basis of these false premises, Engels speculated that men owned the cattle and the commodities that began to be exchanged for them. But he still couldn't explain how the herds were converted from the communal property of the clan or tribe into the property of individual male heads of families.

Property here has a specific meaning: goods with productive potential were property. This meant that agriculture and the domestication of animals, as they developed, were productive resources, owned communally. People did have individual belongings (like tools and ornaments), as burial sites throughout the Neolithic period show, but such private possessions weren't important because their making was equally available to all. When Engels referred to property, he was charting the development of the resources used in the production and reproduction of daily life and how these productive resources were owned.

The evidence shows that domestication of animals and the keeping of large herds did not precede the development of horticulture. In fact, it took place at a later stage. Neither were women isolated from the main productive activity since, just as in hunter-gatherer society, they provided the regular basics of life: horticulture was primarily a female activity and the domestication of animals, while it remain relatively limited, was

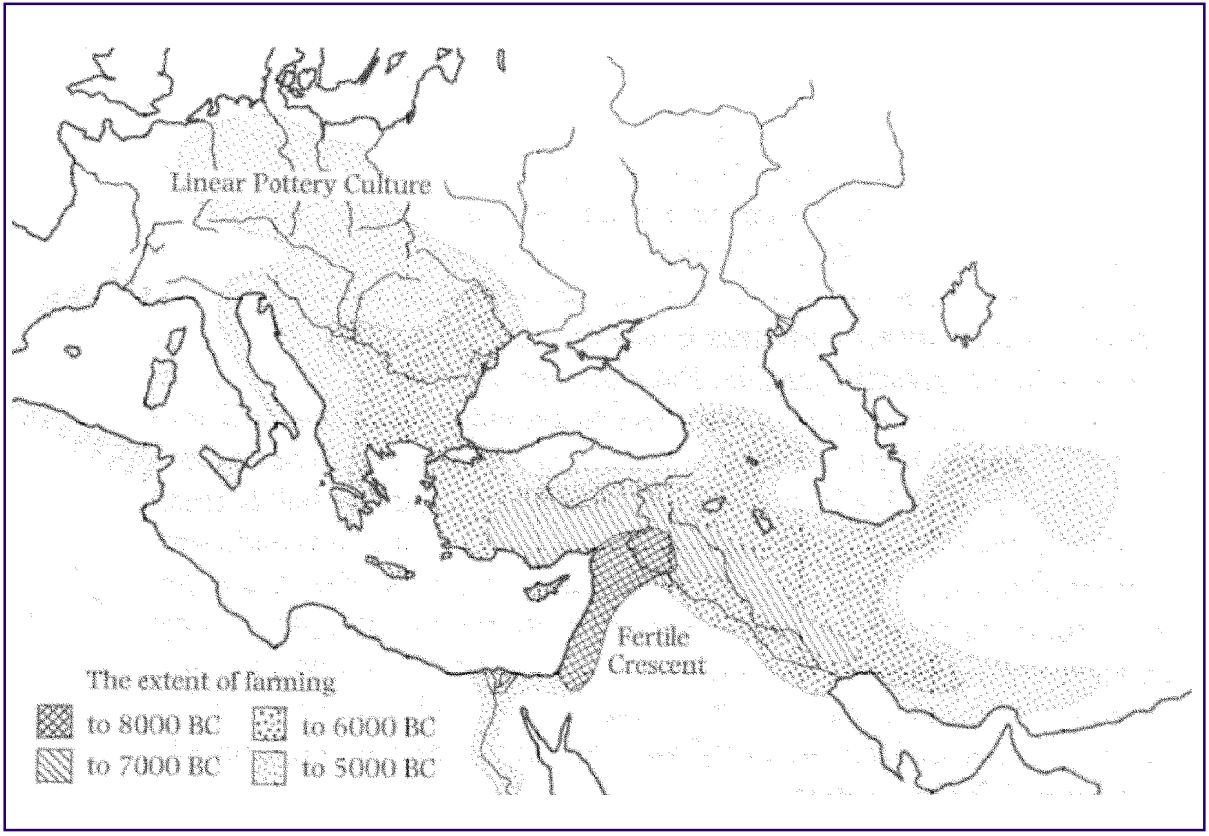

FIGURE 5: *The spread of agriculture* (*from Ehrenberg, 1989).*

primarily women's business.

So Engels' assumption of men's role as provider was incorrect historically, reflecting the gender bias of his period.

The Neolithic matrilineal settlements produced essentially for their own consumption and were self-sufficient based on horticulture and some animal domestication for meat and hides, not for commodity exchange. While some barter exchange may have taken place between horticultural settlements, extensive exchange would not have taken place until agricultural techniques spread to geographic areas which were lacking in the products necessary to make farming implements (wood, stone, silica and, later, bronze) or which lacked the skills or natural products such as clay for the later growth of craft specialisation (such as pottery, weaving, smithing, etc.).

