



**Engels and the
Origins of Human Society**

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(Part 1)

Arguments for socialism are always intertwined with arguments about the origins of human beings and social institutions. Socialists see the exploitation of some people by others, the existence of an oppressive state and the subordination of women to men in the nuclear family as products of human history. Our opponents see them as the result of human nature.

That was why when Marx and Engels first formulated their ideas, they did so by developing a completely new understanding of how human beings relate to the world around them. This involved rejecting the two dominant ways of seeing this relationship: *idealism* which sees human beings as semi-divine, subject to God's will and completely separate from the animal world; and *crude materialism* which hold humans to be no more than machines or animals, either simply reacting to stimuli from the external world (today generally labelled "behaviourism"), or as biologically programmed to perform in certain ways (today, called "sociobiology"). [1]

Marx and Engels first presented their own view in *The German Ideology* and the *Theses on Feuerbach* of 1845-6. They saw human beings as products of the natural, biological world, and history as part of natural history. But they also saw the specific character of humans as lying in their ability to react back on the circumstances that had created them, changing both those circumstances and themselves in the process. Knowledge of both natural history and human history was still very limited when Marx and Engels first formulated their ideas: the first discovery of early human remains (of Neanderthals) was not until 1856; Darwin's *Origin of Species* was not published until 1859 and his *Descent of Man* until 1871; and the American Lewis

Henry Morgan did not publish his pioneering account of the evolution of the family and state, *Ancient Society*, until 1877.

Engels relied on these scientific advances to enlarge on his and Marx's earlier insights. This he did in two important works, *The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man* (written in 1876) [2], and *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (published in 1884) [3]. They contain the most extensive account by the founders of historical materialism of how human beings came to live as they do in modern times – of where 'human nature' and human institutions come from. For this reason attacks on the validity of Marxism and on Engels' reputation have often concentrated on them – especially on *The Origin of the Family*. Scientific advance over the last century has, of course, dated some of Engels' material: he was writing before the discovery of the Mendelian theory of genetics [4], before the earliest hominid remains were found in Africa and at a time when investigation into pre-literate societies was in its infancy. Yet his writings still retain enormous relevance. He applies a method which is materialist without being mechanical – and which continues to challenge both idealism and the terrible twins of behaviourism and sociobiology.

That is why it is worthwhile looking at Engels' arguments in these two works and to defend what is valid in them while sifting out what is dated. This I attempt to do, looking first at his account of human evolution in *The Part Played by Labour*, then at his explanation of the rise of classes and the state in *The Origin of the Family*, and then, finally at the same work's explanation for women's oppression. In each case I will attempt to deal with gaps and discrepancies in Engels' arguments by discussing some of the most important more recent material on these questions.

I) The argument on human origins

Engels outlined his account of human origins in a few paragraphs which are worth reproducing here with only slight editing:

Many hundreds of thousands of years ago, during an epoch not yet definitely determinable ... a race of anthropoid [i.e. human-like] apes lived in the tropical zone ... they lived in bands in the trees ...

These apes began to lose the habit of using their hands to walk and adopted a more and more erect posture. This was *the first decisive step in the transition from ape to man*.

Other diverse functions must have devolved upon the hands. The first operations for which our ancestors gradually learned to adapt their hands ... could have been only very simple ones ... But the decisive step had been taken, the hand had become free and could henceforth attain ever greater dexterity ...

Using the hand for labour had other effects:

Our simian ancestors were gregarious... the development of labor necessarily helped to bring the members of society together by increasing the cases of mutual support and joint activity, and by making clear the advantages of this joint activity to every individual.

Men-in-the-making arrived at the point where *they had something to say* to each other. Necessity created the organ; the undeveloped larynx of the ape was slowly but surely transformed by modulation to produce constantly more developed modulation, and the organs of the mouth gradually learned to pronounce one articulate sound after another.

Parallel with this there was a necessary development of the brain: *“The reaction of labor and speech on the development of the brain and its attendant senses, of the increasing clarity of consciousness, power of abstraction and of conclusion, gave both labor and speech an ever renewed impulse to further development.”* Overall:

Hundreds of thousands of years certainly elapsed before human society arose out of troop of tree climbing monkeys. Yet it did finally appear. And what do we find once more as the

characteristic difference between the troupe of monkeys and human society? *Labour*.

Engels' position, then, sees human evolution as going through a number of interlinked stages: two-legged walking, tool making and use, development of the hand, sociability, brain and speech development, more control over nature, more sociability, more brain and speech development. His account of this was dependent on Darwin's prior work, and each of these elements is mentioned by Darwin. But Engels alters the order of the stages in a significant way.

Darwin assumed that the growth in brain size and intellect occurred *before* the transition to two-legged walking and the use of hands to make tools. Engels argued the sequence of events was the other way round. It was the freeing of the hands that made co-operative labour possible on a scale unimaginable among apes, and from this flowed the development of the brain. As the archaeologist Bruce Trigger tells:

Darwin was ... constrained by reluctance to challenge the primacy which the idealistic religious and philosophical thinking of his time accorded to rational thought as a motor in bringing about cultural change. Hence in discussing human evolution... it was the development of the brain that in turn resulted in tool use. [\[5\]](#)

By contrast:

Engels argued that an increasingly terrestrial life-style had encouraged ... increasing use of tools. This caused natural selection in favour of bipedalism and manual dexterity as well as ... a more complex division of labor: Tool making and the development of a capacity for language the better to co-ordinate productive activities led to the gradual transformation of the brain of an ape into the that of a modern human being...

Darwin's view of the sequence of stages dominated research on human origins for the best part of a century, leading to the belief that any "missing link" between apes and humans had a large brain but an ape-like posture and throwing the whole study of our evolution askew. It encouraged acceptance for some 50 years of one of the great scientific frauds of all time – the Piltdown affair, in which the skull of a man and the jaw of an ape were presented as the remains of one of our earliest ancestors. And it led to the refusal for 30 years to take seriously a genuine find, the discovery in South Africa by Raymond Dart of the remains of an apelike creature which had adopted two legged walking. It was not until the discovery by Donald Johanson in 1974 of a complete three and half million year old skeleton with an ape sized brain and a erect posture that Darwin's sequence was finally abandoned. [6] Only then could archaeologists begin to explain the evolution of one set of skeletons from another. [7]

Assessing Engels' argument today

But if Engels was, amazingly, right in this respect as against Darwin, how does the rest of his account hold together? We have much more knowledge today than in Engels' time. But there are still enormous problems in fitting it together.

Most physical knowledge of our ape and early human ancestors rests on findings of odd fragments of bone, occasional teeth, and small bits of rock which may or may not once have been tools. Using such evidence, students of human origins have to try to guess what whole skeletons were like, the nature of the nerves and muscles that once encased them, the intellectual capacities of the creatures to which they belonged, how they fed themselves and the social context in which they lived. As one of Britain's leading archaeologists, Chris Stringer, has put it:

The field of human evolution is littered with abandoned ancestors and the theories that went with them... Failure to realize the complexities involved in trying to interpret a few fossils scattered sparsely through space and time has characterized the approach of even the most competent workers, resulting in naive interpretations... Consequently, whole evolutionary edifices would collapse, complete with attached ancestors and descendants, with each development in theory, investigation of an underlying assumption or new discovery. [8]

So, for instance, until the late 1970s it was assumed there had been four ice ages in the last 800,000 years. Now it is believed there were at least eight. [9] Again, until 20 years ago it was commonly accepted that the separation of our ancestors from those of great apes occurred with an ape known as *Ramapithecus*, 15 million years ago. Now it is usually held the separation took place with the evolution of the “Southern Apes”, *Australopithecus*, that lived in east and south Africa 3 or 4 million years ago. [10]

The sparsity of reliable information makes it very easy for people to make elaborate, unsubstantiated conjectures about what might have happened, with no facts to confirm or deny them – the modern version of the *Just So* stories Rudyard Kipling wrote for children nearly a century ago. All sorts of writers on human evolution make hypotheses of the form, “And, so, perhaps, we can explain the descent of certain apes from the trees by their need to do X.” Within a couple of paragraphs, the “perhaps” has gone, and X becomes the origin of humanity.

This method is the special hallmark of sociobiologists, [11] but there are also some very good theorists who fall into it on occasions. [12] It is a method Marxists have to reject. We are not interested in story telling for the sake of story telling. So I will try to concentrate on what we know for certain.

