

# THE HUMAN REVOLUTION<sup>1</sup>

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Most anthropologists have tacitly assumed that human culture was established by men. The 'Man the Hunter' myth has dominated palaeoanthropology, now, almost since the inception of the discipline. Through the 1960s and 1970s, it was taken as self-evident that the sexual division of labour, with males going away hunting and bringing home the bacon, emerged millions of years ago in a process linked with the evolution of bipedalism, tool-making and the unusually large human brain.

In the past decade, there's been a revolution in archaeology and palaeontology, leading to the view that all this is nonsense, that the early hominids ('australopithecines') were ape-like creatures leading ape-like lives, and that it was only in a relatively recent 'human revolution' that culture as we know it emerged. Leading archaeologists Lewis Binford and Olga Soffer are now showing that in Europe, at least, there is no evidence that organized hunting bands were traveling distances, hunting large game animals and bringing meat back to semi-permanent base camps until at most 50,000 years ago.

Up-to-date archaeologists and palaeontologists such as Chris Stringer of the London Natural History Museum are today almost unanimously agreed: the Neanderthals were not our ancestors and were not culturally 'modern'. The dominant view today is (a) that the human species emerged in a revolutionary way, (b) that this revolution began in Africa about 120,000 years and was consummated on a global level some 60,000-40,000 years ago, and (c) that only during this revolution did symbolic language and culture emerge. Those primatologists, sociobiologists and others attempting to work out the internal dynamics of this revolution, moreover, stress that *women's* interests and initiatives must have been paramount. This has little to do with feminist political thinking. The scientists' confidence on this score is rooted partly in standard sociobiological theory: among mammalian species including all primates, it's *female* strategies which tend to drive evolutionary change.

The human revolution happened. The details of precisely how it happened

have not yet been agreed. My work as a Marxist is essentially about the details – about the social and political dynamic of that revolution. When Chris Stringer and others talk about a human revolution it's little more than a formal term, which anyone can interpret pretty much as they like. Stringer himself relies mainly on bones and genes, and it's less easy to see the politics in those. Lots of people can talk about the human revolution without thinking things through as Marxists would do. They don't mind the concept because they don't see what it's got to do with politics.

But the moment *Marxists* start trying to think about a revolution *in the Late Pleistocene* – they are bound to start wondering about the social dynamics, the conflicts, the struggles of conflicting forces. And for some Marxists, this is a problem. For it can't possibly be 'class' that was at issue at this early stage. So what can it have been?

Well, the only theoretically possible answer is that of Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. The dynamic can only have been sexual. There must have been a sexual revolution which led to what Engels termed the 'primacy' of women in the 'communistic household'. And that's breathtaking in its implications. It means that if you accept the idea of a 'Human Revolution' and then think it through, it has a logic of its own. You are taken straight to Engels' whole theory. Engels was right after all.

Quoting Arthur Wright, Engels describes how communistically organized Iroquois women wielded their power:

'Usually, the female portion ruled the house... The stores were held in common: but woe to the luckless husband or lover who was too shiftless to do his share of the providing. No matter how many children, or whatever goods he might have in the house, he might at any time be ordered to pick up his blanket and budge; and after such orders it would not be healthful for him to attempt to disobey. The house would be too hot for him and he must retreat to his own clan' (*The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*).

Women's power, according to this account, was based on their solidarity, and on the fact that they had the right to rupture their sexual relations with men

at any time. None of this is new at all. It is just that the new palaeoanthropology converges with sociobiological theory to suggest that Engels was *more* resoundingly and irrefutably right than he himself could possibly have known.

My book starts from the idea that to be fully human is to be conscious, and *that consciousness in any meaningful sense has something to do with the class struggle*. What has that got to do with the human origins? The answer is that the class struggle as a determinant of consciousness didn't begin yesterday, or even a few hundred years ago. As both Marx and Engels fully realised, if our struggle is traced back far enough into the past, it will be found to take other forms, sexual contradictions being among the most central.

The contradictions which led to revolutionary transformation can be traced ultimately to the fact that complex learning depends on large brains. These need time to develop. Besides involving an unusual degree of infant helplessness following birth, such brains also need a prolonged childhood in which sufficient learning can take place. The evolution of large-brained *Homo sapiens* therefore brought with it dramatically intensified childcare burdens. If these were not to defeat the mothers who were primarily responsible, it was vital for evolving females to ensure that the opposite sex contributed more support than had ever been contributed by male primates, including evolving humans, before.

To understand this, you have to realize that male primates – for example gorillas and chimpanzees – provide no food for their offspring. They leave that entirely to mothers. If we suppose that, initially, proto-hominid males were equally reluctant providers and that human evolution involved contradictions and struggles around such issues, then in my view the mysteries of human cultural origins begin to dissolve.