However, explanations which locate the impetus for the emergence of private property in the growth of commodity exchange, such as Reed does in *Women's Evolution,* don't answer the primary question: how did individual men become the owners of the articles that were exchanged or of the means of production that produced them?

Answers such as Engels', that "gaining a livelihood had always been the business of the man", or Reed's, that cattle, as a new form of wealth and as commodities, began to be bartered for wives as bride price and child price, leading to the shift from communal ownership to private ownership by men, beg the question. Neither provide a materialist explanation of why social practices are established in the first place or why they change at a particular time.

Reed, in particular, separates the emergence of private property from any change in the character of the productive forces. She fails to explain how bride price came into existence or why the shift from matrilocality to patrilocality had already taken place, a shift that was necessary if we are to make any sense of bride or child price as a payment for lost labour.

Her argument, that the emergence of private ownership of the means of production, (which means a fundamental change in the economic basis of society and in the social relations of production), was a result of a change in the superstructural institution of marriage, contradicts the central law of historical materialism which states that relations of production (property forms) correspond to the level of development and character of the productive forces, so it is changes in the latter that are the driving mechanism for changes in the former.

The importance of plough agriculture

Despite Reed's and Engels' incorrect premises, modern anthropological and archaeological evidence *does* support a Marxist explanation of the emergence of private property and the oppression of women.

A qualitative change in the character of the productive forces took place with the shift from collective horticulture controlled by women to the individual economic activity controlled by men when they, for the first time, became farmers through the shift to plough agriculture. How did this shift affect the relations of production, particularly in gender terms?

Early plough agriculture required greater physical strength, involving the use of not just goats and sheep, but bigger animals such as cattle, and being based on ploughs with blades made of bronze, not the harder iron which was developed later. Ploughing was also an isolated activity compared to the horticulture of women, and less easily handled with child-minding. Accompanied by a shift in the keeping of animals for meats and hides to their use as sources of secondary milk products, wool and traction power for ploughing, harvesting and transportation, the development of the plough removed women from their role in the production of the major source of food.

Plough agriculture and the associated technological developments spread from Mesopotamia in 4500 BC to Europe in a period of 500 years. With plough agriculture, land became a source of private wealth for the first time. The processing of secondary milk products and the development of wool for weaving meant that the keeping of large herds and flocks also spread quickly.

Full-time mixed farming had major ramifications for the range and complexity of tasks. Ploughs needed to be made, animals trained, regular milking procedures established, milk products such as yoghurt and cheese processed, sheep shorn for wool, herds fed, pastured and watered, wool spun and woven into yarn and textiles. Changes in the division of labour became necessary as all members of the community (i.e., men, as well as women) were needed to fulfil the growing range of tasks.

These shifts in tasks were probably exacerbated by population growth and the need to gain greater yields from less fertile areas. Land became *the* critical resource and migration was one major way of expanding access to this resource.

From 4500 BC all these pressures came together. Intensive agriculture, both for food and secondary products, became increasingly important. Men abandoned hunting and were absorbed into the new tasks in agriculture and herding. This shift was accompanied by social and economic divisions which were much more significant than previously — divisions of wealth and poverty, as well as of land ownership.

Ehrenberg outlines five significant factors in and implications of this shift.[2]

1. Once large-scale herding was established, cattle raiding as a variation of hunting developed. This was the origin of warfare: for the first time, ownership of a resource which was worth stealing and easy to steal existed.

2. Individual plough agriculture heralded the change in gender control of farming. Men controlled the agriculture and herding and women spent more time preparing food and craft products like textiles, and in child-rearing.

3. Although less land was needed for the same amount of production as in horticulture, plough agriculture was far more labour intensive, especially where the land was of poor fertility, and population growth put pressure on the most arable land. Therefore, women needed to produce more children-workers and this would have put more emphasis on what was seen as their major role. It would also lead to greater value being put on male children as women withdrew from farming activities and contributed less to the daily production of food, which had been their major role and the basis of their equal social status.

4. This had implications for the social organisation of communities and laid the basis for the shift from matrilineal and matrilocal organisation to patrilineal and patrilocal organisation. In turn, this laid the basis for the replacement of the clan system by individual and husband-headed family units.

Male farmers and herders would teach their sons the skills and techniques of intensive farming, putting pressure on the matrilineal system of inheritance through sisters' sons. In women-dominated horticulture, women taught their daughters who stayed with them, so inheritance was not a problem. In horticulture, property is communally owned and less tools and equipment is needed, therefore there is less at stake in inheritance. But the dominance of men in the production of food and secondary products became a contradiction to matriliny and matrilocality. Pressure built up against communal ownership as communal methods of collective labour were broken down by the more individual labour of men in plough farming and herding.