The established record: our relatives

It is generally accepted that our nearest relatives are the chimps, the pygmy chimps (or bonobos) [13] and the gorillas [14]. Studies of genetic material suggest that we shared a common ancestor some 4 to 7 million years ago and that even today, after evolving in different directions, we still have some 97.5 percent of genes in common with the chimpanzees. Genetically, “man and chimpanzee are more closely related than horse and donkey, cat and lion, or dog and fox”. [15]

This is still an uncomfortable fact for idealists of all sorts, and confirms Marx’s view that human history is part of natural history. But it is often seized on by modern mechanical materialists who claim that we are simply “naked apes” and that all the faults of society can be blamed on our inherited mammalian genetic make up. As one popular account of human origins put it:

Hierarchy is an institution among all social animals and the drive to dominate one’s fellows an instinct three or four million years old ... The human drive to acquire possessions is the simple expression of an animal instinct many hundreds of years older than the human race itself ... The roots of nationalism are dug firmly in the social territory of almost every species of our related primate family ... Status seekers are responding to animal instincts equally characteristic of baboons, jackdaws, rock cod and men. [16]

Even an allegedly more sophisticated socio-biological text that claims to take into account the effects of cultural as well as genetic evolution concludes that “bigotry” and “group aggression” stem from genetic determination – “the fear of strangers response, the proneness to associate with groups of the early stages of social play and the intellectual tendency to dichotomize continua into in-groups and out-groups”. [17]

From such standpoints, Marxism rests on a terrible error – the “romantic fallacy” of failing to see the genetic basis for the horrors of modern society and instead blaming them on “the social environment” [18], Marxism’s “key error” being to “conceive of human nature as relatively unstructured and largely or wholly the product of external socio-economic forces”. [19]

But the fallacy in fact lies in any “naked ape” claim that we can read off from ape behavior some inbuilt genetic basis of human behavior. It ignores a most important feature of the human genetic make-up which separates us from both our closest cousins. They are genetically programmed in narrow ways that provide them with the behavior appropriate to a limited range of environments, while we are characterized precisely by an immense flexibility in our behavior that enables us, virtually alone in the animal world, to thrive on any part of the globe. This is a fundamental difference between us and the existing apes. So gorillas are not to be found outside tropical rain forests, chimps outside wooded regions in sub-Saharan Africa, gibbons outside the tree tops of south east Asia, Orang-utans outside a few islands in Indonesia; by contrast, humans have been able to live across a vast swathe of Africa, Europe and Asia for at least half a million years. Our genetic “specialty” is precisely that we are not specialized, not constrained by any limited range of instinctive behavior.

What is more, “naked ape” views rest on very simplistic models of ape behavior. Until the 1960s nearly all studies of apes were carried out in zoos, like Solly Zuckerman’s famous 1930s account of life in the chimpanzee enclosure at London Zoo. They fitted the apes into a wider model of behavior based on baboon studies (although baboons are monkeys and have quite substantial genetic differences with all the apes). They were seen as almost completely vegetarian, with little learning capacity and nothing that could, by any stretch of the imagination, be called culture. Above all they were seen as innately aggressive, with the males involved in continual, vicious sexual competition for females and kept in order

only by a hierarchy of “dominance” imposed by the most successfully aggressive “alpha male”.

In the last 30 years studies of chimps, pygmy chimps and gorillas in the wild have challenged any such model, [20] suggesting that drawing conclusions about ape behavior from life in zoo cages is about as valid as drawing conclusions about human behavior from case studies of long term inmates in Dartmoor. [21] The main conclusions that can be drawn are:

- i. Chimps and pygmy chimps are much more sociable than used to be thought. Aggressive confrontations are much less frequent than friendly interactions. Most aggressive confrontations are settled without violence. [22]
- ii. Males are not involved in continual, bitter competition to dominate females. “In the chimpanzee troop, unlike the Savannah Baboon, the dominant male is relatively tolerant of other males’ attention to females: sexual promiscuity is the natural order of things...” [23] “Generally there is little sign of jealousy or aggression.” Females initiate many sexual contacts and their co-operation is essential if males are to have special relationships with them. [24]
- iii. The role of “dominance” among chimps and gorillas has been overstated in past. There is no single hierarchy for all activities among chimps, and among gorillas “dominance” often seems closer to what we would call leadership than to domination. [25]
- iv. There is much more learned and socially transmitted behavior than used to be thought, and much more use of primitive tools. Chimps use stones to break nuts, sticks to collect termites from holes, and leaves as sponges to pick up liquids for drinking.
- v. Chimps are not completely vegetarian. They hunt small animals (for instance, small monkeys) when the opportunity arises and so get about 10 percent of their diet from non-vegetarian sources. And hunting is a social activity: some chimps will chase the monkeys, others will lie in wait, ambush and kill them.
- vi. Apes do not behave as competing individuals when it comes to consuming food. If one chimp finds a source of good food

– a bush well endowed with edible shoots, for instance – it lets others know. And although common chimpanzees consume vegetarian foodstuff individually (except for the mother who provides food for her young offspring), they share meat with each other [26], while pygmy chimps share some vegetarian food as well.

- vii. Elementary forms of communication play a significant role among apes. Gestures are used not merely to attract attention but also to indicate certain intentions – as when a female pygmy chimp tells a male how she wants sex. [27] And a range of sounds are used for different purposes, for signaling danger or a plentiful source of food.
- viii. The social behavior of apes varies from band to band within each species, showing that it depends not merely on instinctive, genetically programmed, factors but also on the natural terrain they live off and the learned techniques they have for coping with this.

Most of these developments are more marked in pygmy chimps than among common chimps and gorillas. There is more sharing of food, more female initiation of sexual activity, and more of a break with the “baboon” dominance model of social interaction since a group of females tends to play a central role in holding the troop together. [28]

This has led to suggestions that “pygmy chimps offer many clues to the nature of the ‘missing link’ between apes and humans”. [29] Be that as it may, the evidence from apes in the wild, and from pygmy chimps in particular, challenges the usual image of innately aggressive and competitive behavior. It also shows how in certain conditions elements of what we usually think of as uniquely human forms of behavior arise among humanity’s nearest relatives – and so could also have begun to arise among our common ancestors of more than 4 million years ago.

Our ancestors

We know very little for certain about our ape and early human (or hominid) ancestors. But what we do know tends to point to the adoption of two-legged walking by creatures, Australopithecines (meaning “southern apes”). [30] These were, in most other respects, closer to apes than to human beings, with brains still little more than chimp size, averaging 385 to 500 cubic centimetres and with no definitive evidence of tool making among them. [31] Hence their classification as apes, not humans.

The first *human* [32] remains are from 2-2.5 million years ago. The brain is substantially bigger (by up to 50 percent) than that of the Australopithecines and chimps, [33] and the species has been called *homo habilis* (or “handy man”) because it was first found, in the Olduvai gorge in east Africa, alongside stone tools. The shape of its teeth suggests a mixed diet of meat and vegetation, as against the overwhelmingly vegetarian diet of the modern great apes.

By about 1.6 million years ago, humans with considerably larger brains – usually designated as a new species, *homo erectus* (“upright man”), were to be found in Africa and were soon spreading out from Africa to the Eurasian landmass. Over the next million years brain size continued to grow until it reached about 1,000 cubic centimeters – as big as that of some modern humans, even if smaller than our average. By now teeth were clearly adapted to meat eating, showing that hunting went along with the gathering of vegetarian foodstuffs. Stone tools were shaped into standard patterns (usually referred to as the *acheulean*) for different jobs – hand axes, cleavers, scrapers, and so on. And, significantly, the males were on average only about 20 percent larger than the females (as

opposed to twice as large among the Australopithecines and the great apes). This indicates that defence against predators must have depended much more on co-operation within each group and the use of tools as weapons than on the physical prowess of any individual male.

From about 500,000 years ago a variety of human types were to be found through Africa, Europe and Asia which resembled modern humans in having large brains (in some cases bigger than ours), and thin skulls. These are designated “archaic *homo sapiens*”, as the earliest version of our own species. The best known of them are the Neanderthals, who lived in Europe and parts of the Middle East from about 150,000 to about 35,000 years ago.

Finally, anatomically modern humans (often known as *homo sapiens sapiens*) seem to have evolved in Africa and possibly the Middle East 200,000 to 100,000 years ago.[\[34\]](#) By 40,000 years ago they were spread throughout Africa, Asia and Europe and were making the first landings in Australia. By 12,000 years ago at the latest they had crossed from north east Asia to the Americas. [\[35\]](#)

There have long been arguments about the relation of modern humans to the Neanderthals. When the first Neanderthal skeleton was found 140 years ago, it was seen as representative of a species much more primitive than ourselves, with many “bestial” ape-like characteristics (hence the colloquial use of “Neanderthal” to mean animal-like or barbaric). Forty years ago it was still assumed to be an evolutionary blind alley – “a human type which evolved in the colder climes of ice age Europe before dying out”.[\[36\]](#) Then the intellectual pendulum swung in the opposite direction: the emphasis was on the large Neanderthal brain and its similarities to ourselves.

Today the pendulum has swung at least part of the way back again, with the most popular view being that the modern humans evolved along a completely separate line from the “archaics”, originating from a group of *homo erectus*, normally identified as living in Africa. But there is still substantial resistance to this “out of Africa” view from those who see some continuity between at least some of the archaics and ourselves. [37] Such is the paucity of evidence the arguments may never be finally resolved. [38] And, however important the debate is from a purely scientific perspective, it is not, in itself, particularly significant when it comes to understanding the nature of modern humans. [39]

A species born from blood?

Much “naked ape” theorizing is based on the assumption that our ancestors were engaged in continual bloody combat both with other species and with each other. Thus Ardrey argues, “man emerged from the anthropoid background for one reason only: because he was a killer”. [40] From this the conclusion is drawn that murder is in our genes, held in check with difficulty by the mechanisms of civilisation. Such views were encouraged by the ideas on early human evolution developed by Raymond Dart after discovering the first Australopithecine remains. He claimed his bone finds showed that hunting was the major factor in the evolution of our earliest non-ape ancestors, that there had been “the predatory transition from ape to man”. [41] Such views are still peddled in some quarters. But much of the evidence deployed to justify them has been discredited. Dart’s piles of bones were probably not the result of human hunting. Our nearest cousins, especially the bonobos, are not particularly aggressive. And, as we shall see, war is non-existent and vegetation has supplied more nourishment than meat in

those surviving societies that are similar to those our ancestors lived in until about 10,000 years ago.