If females needed to get males to hunt for them, they would have had to link sex with success in the chase. To grasp the main logical possibilities, let's begin by reviewing the situation among chimpanzees.

When a male chimp has caught a monkey or other animal, a female will sometimes rush up and sexually present her hindquarters. If the female is in oestrus and the male is interested, she may obtain a share of his meat, which she will begin eating on the spot, perhaps while copulation is still proceeding.

Naturally, if a second female arrives at the kill site, she will be in competition with the first for the male's favours. For obvious reasons, we can see that this strategy isn't conducive to female gender solidarity. Neither does it promote solidarity between males. The logic of the situation compels males to do battle against one another, using whatever meat they can obtain in order to entice females to their side.

Human females, I am arguing, did the exact opposite. As the revolution got under way, they found themselves no longer chasing after meat-possessing males. Instead, they stood firm with their offspring and declined to move. We can tell this from the archaeological evidence of their home-bases, fires etc. Unlike Neanderthal females, women of our species at this point stopped moving endlessly from camp to camp. For much of the time, they doubtless relied partly on their own gathered food. But as and when they wanted meat – as they emphatically did during seasons when gatherable food was scarce – they adopted a totally new strategy.

Instead of endlessly traveling and foraging, they persuaded their male partners do much of the necessary traveling for them. Instead of running to the meat, they made the meat come to them. The trick was in essence quite simple. They signaled 'No!' to any male who approached without meat. Any male who tried to defy this resistance met with a wall of collective hostility, generated by the logic of the situation.

There would have been no point in signaling 'No!' to a lazy or empty-handed male if the female concerned knew that her sister or female neighbour was going to signal 'Yes!' at the same time. The male would just cheat and go to her rival. In other words, the strategy of signaling 'No!' would have meant choosing the right moment, making sure that all females in the vicinity were in this together. The women's 'No!', then, within this strategy, must have been a *collective* signal in order to be effective.

Women, as they became conscious and cultural, had a ready made biological heritage for exactly such a strategy. The human female conceals her ovulation, so that no male can tell precisely when she's fertile. When cycling, she loses more blood than any other primate, her menstrual periods signaling imminent fertility. She can have sex at any time in her cycle, or refuse sex at any time. Finally, women have the capacity to synchronize their menstrual

cycles with one another. The average length of the human cycle indicates an evolutionary strategy of synchronizing cycles using the moon to keep in phase: unlike a chimp cycle, which is on average 36 days, the human one averages 29.5 days – precisely the time it takes for the moon to pass through its phases as seen from the earth.

Solidarity enhanced women's consciousness, as if making them more intelligent. The solidarity stemming from strike action would have enhanced menstrual synchrony, enabling women to experience their body-clocks as a source of collective strength. 'Females' in fact became 'women' when they established their own pride, their own dignity, their own power. Empowered by finding themselves in solidarity with one another, women collectively drew on their own biological resources to give their menstrual blood a wholly new, collectively constructed meaning as a symbol of inviolability. Women chose each period of synchronized menstruation as the best moment to go collectively on strike. Such collective action, timed to occur around new moon, would have signaled the beginning of each month's preparation for a ceremonial collective hunt, this carefully planned expedition typically culminating around full moon.

Under such circumstances the flowing of the blood, far from symbolizing weakness or disability, would have been felt as the symbolic expression of women's solidarity and power, including solidarity with men as sons and brothers acting reliably in women's defence. And I should add that if such *blood-solidarity* or *clan solidarity* in some ways felt like modern class solidarity – as Engels certainly thought – then the blood of sisterhood may have prefigured the red banner of socialism today.

In the course of cultural origins, the rule against rape was to revolutionary womanhood what the inviolability of the picket-line is to revolutionary communism today. It was the first cultural rule, the one to be established at all costs, and the foundation on which all other rules were to be built.

I make no apology for drawing on the findings of 'right-wing sociobiology' in order to arrive at such conclusions. Marx did the same thing in his own time: he took classical political economic theory which was clearly being used to justify the existing system of class oppression – and instead of ignoring it, looked into its *internal* contradictions. He was able to make revolutionary use

of it. Sociobiology looks at human sociality in the pre-cultural period and sees parallels everywhere with bourgeois economics. It is powerful precisely because of this – because it claims to show that the predatory and competitive realities of contemporary society are rooted in ‘human nature’.

My view is that behaviour motivated by the requirements of ‘selfish’ genes really is what drives Darwinian evolution. There’s no point in denying that. The important thing is that humans became human by *overthrowing* that logic of nature. We got into culture, which is different. Culture, based on solidarity, reconstructed our nature completely. That’s what the human revolution was all about, and why it’s so important to claim it as the beginning of our revolutionary heritage. We won the revolution once. We can do it again.

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Note 1: This article was first published in *Socialist Organize* in August 13 1992. It is reprinted here with some minor corrections.