5. Large increases in related tasks and the increasing range of material possessions led, over time, to craft specialisation and exchange which, in turn, increased the division of labour.

Trade and commodity exchange were mainly carried out by men on behalf of the household or clan. Increasingly, this put pressure on them to combine the products of their own agricultural work with the products of the household, adding to the tendency towards individual ownership and control over all products.

Material possessions and inheritance led to accumulation of wealth over generations, developing the social hierarchies of class, status and power. The wealthy became powerful by lending to poorer clan families who, in return, gave services such

as labour or combat duties. The divide between rich and poor widened as the poor became more indebted and had less time to spend producing for their own subsistence. This process is the framework within which people, as well as products, animals, goods and land, became objects of value for exchange. Children or women could be given (for use as labourers or breeders) to pay off obligations incurred by poor families.

It is ironic that while the discovery of farming by women at the beginning of the Neolithic period was such a positive leap forward, by the end of the Neolithic it had changed into a negative outcome for women. Women's work, collective in the developing crafts, weaving, pottery, etc., increasingly became located in the home with their exclusion from major food production (although women's role in food preparation increased). This isolation from the source of their previous high status, power and equality, in both hunter-gatherer and early Neolithic communities, led to their subordination and powerlessness in the developing class society and all class formations from that time onwards.

Relevance for today

This isn't just an interesting historical reconstruction based on today's evidence, one story of origin amongst many. The Marxist explanation of the social development of private property and the oppression of women makes sense of the data, and it refutes the dominant explanation of why social inequality exists and why it can't be changed, the doctrine of natural difference.

There is no evidence to back up biological determinist theories, nor do they rely on evidence. Such theories are ideological, given credence in order to distort, undermine and discourage attempts to eliminate gender inequality. Ideologies like biological determinism exist to serve a class interest — in the present time, the interest of those who want to roll back the gains for women made since the 1960s.

A campaign is currently being waged by the capitalist class and its governments to reduce real wages, cut back publicly funded social services and welfare, attack youth, and enforce a user-pays approach to education, health care and aged care. This offensive needs the traditional unit, the family, to absorb the fallout. The family is the one major sphere of capitalist society in which labour replacement services can be absorbed without payment: women pick up the burden unpaid.

Governments' social engineering policies have facilitated a push back into the home. Childcare costs have increased while the range of childcare services has been reduced. Monetary concessions for the one-wage household have been put in place. The job market has been restructured such that full-time work (and its accompanying living wage) is being transformed into part-time and casual employment, predominantly

filled by women. If these women have children, their wages barely cover their childcare costs and jeopardise any family allowances paid by the state.

The capitalists' offensive is not aimed at driving all women permanently out of the work force. This is historically precluded; the proportion of women in waged work has been rising ever since the beginning of the industrial revolution. Rather, the aim is to make women more vulnerable to increased exploitation, to drive them down in the work force (lower wages, fewer hours, less job security, fewer holidays, more piece work, less safety and less unionisation), and thereby exert a downward pressure on the wages and conditions of all workers. Bolstering the working class's acceptance of the idea that women's "natural" place is first and foremost in the family as the unpaid carers of husbands, children, the sick and aged, and therefore that their waged work is only secondary, strengthens the ruling class's ability to do this.

These attacks do not mean that all the gains of the women's liberation movement will be lost. Women in well-paid full-time jobs can still afford to make choices about children and careers, but they too will be affected by the ideology that counterposes job satisfaction with child-rearing. Guilt about prioritising anything other than marriage and motherhood is a central part of this ideological offensive.

The attacks do mean that class differences are increasingly impacting on the gains made by women in the past. Rich women have been able to side-step many of the worst features of women's oppression and exploitation. Once women could inherit and control their own money, a gain primarily from the first wave of feminism at the turn of the 20th century, they could choose to ignore the circumstances constraining other women's lives.

It now seems, in the light of neoliberal policy, that many more middle-class women have been able to improve their lot, as long as they ignore the plight of their less fortunate sisters. There has been a growing division between the "sisters in suits", with their decisions of self-interest, and the broader population of women who have different interests. Neoliberal economic policies are creating the material conditions to consolidate that gap.

The historical explanation of the social causes of women's oppression presented in this pamphlet shows quite clearly the consequences of women being excluded from a major role in the economic life of their society. Without economic independence, women are vulnerable and less able to make and implement decisions about their lives.