One interpretation of the “out of Africa” position would, however, back up the “born from blood” thesis. It rests on the claim that geneticists have proven that certain of our genes originated with a single woman in Africa between 100,000 and 200,000 years ago. Humanity began with her, it is said, with her descendants spreading out from Africa, “replacing ancient, indigenous humans all around the world ... in an abrupt and violent manner”. [42] The implication is that modern humans engaged in primeval genocide against peoples who were very similar to themselves and that this points to ingrained, warlike characteristics built into our very nature.

But the whole argument rests on an elementary confusion between what happens with genes and what happens to the bearers of those genes. Every individual has at least one pair of genes for each genetically transmitted characteristic, one from its mother and one from its father. [43] But both genes do not necessarily have equal impact on the individual’s physical make-up and sometimes one will be “dominant”, completely masking the existence of the other, although each has an equal chance of being passed on to the individual’s offspring. Thus, a child with one parent with blue eyes and one with brown can itself have brown eyes, but still be able to transmit blue eyes to its own children.

Evolution takes place when a new form of a gene appears which can change the physical characteristics of an individual, so increasing the chances of that individual surviving to breed. Eventually, the new form of the gene will completely replace the old. But in the interim (which may be a very long time) successive generations of individuals can

carry both forms of the gene, with some individuals displaying the new characteristics but still passing on to some of their offspring genes for the old characteristic. Likewise those displaying the new characteristic can transmit the gene for the old characteristic to some of their offspring. When the new gene comes to predominate, it usually does so among people who share a common ancestor (the first possessor of the gene) but who have many other ancestors as well. [44] So an African origin for modern humans does not entail us all having one, and only one, distant female ancestor, whose descendants wiped everyone else's; rather it means we had at least one shared ancestor as well as many others.

Allan Wilson, who did the first genetic research suggesting the shared African ancestor, certainly did not believe she was the single source from which we came. As two of his colleagues wrote shortly after he died about such interpretations: "they have confused the migration and extinction of genes with those of populations. There is no suggestion that Eve was the first, and, at one time, the only, woman." [45]

Chris Stringer, one of the most eminent members of the "single origin" school, recognizes that "during the few thousand years of possible coexistence of Neanderthals and modern *homo sapiens*, extensive gene flow could have occurred between groups ..." [46] At a 1987 conference on human origins there was "a consensus that although there are considerable morphological differences between archaic and modern *homo sapiens*, hybridization or local continuity between the two groups cannot be ruled out". [47] This possibility is reinforced by the fact that the two groups coexisted for some thousand years in certain areas, living in the same sites (although not necessarily together) and using similar tools.

Even if humans did not interbreed with the Neanderthals and other archaic members of our species, it does not at all follow that they displaced them by violence. It does not require violence for one animal population to replace another within a few thousand years. It only requires that one is more successful than the other at getting a livelihood from the environment. This leads to its numbers growing, depleting the resources available to the other until its birth rate is no longer sufficient to make up for its death rate. Models have been suggested for how this could have happened in the case of modern humans and Neanderthals within a mere 1,000 years, without one butchering the other. [\[48\]](#)

Brain, culture, language and consciousness

Much more important than the argument over the exact line of ancestry of modern humans are other questions with which it is often interlinked. These concern the origins of culture and language.

The debate arises because skeletal and stone tools do not, in themselves, tell us how our ancestors lived, the degree to which they communicated with each other, how successful they were at gathering vegetarian foodstuffs and hunting, still less whether they told each other stories, engaged in rituals or had inner thoughts. The structure of the cranial skeleton does not even let us know in detail how the brain was constructed, let alone what it did. And the remaining stone tools of our ancestors cannot tell us anything about their wooden and bone tools (which were probably much more prevalent, since these substances are easier to shape than stone), whether they used animal skins and vegetarian matter for decoration (which would imply imagination) as well as simply to eat and keep warm.

So, just as there are elaborate, opposed conjectures about the genealogies of the physical bodies from which skeletons come, there are completely contradictory interpretations of the development of their minds and cultures.

There are two main sets of theories. First are those which see culture and language arising very early in hominid history, at least by the time of *homo habilis* (2 million years ago) as human beings co-operated to use tools to get a livelihood. The development of culture, language, the brain and human intelligence is seen as a long, cumulative process, beginning 2 million years ago and continuing until the arrival of the first fully modern humans, some 100,000 or more years ago. The requirement of coping with the environment and the upright posture adopted by the ancestral hominids led, in each generation, to the natural selection of those genes which encouraged intelligence and sociability. As Nancy Makepiece Tanner has put it:

Selection would intensely favor the more intelligent young who could effectively execute the new behavior ... Reorganization (of the brain) could have happened quite rapidly: young who did not make it and died before reproductive age did not pass on their genes. Selection would have favored young who were curious, playful and cued in to the behavior of other group members, imitating tool making skills and environmental know-how, learning to recognize and to interact with a wide and diverse social network. [49]

Most such interpretations have built on the work of Glyn Isaacs, who argued that collections of animal bones alongside tools at Olduvai pointed to the existence among *homo habilis* of “home bases” to which they carried the carcasses of hunted animals to be shared out among themselves. [50] The tools themselves, it is claimed, could

not have been made without a level of manual dexterity and intelligence way beyond that of the apes. As John Gowlett argues:

We know certainly that tool making goes back for at least 2 million years ... Through the process of detaching hundreds of flakes ... in sequence ... each individual step is subordinate to the ultimate goals ... The striking of individual flakes requires manual dexterity and hand-eye co-ordination, as well as an appreciation of the fracture properties of stone. More than this, it requires the ability to “see” where the flake will come off. [51]

Along with this stress on tool making and intellectual development goes a claim that the skull of *homo habilis* points to a specifically human-like organization of the brain, complete with the first development of areas adapted to speech (Broca’s and Wernicke’s areas), which is “strongly suggestive that even 2 or 3 million years ago natural selection was operating on eco-niche adaptation and that cognitive and social behavior was surely the main focus”. [52]

According to this view, the successive enlargements of the brain over 2 or 3 million years correspond to the increased dependence on communicative and cognitive skills, which in turn were necessary for the transmission of knowledge about increased tool making, for co-operative gathering and hunting and for coping with the much denser networks of social interactions which grew out of both these activities.

Some proponents of this account claim there is archaeological evidence which backs it up: the finding of “base camps” among *homo habilis*, the remains of fire use among *homo erectus*, “ritual burial sites”, the remnants of ochre skin painting and of hut building among archaic

human beings. All these are said to point to a growing complexity of social life, to growing transmission of culture, to increased symbolic communication, and to expressions of intelligence and artistic imagination similar to, even if less developed than, those among modern humans.

If this model of human evolution is correct, it vindicates Engels' account. As Charles Woolfson has said, it means that "the broad outlines of Engels' theory are, by and large, confirmed by contemporary research, and that, in this respect, Engels' essay is a brilliant scientific anticipation of what is now thought to be the likely pattern of human evolution". [\[53\]](#)

The new idealist challenge

But this model has faced some sharp challenges in the last few years. These have rested on a number of claims.

Firstly, that much of the archaeological evidence is unreliable. Isaacs' *homo habilis* "base camps" could have been little more than early human versions of the chimpanzees' nests and the animal bones the result of individual scavenging of animal remains left by other carnivores, not of socially organized hunting. [\[54\]](#) Skull remains do not tell enough about the shape of the brains they once enclosed for us to deduce the existence of specialized areas (Broca's and Weinecke's areas) devoted to speech. [\[55\]](#) Remains which allegedly show hut construction among *homo erectus* and the use of decoration among archaic *homo sapiens* can, in fact, be explained in very different ways that do not involve any high level of culture. Alleged ritual burials could just as well have been the result of natural events – the collapsing of cave roofs on their occupants, for example. [\[56\]](#)

Secondly, the most convincing evidence we have, the stone tools that remain, change very little through the million year long duration of *homo erectus* and the hundred thousand long history of the Neanderthals. What is remarkable, it is claimed, is not that there is change, but that there has not been much greater, much more rapid, much more systematic advance. This does not occur until the “upper palaeolithic” cultures of the modern humans some 35,000 years ago. Until then, it is claimed, the tool production did not differ qualitatively from what happens among non-human mammal species. [57] And it is only then that we find unchallengeable evidence of artistic production (cave paintings) and ritual behaviour (ceremonial burial, etc).

Thirdly, it is claimed that neither *homo erectus* nor the Neanderthals had a larynx capable of making more than a fraction of the range of sounds made by modern man, and that, they were, therefore, incapable of language as we know it. [58]

Finally, it is said, the model rests on an outdated, gradualist version of evolutionary theory, in which species change a little at a time as individual genetic mutations arise and are selected. More recent evolutionary theory accepts the possibility of what Gould and Eldridge call “punctuated evolution” according to which genetic change can take place in bursts. [59]

The overall impact of these different arguments has been to encourage a fashion in recent years which sees “a distinctively human way of life” as arising very late in history, as a result of a “human revolution” which first produced culture and language. A recent exposition of the argument puts it like this:

Homo erectus had very nearly a modern brain capacity, but apparently very little in the way of human culture to show for it. If human origins are taken to mean the beginnings of a recognizably human culture, then the first 3.5 million of the 4 million years of hominid history must be countered still as a period of pre-history ... [60]

It seems likely that the most momentous changes occurred only after the evolution of *homo sapiens*. They may even have begun later still, after anatomically modern humans replaced the early varieties of *homo sapiens*. [61]

If this is true, then Engels' account was fundamentally misconceived. Something other than co-operative labour must have been behind the evolution of humanity. But the argument has huge holes in it which cannot be plugged by materialist explanations.

The evidence on stone tools does not prove that no advance in culture occurred. Stone would never have been the only substance used by our *homo habilis* and *homo erectus* predecessors to make tools, even if it was the one most able to survive the rigors of time. They certainly used wood, bone, animals skins and fire to cope with their environment, and would probably have found ways to make twine of various sorts for trapping animals and for carrying. [62] All of these could have been as important to them, if not more important, than stone, and could have been used in innumerable, changing, ways which left next to no evidence. What is more, a slow change in stone tools is not the same as no change at all. And it certainly does not prove they were made by creatures without cumulative intellectual and cultural development.

As McGrew points out, there is an enormous gap between the tools used by chimps and those used by *homo habilis*, let alone *homo erectus*:

Chimps are skilful makers and users of tools ... there are certain things chimps have not been seen to do ... They do not make flaked stone tools ... They do not use digging sticks to get at roots ... They do not use missiles or ladders to get at out-of-the way fruit. [63]

S.T. Parker and K.R. Gibson, using Piaget's conceptual framework for language development in humans, claim that evidence suggests that early hominids would have had "intelligence and language comparable to that of young children". [64] Thomas Wynn argues by the end of the Acheulian period, 300,000 years ago, early humans had already reached the second highest stage in human intellectual development, that of "concrete operations", with the "almost perfect symmetry of hand axes" pointing to an aptitude for "reversibility, conservation, correction of errors, and so on". [65]

Stone tools could have changed very slowly simply because they were adequate to the tasks set them – in the same way that some basic tools of carpentry show little change from Ancient Egyptian times through to the early 20th century. And even if the stone tools changed slowly, this does not mean they were easily made or could be the result of people simply copying others without giving any thought to what they were doing.

Certainly, stone tools cannot be used to justify claims of an enormous gap between the first modern humans and the later "archaic" humans. Not only did both groups coexist for many tens of thousands of years, but also that they shared cultures. Until 40,000 years ago the modern humans of Europe and the Middle East used the same sort of

“Mousterian” tools as the Neanderthals (as is acknowledged by Adam Kuper, who accepts the fashionable view that a “distinctively human culture” only goes back 25,000 to 35,000 years.) [66] Yet the last surviving Neanderthals of 35,000 years ago had learnt to use some of the same more advanced technologies as their modern human neighbours.[67]

Even after modern humans had moved on to these new technologies, change was often very slow, with “no major technological developments, no significant increase in man’s ability to generate energy” for a long period. [68] In what is now France, for example, there was a gap of up to 20,000 years between the arrival of “upper palaeolithic” culture 35,000 years ago and the Magdalenian cave paintings at La Marche. And it was another 10,000 years before agricultural techniques replaced hunting and gathering in the area.

The picture, then, is one of a slow development of techniques over 2 or 3 million years, with some acceleration 200,000 to 150,000 years ago just as the Neanderthals and the first modern humans were appearing. Further acceleration took place 30,000 to 35,000 years ago, among both the growing modern human population and the declining Neanderthal population; further rapid change at the time the cave paintings some 15,000 years ago; very rapid development with the rise of agriculture 10,000 to 5,000 years ago; and massive acceleration over the last thousand years. This suggests that, although there could have been important biological differences between archaic and modern humans, the speed of innovation did not, necessarily, depend on this. Something else had to be involved.

Even if *homo erectus* and the archaic humans had a much more limited vocal range than modern humans – and some paleontologists challenge this conclusion [69] – this does not mean that Neanderthals and other archaic humans lacked language completely. It simply means they were not as good at communicating with each other as ourselves. As Lieberman, the arch-exponent of the view stressing the linguistic limitations of the Neanderthals, himself writes: “The computer modelling does not show the Neanderthal hominids totally lacked speech or language; they had the anatomical prerequisites for producing nasalised versions of all the sounds of human speech save [i], [u] and [a] and velar consonants, and probably had fairly well developed language and culture”. [70]

Finally, the argument that punctuated evolution can take place does not, in itself, prove that it did take place in such a way as to produce culture and language suddenly. And there is one powerful argument against this – that of brain size. If the evolution of humanity was the result of very rapid changes towards the end of a period of millions of years, then that is when you would expect the most characteristic feature of *homo sapiens* – the massive size of our brain compared to our bodies – to arise. The original formulation of the punctuated evolution hypothesis by Gould and Eldridge in fact held to this view, contending that the brain hardly increased in size for the million years *homo erectus* existed. But, as Stringer points out, there is “little evidence” to back up this view. [71]

That leaves a problem for any theory which sees the “human revolution” as occurring all at once half a million years ago with the replacement of *homo erectus* by *homo sapiens*, let alone 35,000 years ago after the evolution of anatomically modern humans: why did late *homo erectus* have a brain twice the size of the Australopithecines,

and the Neanderthals a modern sized brain? It could not have been simply to undertake the mental operations which could be done by their ancestors millions of years before.

At the same time, it is inconceivable that our forebears of a million years ago could have survived unless they had already developed ways of co-operating together to cope with their environment and of transmitting knowledge to each other on a qualitatively greater scale than is to be found among our ape cousins. For by that time they were already moving out of the African valleys where their species originated to colonise much of Eurasia, showing they were capable not just of living in a certain restricted ecological niches, but of adapting a variety of environments to their needs – learning to discriminate between those newly encountered varieties of plants that were edible and those that were poisonous, learning to hunt new sorts of animals, learning to protect themselves against new predators, learning to cope with new climates.

The dialectic of labour and intellect

The direct archaeological evidence for social labor – or for any other form of behavior – among our forbears is necessarily weak. But the circumstantial evidence is overwhelming.

Look at the features that distinguished *homo erectus* from the apes. It walked on two legs and lost the easy escape route from predators of fleeing into the trees; its young took considerably longer to mature (and so needed a longer period of protection by their elders); the males of the species were now only on average 20 percent larger than the females, not 100 percent, and so were not built mainly for defense; it experienced considerable reduction in the size of the canines (the long pointed side teeth with which monkeys

and apes can threaten would-be predators and to kill small animals for food); its back teeth (molars) were adapted to a diet which included much meat, while excluding any vegetable matter that required much grinding down during chewing; the hand was reshaped, with the development of a thumb that could hold and manipulate small objects; female sexual interest was no longer concentrated mainly around the time of ovulation; and, as we have seen, there was an enormous increase in brain size.

A creature with this combination of features could only survive if it had developed some means of replacing some of the physical characteristics it had lost. It had to be able to defend its young for longer periods of time than its ape cousins despite losing apes' enormous canines, tree climbing abilities and large male build. It had to be able to cope with a greater variety of vegetation than them despite having molars that were not as good at grinding. It had to find some way to cut up the flesh of animals, whether it hunted them itself or merely relied on finding carcasses left by other predators. All of these things point to an enormous dependence on the use of artifacts of various sorts to defend, to cut up, to dig, to gather and to grind. They also point to a much greater level of social organization than is found among even the most sociable of apes: it is this which probably explains the change in the pattern of female sexuality, encouraging permanent ties between the sexes rather than the frenetic coupling concentrated around a couple of days a month to be found in common chimps. But to transmit the knowledge of the necessary techniques and to cope with the enormous level of social co-operation involved in social living on this scale required a much higher level of brain power than previously. Over many millennia those creatures whose genes changed in such a way as to best enable them to learn from, to communicate with and to care for each other would have an advantage when it came

to surviving and reproducing. Natural selection would bring about the evolution in the direction of ever larger, denser and more complex neural networks, capable of directing and learning from intricate motor functions of the hand and of using minute changes in gesture or voice to communicate.

Only if you see things in this way can you explain why our species was already endowed with the capacities 35,000 years ago to develop a whole new range of technologies. The explanation lies in 2 million years of cumulative evolution, with labor at each stage encouraging the adept hand, greater sociability and the larger brain. And, at each stage, the adept hand, greater sociability and the larger brain made possible more advanced forms of labor. But all this makes *labor* the real missing link in the story of human evolution, as Engels rightly insisted.

Such labor had enormous implications for the brain. Those best at the co-operating with others in tool production and use would have been those whose brains underwent changes in structure and size that made them better at co-ordinating the motor functions controlling the hands with vision and hearing, while also becoming more responsive to the signals of others of their kind. [72] A cumulative process would soon have been underway in which survival depended on culture, and the ability to partake in culture upon a genetic endowment that encouraged the combination of sociability, communication, dexterity and reasoning power.

It is this which explains why our forebears were able, a million or so years ago, to move out of their African ancestral home into the very different climatic conditions of Eurasia, and why the Neanderthals were able to survive the harsh conditions of the European ice age for 100,000 years or more. However great or little their differences from us,

they could not have survived unless they had at least substantial rudiments of culture, language and intelligence. After all, they were like us in one very important respect: they had nothing else to protect them – no body fur, no great speed in flight, no tusks or claws, no ready ability to disappear into the trees.

It is this which also explains the development of those most peculiarly human attributes, language and consciousness. The distinctive feature about human language, as opposed to the sounds and gestures made by other animals, is that we use words to refer to things and situations that are not actually present in front of us. We use them to abstract from the reality that confronts us and to describe other realities. And once we can do this to others, we can also do it to ourselves, using the ‘inner speech’ that goes on inside our heads to envisage new situations and new goals. The ability to do these things cannot have arisen at one go. It must have grown up over many generations as our remote ancestors learnt in practice, through labor, to abstract from and to change immediate reality – as they began to use sounds and gestures not merely to indicate what was immediately in front of them or what they immediately desired (which is what some animals do) but to indicate how they wanted to change something and how they wanted others to help them. In tool use we know there was a significant change from the ape to the early humans: the ape picks up a stick or stone to use as a tool; the early humans of 2 million years ago were already not only shaping the stick or stone, but using other stones to do the shaping, and, undoubtedly, learning from each other how to do this. This implies not merely conceptions about immediate things (food stuffs), but about things once removed from immediacy (the tool that can get the food stuff) and twice removed from immediate reality (the tool that can shape the tool that gets the food stuff). And it also

implies communication, whether by gesture or sound, about things two stages removed from immediate conditions – in effect, the first use of abstract nouns, adjectives and verbs. The development of labor and the development of communication thus, necessarily, go hand in hand. And as they both develop, they both encourage the selection of those new genes which made people more adept at both: the more agile hand, the larger brain, the larynx that made a wider range of sounds.