Of course, this doesn't mean that only economic issues affect women. There are many ways in which women are oppressed in class society — attacks on reproduction rights are another major area. But economic marginalisation significantly restricts

other choices. It also strengthens the impact of the ideological onslaught by reducing the range of other experiences open to women who are forced to stay at home while their children are young. As children enter school, women may work part-time for a pittance to absorb the increasing costs being re-imposed on the family as social spending is slashed.

Feminist perspectives & liberation

The engineering of women back into economic dependence and psychological conservatism is exacerbated by increasing divisions within feminism, a weakening and fragmenting of the movement and the undermining of the realisation that collective organising is necessary.

Liberal feminism now rests on the "some women make it, most don't" rationale. Attempts are made to justify this by arguing that the women on the front line are the trail-blazers in a nasty male-dominated world and need support from their sisters. What is less and less often mentioned is that the trails being blazed are individual career paths, not advances down the road of opportunities for all women. Increasingly, individual self-interest is being justified by "do it yourself" (DIY) feminism, which rejects the conservative self-interest or defeatism of an older generation of liberal feminists while assuming that institutional barriers to equality no longer exist for women. Instead, if a woman doesn't make it (however you want to define "it") then it's her own fault — yet another "blame the victim" guilt trip.

Radical feminism confuses the way the attacks on women are taking place by giving credence to "the natural" and thus to the central ideological attack. Declaring the essential moral worth of women can't overcome the weight of economic and social cutbacks, nor can it supplant the "woman the mother and home-maker" thrust of the ideological attack. This is especially so if radical feminism's own analysis of why women are "superior" rests on their reproductive and nurturing character.

While radical feminists understand that women's oppression is a structural problem, they insist that only their view is legitimate and muzzle or censor alternate views. This makes united action to rebuild the women's liberation movement impossible. It also lines up this strand of feminism with some of the most right-wing forces grouped against women, such as around questions of sexuality and reproductive rights.

The other major strand within feminism that adds to the ideological confusion is postmodernism. This strand replicates the individualism of liberal feminism and is often adopted in reaction to the dogmatism of radical feminism.

In one sense, postmodernism is an expression within feminism of the philosophy of neoliberalism. It emphasises diversity and difference; each human being has unique

experiences of the world and will perceive and respond to the world differently. This means that attempts to universalise or make general laws about how the world (natural or social) operates is to impose one view on the experiences of everyone. Those who in the name of science or progress have dominated in the past have done so by silencing and exploiting less powerful groups, including women. Therefore, say the postmodernists, science and theories of social progress must be eliminated.

There are no regular patterns of experience in society, only fragmented viewpoints expressed through language as highly individualised stories ("texts"). So, institutionalised oppression by gender, class, ethnicity, race, etc. are delusional, impositions on another's view of her own experience.

For postmodernists, liberation does not involve concrete attempts to change society, whether by reform or revolution. Instead, liberation is individual and subjective. Change is equated with shifts in language or appearance, and with how you "define" yourself or "identify" in any particular situation. This viewpoint makes solidarity based on similar experiences of oppression, and collective struggle to change that oppression, impossible. Postmodernism is thus another weapon in the armoury of those who benefit from the status quo.

Marxists argue that systematic oppression and exploitation do exist and that we can determine the mechanisms of how and why they exist in order to change them.

Change can't be imposed from above, it can only take place when those who are oppressed understand the nature of their oppression and join with others to eradicate it. That is why it is crucial to combat the myth that women are and always have been subordinated.

The idea that gender inequality is natural and unchangeable is put forward as scientific fact, whereas in reality it is part of a reactionary political ideology, one which can be exposed as myth only by examining the historic and scientific evidence of the emergence of human society and its development.

NOTES

1 Engels, 1970, p. 319. **2** Ehrenberg 1989, pp. 105-107.

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'There is no evidence to back up biological determinist theories, nor do they rely on evidence. Such theories are ideological, given credence in order to distort, undermine and discourage attempts to eliminate gender inequality. Ideologies like biological determinism exist to serve a class interest — in the present time, the interest of those who want to roll back the gains for women made since the 1960s.'

— Pat Brewer

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The pervasive gender inequality of modern society is not 'natural'. Women have not always been an oppressed sex. In fact, the earliest human communities did not know private property, class division and the state — or the subordination of women.

Frederick Engels' pioneering 1884 work, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, provided a scientific explanation of the origins of women's oppression. Advances in archaeology and anthropology since then have confirmed the Marxist contention about the egalitarian nature of early human society.

However, Engels could not explain some key aspects of the transition from pre-class to class society. Recent scientific evidence enables these gaps to be filled in and a fully coherent explanation to be developed. That is the subject of this pamphlet.

This is of tremendous importance to the fight for women's rights today, a key task of which is to combat all those reactionary ideas which seek to present women's current social position as 'normal' and therefore unchangeable.

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