Such developments do not involve just quantitative changes. As the growth of labor, the growth of sociability and the growth of language reinforced each other, encouraging the selection of a whole range of new genes, new networks of nerve cells would emerge in the brain, making possible whole new ranges of interaction between people and the world around them. This may well explain why suddenly new species of humans developed that lived alongside and then superseded those that went before, as with the successive emergence of *homo habilis*, of *homo erectus*, of the various sorts of archaic human. Thus, it may well be the case that modern humans eventually replaced the Neanderthals because they were able to communicate more quickly and clearly with each other (although we will probably never know for certain if this was so).

So there has to be a recognition of how quantity turns into quality, of how through successive changes animal life gave birth to that new form of life we call ‘human’, which had a dynamic of its own, shaped by its labor and its culture not by its genes. But this should not lead to a collapse into a new idealism which sees culture and language as emerging from nowhere in the fairly recent past. If such an approach is fashionable in some circles, it is not because it can provide a scientific, materialist account of our origins, but because it fits in with the much wider mood of the intelligentsia

since the late 1970s. In virtually every discipline there has been the attempt to separate off the development of language and ideas from the development of material reality. As in the days of Marx and Engels, the struggle for science is a struggle against both idealism and mechanical materialism – with idealism today taking the form of “post modernist” fashions, and mechanical materialism of sociobiology. [73]

Loose ends

There are many details in the story of human evolution that are not yet resolved and which, because of the paucity of the evidence, may never be resolved. This accounts for a whole series of ongoing debates which produce heat at academic conferences and give rise to nice titbits for science journalists.

There is, for example, a fascinating debate about why a group of apes adopted two-legged walking in the first place. Most authorities say it was because climactic change broke up the forests in which the ancestral apes lived, presenting the ancestral apes with a choice between retreating into the remaining forest or adapting to a more open environment. Natural selection would then have picked out genetic traits among the groups which retreated into the forest adapted to that sort of life, the traits we find in today’s gorillas. And in the same way it would have picked out among the grassland dwellers the “co-operative” and culturally transmitted tool using traits we find among humans: “The hominids obtained less succulent and probably much harder to find plant foods in the new environment, the east African savannah. They specialized by becoming more intelligent and bipedal, and by using tools.” [74] As against this, others claim archaeological evidence points to the first two-legged apes living in forests, not bush and grassland. [75]

There is another debate about the role of hunting in the first steps along the hominid line. The revival of discussion on the social aspects of human evolution was given an enormous boost by the 1966 Man the Hunter conference convened by Richard Lee and Irven DeVore which drew together archaeologists and anthropologists studying present day hunter-gatherer societies. As the title of the conference suggests, the stress was on hunting as the formative social activity. [76] But this was soon challenged by those [77] who said the archaeological evidence for *homo habilis* pointed to individual scavenging (the eating of animals already killed by other carnivores) not collective hunting. This in turn led to the rejoinder that our ancestors would have had every incentive to scavenge collectively (numbers would have frightened off the carnivore that killed the prey in the first place, while there was little point in the individual hominid hogging for him or herself a carcass far too big to be eaten by one person before it went mouldy). [78]

At the same time, from another direction, it was stressed the early bipeds would necessarily have been unsuccessful hunters, but that to rear their young and to be successful gatherers of vegetarian food they would have had to become social tool users: “To all indications the ancestral chimp-like population of 5 million years ago possessed behavioral and anatomical elements basic to the development of a gathering adaptation in which a whole range of savannah plant foods could have been exploited with tools ...” [79] The young had to undergo extensive socialization if they were to learn to perform such tasks, which put a premium on the “mother-offspring tie”, with females “as the necessary centre of the social group: Appropriate motor patterns for making and using gathering tools for digging, knocking down, scraping, opening or

dividing foods, for carrying implements, food and babies, and for defense from predators, had to be learnt.” [80]

Finally, there is the debate already referred to, in passing, on the relations between the different hominid specimens that have been found – the various sorts of *Australopithecus*, *homo habilis*, *homo erectus*, the various sorts of “archaic humans”, the Neanderthals and modern humans.

But none of these disagreements among the professionals should obscure one of the most fascinating developments in intellectual history over the last 30 years – the vindication of the line of analysis laid out in the unfinished, unpublished pamphlet which Frederick Engels wrote after reading Darwin. Trigger tells how:

Engels’ work demonstrates that it was possible to conceptualise the modern materialist theory of human evolution already in the 1870s. Yet Darwin’s essentially idealist concepts about human evolution were clearly more compatible with the beliefs of most middle class scientists in Western Europe than were those of the arch-revolutionary Engels. Hence it was not surprising that Engels’ work was ignored ...

The result was that the search for origins spent three quarters of a century going up blind allies until, in the 1960s, “Kenneth Oakley, Sherwood Washburn and F. Clark Howell laid the groundwork for the construction of a new theory of evolution that, while arrived at largely inductively, closely resembled Engels’ long forgotten work”. [81]

Notes

1. The history of modern bourgeois philosophy has been very much a history of the polemic between the two views, although it cross cuts with other arguments, over how we gain access to knowledge, between empiricism and rationalism.
2. He never completed it, but it was later published in its incomplete form soon after his death, in the German socialist journal, *Die Neue Zeit*.
3. Utilising copious notes by Marx on Morgan's book, published as Karl Marx, *Ethnological Notebooks*.
4. Gregor Mendel actually published his findings in an obscure journal published in Brünn (Brno) in 1865, but they were not rediscovered by other biologists until the turn of the century.
5. B. Trigger, *Comment on Tobias, Piltdown, the Case Against Keith*, in *Current Anthropology*, Vol.33, No.3, June 1992, p.275.
6. For an account of all these confusions, see A. Kuper, *The Chosen Primate* (London, 1994), pp.33-47.
7. On the paucity of attempts to explain human evolution until the 1960s, see the introduction to R. Foley (ed.), *Hominid Evolution and Community Ecology* (London, 1984), p.3.
8. C. Stringer, 'Human evolution and biological adaptation in the Pleistocene', in *ibid.*, p.53.
9. N. Roberts, *Pleistocene environment in time and space*, in *ibid.*, p.33.
10. Such a rapid change in the state of knowledge means that otherwise very useful works can be out of date in important respects. This applies, for instance, like Charles Woolfson's Marxist account of much of the material on human evolution, *The Labour Theory of Culture*, although it was only published in 1982 and although its basic argument is very close to the one I present here. While I was writing this article, reports appeared in the scientific press suggesting the famous "Java man" fossil was a million years older than previously thought (*New Scientist*, 7 May, 1994) and that the earliest example yet of an Australopithecine had been found in Ethiopia.
11. And of one of their allegedly "radical" followers, Chris Knight. His book *Blood Relations* (Yale, 1991) is one great big *Just So* story – with lots of factual material distorted in an attempt to justify his claims. See my review, *Blood Simple*, *International Socialism* 54, Spring 1992, p.169.
12. Engels himself does at points in *The Origin of the Family*, but see later.
13. A separate species, *Pan paniscus*, to the common chimp (*Pan troglodytes*).

[14.](#) Although a few zoologists still argue for the orang-utang. See, for instance, J.H.J. Schwartz, *The Red Ape* (London, 1987), reviewed by Peter Andrews in *New Scientist*, 14 May 1987.

[15.](#) S.I. Washburn and R. More, *Only Once*, in P B Hammond, *Physical Anthropology and Archaeology* (New York, 1976), p.18.

[16.](#) R. Ardrey, *African Genesis* (London, 1969), pp.9-10.

[17.](#) C.J. Lumsden and E.O. Wilson, *Genes, Mind and Culture* (Cambridge, Mass, 1981), p.258.

[18.](#) R. Ardrey, *op. cit.*, p.170.

[19.](#) C.J. Lumsden and E.O. Wilson, *op. cit.*, p.354.

[20.](#) These studies have been not been easy to undertake in a scientifically controlled way. They have involved trailing dispersed bands often 40 or more strong through sometimes dense woodland and among tree tops to which humans cannot easily get access, while recognising that the human presence itself can influence ape behaviour (with chimps, for instance, fighting over food when it is handed out once a day from a single human source in a way in which they might not when eating from dispersed plant life). As a result the evidence from the studies is open to different interpretations. They do, however, all point in a very different direction to the old "baboon" model. For discussions taking into account the wild life studies, see I.S. Bernstein and F.O. Smith (eds.), *Primate Ecology and Human Origins* (New York, 1979); W.C. McGrew, *Chimpanzee Material Culture*, in R.A. Foley, *The Origins of Human Behaviour* (London, 1991), pp 16-20. For accounts of original investigations, see J. Goodall, *The Chimpanzees of Gombe* (Cambridge, Mass, 1986); M.P. Giglieri, *The Chimpanzees of Kibale Forest* (New York, 1984); A.F. Dixson, *The Natural History of the Gorilla* (London, 1981); B.M.F. Galiliki and G. Teleki, *Current Anthropology*, June 1981.

[21.](#) Thus aggression between males over mating is more frequent in captivity than in the wild "because of the greater ability of the male to control the female in the cage", according to R.H. Nadler, "Aggression in Common Chimps, Gorillas and Orang-utangs"; female pygmy chimps exercise choice over the males they mate with in the wild in a way in which they cannot while caged, according to J.F. Dahl, *Sexual Aggression in Captive Pygmy Chimps*. Abstracts of both papers appear in *International Journal of Primatology*, 1987, p.451.

[22.](#) For a summary of the evidence on this, see N.M. Tanner, *Becoming Human* (Cambridge, 1981), pp.87-89.

[23.](#) R. Leakey and R. Lewin, *Origins* (London, 1977), p.64.

[24.](#) N.M. Tanner, *Becoming Human*, *op. cit.*, pp.95-96. See also Dixson, *op. cit.*, p.148.

[25.](#) A.F. Dixson, *op. cit.*, p.128. Amazingly, Ardrey admits that the gorilla is not aggressive or driven by a “territorial imperative” – and then concludes it has lost “vital instincts”, that “universal primate compulsions” have faded because the species is “doomed”! R. Ardrey, as above, pp.126-127.

[26.](#) This makes sense. Vegetarian foodstuffs are relatively bulky and found on dispersed trees and bushes. There is no advantage for the individual or the troop either in all eating at the same place. By contrast, meat can only be obtained if several chimps co-operate to kill a single, animal – and that is unlikely to happen unless the prey is shared between them.

[27.](#) See the drawings of Lokelema, a 25-35 year old female, and Bosondro, a 5.5 to 7.5 year old male, in N.M. Tanner, *On Becoming Human, op. cit.*, pp.124-125.

[28.](#) A.L. Zihlman, *Common Ancestors and Uncommon Apes*, in J.R. Durrant, *Human Origins* (Oxford, 1989), p.98.

[29.](#) *Ibid.*, p.98. See also J. Kingdon, *Self Made Man* (London, 1993), p.25. Cronin suggests that molecular evidence points to *pan paniscus* being the “relic stock” from which gorillas, the common chimpanzee and humans all descended, quoted in N.M. Tanner, *On Becoming Human, op. cit.*, p.58.

[30.](#) The Australopithecines are usually divided into three or four species. One, *Australopithecus afarensis* (of which there exists a full skeleton, nicknamed “Lucy”), is seen as a direct ancestor of modern human beings; the others are usually seen as evolutionary dead ends, as creatures that adapted to certain ecological niches but which could not make the transition to new niches when the terrain changed.

[31.](#) Dart, the discoverer of the first Australopithecine skeletons, saw animals bones found with them as evidence of hunting by Australopithecines. But this claim has been challenged since, and the bones are usually thought to have been gathered by hyenas.

[32.](#) There is no universally accepted account of where the ape line ends and the human line begins, nor or how the human line is be distinguished into different species. However, most present day accounts put Australopithecus with the apes and accept the 2 million year old skull 1470 as being from the earliest known human species, *homo habilis*. See, for instance, R. Leakey and R. Lewin, *Origins Revisited* (London, 1993), p.117.

[33.](#) P.V. Tobias, *The brain of homo habilis*, *Journal of Human Evolution*, 1987, p.741; R. Leakey, *Recent fossil finds in Africa*, in J.R. Durant (ed.), *Human Origins* (Oxford, 1989); N.M. Tanner, *On Becoming Human, op. cit.*, p.254.

[34.](#) It is claimed that skeletal remains at Omo in Ethiopia and Klasies River and Border Cave in South Africa are of modern humans living 130,000, and 80,000 to 100,000 years ago. But this evidence is

challenged by people like Milford Wolpoff and Alan Thorne, see, for example, their article, *The case against Eve*, *New Scientist*, 22 June 1991, and the brief summary of critical comments at the 1987 Cambridge conference on human origins in S. McBrearty, *The origins of modern humans*, *Man* 25, 1989, p.131. It is also claimed that remains of anatomically modern humans found at Qafzeh in Palestine are 80,000 to 100,000 years old see, for instance, McBrearty, p.131, who notes, “this is consistent with either an African or a south west Asian origin for modern people”.

35. There is much controversy about the age of various early human remains in the Americas. For one summary of the arguments, see Gordon R. Willey, *The Earliest Americans*, in P.B. Hammond (ed.), *Physical Anthropology and Archaeology*, *op. cit.*.

36. A point made by Graves, *New Models and Metaphors for the Neanderthal Debate*, *Current Anthropology*, Vol.32, No.5, December 1991, p.513. For an account of the discussion from more than half a century ago, see V.G. Childe, *What happened In History* (Harmondsworth, 1954), p.30.

37. This alternative view sometimes called the ‘multi-regionalist view’ and its best known proponent is Milford Wohlhoff.

38. There are doubts about the full “Out of Africa thesis” from people like Roger Leakey who do not ascribe to the full multi-regionalist position either. See, for instance, Leakey, *Recent fossil finds in Africa*, in J.R. Durant, *op. cit.*, p.55: “I believe the world of 100,000 years ago was populated by regionally distinct groups of the same species; I do not favour the idea that the modern form of our species had a single geographic origin ...” The fossil evidence from widely separated parts of the world indicates to me that “*homo sapiens* in its modern form arose from a population of a more archaic form wherever its was established.” His tone is much more measured in his 1993 book, *Origins Reconsidered*, but this book was written jointly with Roger Lewin, who favours the single origins view. The joint authorship probably explains why the book gives such an excellent overview of the debate, see R. Leakey and R. Lewin, *Origins Reconsidered*, 1993, pp.211-235. For other accounts of the controversy see: Roger Lewin, *DNA evidence strengthens Eve hypothesis*, *New Scientist*, 19 October 1991; J Poulton, *All about Eve*, *New Scientist*, 14 May 1987; C Stringer, *The Asian Connection*, *New Scientist*, 17 November 1990; *Scientists Fight It Out and It’s All about Eve*, *Observer*, 16 February 1992; M. Wohlhoff and A. Thome, *The Case Against Eve*, *New Scientist*, 22 July 1991; S. McBrearty, *The Origin of Modern Humans*, *Man* 25, pp.129-143; R. Leakey, *Recent Fossil Finds in Africa*, and C. Stringers, *Homo Sapiens: Single or Multiple Origin*, both in J.R. Davent (ed.), *Human Origins* (Oxford, 1989); P. Mellors and C. Stringer (eds.), *The Human Revolution* (Edinburgh, 1989); P. Graves, *New Models and Metaphors for the Neanderthal*

Debate, Current Anthropology, Vol.32, No.5, December 1991; R.A. Foley, *The Origin of Human Behaviour* (London, 1991), p.83.

39. The “multi-regionalist” view is sometimes seen as somehow providing some justification for racism, since it argues that people in different parts of the world began to develop certain differentiating features hundreds of thousand rather than tens of thousands of years ago. But this is to make an elementary logical mistake. Since it assumes a much slower rate of evolution, and therefore of the evolution of human differences, than the single origins view, it cannot be taken to prove the final differentiation was any greater.

Just as mistaken is the claim that the origin of modern humans in Africa refutes the white racists or even proves that Africans are a superior “race” to “whites”. A racist could easily accept an African origins for modern humans, and then insist that this shows Africans are more “primitive” since they have “evolved less” than “whites”, basing the claim on the argument that if modern man could evolve very quickly into a separate and superior species from the Neanderthals 100,000 or so years ago, why could not white have developed into separate and superior species to blacks 20,000 years ago? This was, in fact, the racist argument during the many decades in which Neanderthals were seen as “primitive ape men”.

Racist arguments are wrong, not because of one or other hypothesis about human origins, but because there is no backing for them in what we know about the genetic and biological make-up of living human beings. The human species cannot be divided into distinct sub-groups, each of which is made of individuals who are distinguished from those in other subgroups by a complete set of genes and physical characteristics. At most it can be divided into groups according to variations in particular individual characteristics such as the amount of melanin in the skin, the tendency of hair to curl, eye colour, blood group, height, nose length, or whatnot. But these groups for particular characteristics are not congruent with each other. The group of people with little melanin (“whites”) contains many people with brown eyes. The group of people with large noses contains people with all levels of melanin. This cross cutting nature of the groupings applies even when particular characteristics tend to be concentrated in certain parts of the world: so the geographic distribution of blood groups does not coincide at all with that for melanin (i.e. skin “colour”), and neither coincides with the distribution of the sickle cell gene (which is found among Greeks, Turks, Italians, Arabs and Africans). So the common sense notion of race – a product of the slave trade and imperialist conquest – cannot be used as a valid scientific category. For a full discussion on these matters, see F.B. Livingstone, *On the non-existence of human races*, in *Current Anthropology*, 3 (1962), p.279; see also the comment on Livingstone’s argument by T. Dobzhansky, in the same place.

It would be a fundamental mistake for anyone to make the argument against racism dependent upon theories about the past which might be thrown into doubt by a new discovery of archaic bones or new techniques for deciphering humanity's genetic past.

[40.](#) R. Ardrey, *African Genesis* (London, 1967), p.20.

[41.](#) R.A. Dart, *The Predatory Transition from Ape to Man*, *International Anthropological and Linguistic Review*, Vol.1, No.4, 1953.

[42.](#) This is the presentation of the argument by two of its opponents, M. Wolpoff and A. Thome (*The Case Against Eves*, *New Scientist*, 22 June 1991). But the same gloss is put on the hypothesis by some of those who support it.

[43.](#) I am simplifying the argument here to make it as easy to follow as possible. In fact, most characteristics are a product of many different pairs of genes. But this does not affect the validity of my point. For a fuller popular account of the most modern genetic theory, see S. Jones, *The Language of Genes* (London, 1993), Ch 2.

[44.](#) Geneticists distinguish between the continuous transformation of a whole species into a new species which succeeds the old through gene selection ("anagenesis") and the branching off of one sub-population to develop into a new species alongside the old ("cladogenesis"). See the introduction to R. Foley (ed.), *Hominid Evolution and Community Ecology*, p.15. Alexeev calls those who see whole human species developing into new species as "lumpers", those who see one small group splitting off to form a new group "splitters". O. Alexeev, *The Origins of the Human Race* (Moscow, n.d.), p.101.

[45.](#) This leads them to point out the "African Eve" and the "multi-regionalist" hypotheses need not necessarily exclude each other: "If genes controlling skull shape are in nuclear DNA, which seems probable, they may locally change frequency as a result of drift or local environmental selection pressures. Thus we see no incompatibility in the African origin of all human mitochondrial tissue and the local continuation of distinctive bone structure. The existence of both certainly strengthens the view of the human race as one single interbreeding population", T. Rowell and M.C. King, letter in **New Scientist**, 14 September 1991.

[46.](#) C. Stringer, *Homo sapiens, single or multiple origin*, in J.R. Durant, **op. cit.**, p.77.

[47.](#) S. McBrearty, **op. cit.**, p.134.

[48.](#) See, for example, P. Graves, **op. cit.**, p.521, and E. Zubrow, quoted in R. Leakey and R. Lewin, **Origins Reconsidered**, p.234-5.

[49.](#) N.M. Tanner, **op. cit.**, p.155.

[50.](#) For summaries of Isaacs' views, and the criticisms made of them by Binford and others, see R.J. Blumenshine, *Breakfast at*

Olorgesalie, **Journal of Human Evolution**, Vol.21, No.4, October 1991, and J.M. Sept, *Was there no place like home?*, **Current Anthropology**, Vol.33, No.2, April 1992.

[51.](#) J.A. Gowlett, *The Mental Abilities of Early Man*, in R. Foley (ed.), **op. cit.**

[52.](#) Quoted in N.M. Tanner, **op. cit.**, p.206 See also P.V. Tobias, *The brain of homo habilis*, **Journal of Human Evolution**, 1987, p.741.

[53.](#) C. Woolfson, **The Labour Theory of Culture**, **op. cit.**, p.3.

[54.](#) J.M. Sept, *Was there no place like home?*, **op. cit.**, and Binford, quoted in R.J. Blumenshine, *Breakfast at Olorgesailie*, p.307.

[55.](#) Argument quoted by P. Graves, **op. cit.**, p.519.

[56.](#) Robert Cargett's view, referred to in R. Leakey and R. Lewin, **Origins Reconsidered**, p.270; see also M.C. Stimer, T.D. White and N. Toth, *The Cultural Significance of Grotta Guaterii Reconsidered*, **Current Anthropology**, Vol.32, No.2, April 1991.

[57.](#) Strangely enough, this argument is put very strongly by a would-be Marxist, Chris Knight, **op. cit.**

[58.](#) Lieberman's arguments are contained in his **Uniquely Human** (Cambridge Mass, 1991).

[59.](#) See Gould and Eldridge, **Paleobiology 3**, 1977; for a criticism of their views, see Cronin and others, **Nature 292**; for a summary of the debate, see C. Stringer, *Human Evolution and Biological Adaptation in the Pleistocene*, in R.A. Foley (ed.), **Hominid Ecology**, p.57.

[60.](#) A. Kuper, **op. cit.**, p.53.

[61.](#) **Ibid.**, p.79.

[62.](#) The importance of twine or string of some sort is stressed by Jonathan Kingdon, whose knowledge of the ecology of African mammals is able to throw enormous light on the conditions in which early human found themselves, see his **Self Made Man**, **op. cit.**, p.51.

[63.](#) W.C. McGrew, *Chimpanzee Material Culture*, in R.A. Foley (ed.), **The Origins of Human Behaviour** (London, 1991, p.19-20.

[64.](#) S.T. Parker and K.R. Gibson, *The Importance of Theory for Reconstructing the Evolution of Language and Intelligence*, in A.B. Chiarelli and R.S. Corrucinia (eds.), **Advanced Primate Biology** (Berlin, 1982), p.49.

[65.](#) T. Wynn, *Archaeological Evidence for Modern Intelligence*, in R.A. Foley (ed.), **The Origins**, **op. cit.**, pp.56-63.

[66.](#) A. Kuper, **op. cit.**, p.89.

[67.](#) P. Graves, **op. cit.**, pp.519-521; R.A. Foley, **The Origins, op. cit.**, p.83.

[68.](#) N. David, *On upper palaeolithic society, ecology and technological change: the Noaillan case*, in Colin Renfrew (ed.), **Explaining Cultural Change** (London, 1973),p.276.

[69.](#) B. Arensburg and B. Vandermeersch claim that the hyoid bone of a Neanderthal from 60,000 years ago found in the Kebara Cave at Mount Carmel in Israel indicates that “the morphological basis for human speech capabilities appears to have been fully developed”, quoted in R. Leakey and R. Lewin, **Origins Reconsidered, op. cit.**, p.272. Lieberman challenges the significance of this find. For his own account of this controversy, see his **Uniquely Human, op. cit.**, p.67.

[70.](#) Lieberman, **ibid.**, p.65.

[71.](#) C. Stringer, *Human Evolution and Biological Adaptation in the Pleistocene*, in R.A. Foley (ed.), **op. cit.**, p.64.

[72.](#) Even Lieberman, with his contention that full use of language was a late development, stresses the role of labour: “The brain mechanisms that control speech probably derive from ones that facilitated precise one-handed manual tasks.”

[73.](#) The point is very important, since one of the best refuters of sociobiology, Stephen Gould, shows some signs in his recent works of a certain “post-modernist” slippage. In **Bully for Brontosaurus** he tends towards acceptance of the view that language arose suddenly 35,000 years ago, while in **Wonderful Life** (London, 1989) he outlines a whole philosophy of history that emphasizes its accident proneness and arbitrariness rather than its intelligibility, as when he writes: “A historical explanation does not rest on direct deductions from laws of nature, but on an unpredictable sequence of antecedent states, where any major change in any step in the sequence would have altered the final result. This final result is therefore dependent, or contingent, upon everything that came before – the unerasable and determining signature of history” (p.283). But, in fact, everything is not “contingent”. In certain conditions, both in the biological world and in history, certain things are likely to happen – faced with mass extinctions of species, certain creatures with a certain genetic make-up are more likely to survive than others, faced with a certain change in the environment certain sorts of human labour and social organisation are more likely to be able to cope than others, faced with certain changes in society classes with certain interests are likely to react in certain ways. That is why we cannot only write history, but use it, within limits, to illuminate the present. I can’t help feeling that Gould himself would have recognised this in the radical 1960s and his present stance is very much a reflection of changing intellectual fashions rather than personal conviction. It should also be added that excellent simplicity of language with which he expresses scientific ideas can disguise the fact

that sometimes the views he expresses are ones which other researchers strenuously resist (as with his particular interpretation of the Burgess Shale findings in **Wonderful Life**).

[74.](#) N.M. Tanner, **op. cit.**, p.56.

[75.](#) R.J. Rayner and others, **Journal of Human Evolution**, Vol.24, p.219, quoted in S. Bunney, *Early Humans were Forest Dwellers*, **New Scientist**, 10 April 1993.

[76.](#) See, for example, the contribution of W.S. Laughlin, *Hunting, its Evolutionary Importance*, in P.B. Hammond, **op. cit.**, p.42.

[77.](#) For instance, L. Binford, **Bones, Ancient Man and Modern Myths** (New York, 1981).

[78.](#) See, for example, B.J. King, *Comment on J.M. Sept, Was there no place like home?*, **Current Anthropology**, Vol.33, No.2, April 1992, p.197.

[79.](#) N.M. Tanner, **op. cit.**, p.139.

[80.](#) **Ibid.**, p.149.

[81.](#) B. Trigger, comment on Tobias, *Pittdown, the Case Against Keith*, in **Current Anthropology**, Vol.33, No.3, June 1992.

II) The origins of classes and the state

The Part Played by Labor ended with a few paragraphs suggesting how, once the human species was established biologically, its labor on the world then led to successive changes in its social institutions. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, written eight years later, built on these insights, developing an overall account of the evolution of class society.

It held that originally humans had lived in societies without private property in the sense in which we use the term today (i.e. no private wealth, as opposed, say, to tooth brushes), without any division into classes, and without any domination of women by men. But changes in the way humans co-operated to produce their livelihoods led to the replacement of these “primitive communist” societies by a succession of forms of class society, of which modern capitalism is the most recent. And with class society came the state and different forms of family in which women were oppressed.

If *The Part Played by Labor* was ignored by established social science, *The Origin of the Family* was systematically denounced. The whole idea of “primitive communism” was dismissed as a fairy story. The experience of the American anthropologist Eleanor Leacock was typical. She tells how it was “generally accepted when I was a student that ‘the communism in living’ referred to by Lewis Henry Morgan and Frederick Engels had in fact never existed”. [\[82\]](#)

In part, the attack on Engels was political, linked with the general attack on socialist ideas. But the attack also corresponded to a general ahistorical, anti-evolutionary trend in sociology and social anthropology. Whereas in the 19th century these disciplines had originated as speculative

attempts to show how all of human history had grown organically into the marvel of modern capitalism, in the 20th century the trend was in the opposite direction – to reject any notion of social evolution whatsoever. There were many accounts of life within individual cultures. There were attempts to show how the different aspects of particular “primitive” societies had the “function” of keeping society going. There were even attempts to provide a “theory” for the functioning of each and every society, of which the most grandiose and the most fruitless were the writings of Talcott Parsons. But there was a repudiation of any attempt to account for social evolution.

Yet throughout this period, the actual researches of social anthropologists proved the existence of vast number of societies in which classes, the state or women’s oppression as we know it did not exist – for instance Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa*, Ruth Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture*, even Bronislaw Malinowski’s *Argonauts of the Western Pacific and Sex and Repression in Savage Societies*, and Meyer Fortes’ and Evans Pritchard’s *African Political Systems*.

Only in one discipline, that of archaeology, did notions of evolution persist. This may have been partly because archaeologists found human bones and artefacts embedded in geological layers laid down at different points in the past and were therefore prone to see some as succeeding others. But it was also because the most eminent figure in British archaeology was a left wing socialist, V Gordon Childe, who was attracted to a Stalinised version of Marxism in the 1930s and used some of Engels’ insights to come to terms with inadequacies in his own previous accounts of cultural change (which had depended on elaborate schemes by which culture “diffused” from one society to another). [83]

Then in the late 1960s the intellectual climate changed – a change which could not be divorced from wider upheavals of the decade. On the edges of the academic world some anthropologists (among them Marxists like Eleanor Leacock and anti-imperialists like Richard Lee) began to work with archaeologists (who were often influenced by Gordon Childe) to elaborate evolutionist interpretations of human society. They effectively re-established the validity of ideas that had been anathematised for two generations, especially the contention that for hundreds of thousands of years humanity lived in societies without classes, private property and the state.

Today, an influential non-Marxist like Ernest Gellner can accept that for a vast period humans lived in as “hunter/gatherers ... defined by the fact that they possess little or no means of producing, accumulating or storing wealth”, in societies “characterized by a low degree of division of labor”. [84] And Richard Lee can argue quite respectably: “Before the rise of the state and the entrenchment of social inequality, people lived in for millennia in small scale kin based social groups, in which the core institutions of economic life included collective or common ownership of land and resources, generalised reciprocity in the distribution of food, and relatively egalitarian political relations.”

This does not mean we can simply take all of Engels arguments and treat them as sacrosanct. He himself noted in 1891 that what he had written in 1884 needed to be revised to take account of “important progress” in knowledge. And we live not seven, but more than 100 years on from that. As Gailey has noted, in a study very much in the tradition laid down by Engels, much of the “ethnographic” (i.e. anthropological) data in *The Origin of the Family* has been overtaken by further

researches. [85] There is a core to Engels' argument in *The Origin* which remains extremely valuable. But it is necessary to disinter it from a range of factually incorrect data and speculative arguments which have been treated as gospel since by some would-be Marxists and used by opponents to discredit all of Engels' insights. [86]

Primitive communism

Engels' starting point was a reformulation of the point he and Marx had made back in 1845-6, that the ways human beings secure a living from nature determine how they co-operate with each other and so lay the basis for societies in which they live:

The determining factor in history is, in the last resort, the production and reproduction of immediate life... On the one hand the production of the means of subsistence, of food, clothing and shelter and the tools required therefore; on the other the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social institutions under which men of a definite epoch and definite country live are conditioned by both kinds of production ... [87]

Morgan, quite independently of Marx and Engels, had come to a somewhat similar conclusion: [88]

Mankind are the only beings who may be said to have gained an absolute control over the production of food ... Without laying the basis of subsistence mankind could not have propagated themselves into other areas... and ultimately over the whole surface of the earth ...

It is accordingly probable that the great epochs of human progress have been identified more or less directly with the enlargement of the sources of subsistence.[89]

Engels followed Morgan in dividing human history into three great stages – savagery, barbarism and civilisation. Each had “a distinct culture and mode of life more or less special and peculiar to itself” and rested on a particular way of achieving a livelihood: [90]

Savagery – the period in which the appropriation of natural products, ready for use, predominated; the things produced by man were, in the main, instruments that facilitated this appropriation.

Barbarism – the period in which knowledge of cattle breeding and land cultivation was acquired, in which methods of increasing the productivity of nature through human activity, were learnt.

Civilization – the period in which knowledge of the further working-up of natural products, of industry proper, and of art, was acquired. [91]

The terms themselves reflected the prejudices of the late 19th century, of the idea of so-called “primitive” societies as “savage” and “barbaric”. But Morgan and Engels, who both by and large rejected those prejudices, were able to use these distinctions to grasp what is central to any scientific study of human social development: the distinction between societies where human beings get a livelihood through gathering berries, nuts and roots and hunting wild creatures (so called “hunter-gatherer” or “foraging” societies); societies where human beings cultivate the land and herd mammals (“agricultural societies”); and societies which are to a greater or lesser extent urbanised (“civilisation” in the literal sense of being based on towns). [92] This in turn enabled Engels to challenge many orthodox prejudices about society.

Most reactionary thinkers claim “primitive societies” are markedly hierarchical, under the sway of brutal, aggressive

and murderous males. [93] Since these societies have existed much longer than “civilisation”, it is said to follow that human nature is likewise brutal, aggressive and murderous.

Engels’ view was very different. He argued that early societies were organised along completely different lines to class societies, using as his model Morgan’s account of the North American Iroquois. There was no private property in them and no division into classes. And they were not held together by a state in the sense of “a special public authority separated from the totality of those concerned in each case”. Instead, they were organised through extended, interlinked “consanguine” groupings (that is, of people who were related to each other, or at least thought they were) – groupings which Engels called “gentes”, “clans” or “phatries” and which modern anthropologists usually call “lineages”:

This gentile constitution is wonderful in all its childlike simplicity. Everything runs smoothly without soldiers, gendarmes or police; without nobles, kings, governors, prefects or judges; without prisons, without trials. All quarrels and disputes are settled by the whole body of those concerned ... Although there are many more affairs in common than at present – the household is run in common and communistically by a number of families, the land is tribal property, only the small gardens being temporarily assigned to the household – still, not a bit of our extensive and complicated machinery of administration is required.

There can be no poor and needy – the communistic household and the gens know their responsibility towards the aged, the sick and those disabled in war. All are free and equal, including the women. There is as yet no room for slaves nor, as a rule, for the subjugation of alien tribes ...

This is what mankind and human society were like before class divisions arose ... [\[94\]](#)

Modern studies of surviving hunter-gatherer and early agricultural societies have upheld the essential core of Engels' account. Hunting-gathering peoples live in what are usually called "band societies" – based on loose knit groups of 30 or 40 people which may, periodically, get together with other groups into bigger gatherings up to a couple of a hundred strong. There is no formal leadership, let alone class division within these societies.

Individual decision makings are possible for both men and women with respect to their daily routines ... Men and women alike are free to decide how they will spend each day: whether to go hunting or gathering, and with whom ... [\[95\]](#)

There was no differential access to resources through private land ownership and no specialization of labor beyond that of sex ... The basic principle of egalitarian band societies was that people made decisions about the activities for which they were responsible. [\[96\]](#)

Individual band members enjoy a level of autonomy infinitely greater than the mass of people in class societies. But it is not accompanied by selfishness in their relations with each other. On the contrary, the stress is on generosity, on individuals helping each other:

Food is never consumed alone by a family: it is always shared out among members of a living group or band ... Each member of the camp receives an equitable share ... This principle of generalized reciprocity has been reported of hunter-gatherers in every continent and in every kind of environment. [\[97\]](#)

There is a very strong disdain for the competitive notions which are taken for granted in our society. As Richard Lee tells of the !Kung [\[98\]](#) people of the Kalahari (the so-called "Bushmen"):

The !Kung are a fiercely egalitarian people, and they have evolved a series of important cultural practices to maintain this equality, first by cutting down to size the arrogant and boastful, and second by helping those down on their luck to get back in the game ... Men are encouraged to hunt as well as they can, but the correct demeanor for the successful hunter is modesty and understatement. [\[99\]](#)

One of the !Kung reports:

Say a man has been hunting. He must not come home and announce like a braggart. "I have killed a big one in the bush!" He must first sit down in silence until I or someone else comes up to his fire and asks, "What did you do today?" He replies quietly, "Ah, I'm no good at hunting. I saw nothing at all ... maybe just a tiny one". Then I smile, because I know he has killed something big. [\[100\]](#)

An early Jesuit noted of another hunter-gathering people, the Montagnais of Canada: "The two tyrants who provide hell and torture for many of our Europeans do not reign in their great forests, – I mean ambition and avarice ... as they are contented with a mere living, not one of them has given himself to the devil to acquire wealth". [\[101\]](#) There are no chiefs or bosses in such bands. Thus the Mbuti Pygmies of the Congo:

never have chiefs ... In each aspect of Pygmy life there might be one or two men or women who were more prominent than others, but usually for good practical reasons ... The maintenance of law was a co-operative affair ... The more serious of crimes, such a theft, were dealt with by sound thrashing which was administered co-operatively by all who felt inclined to participate, but only after the entire camp had been involved in discussion of the case ... Pygmies dislike and avoid personal authority. [\[102\]](#)

Among the !Kung “patterns of leadership do exist”, but they are very different to power as we know it. In discussions the opinions of some individuals tend to have more impact than others. “These individuals are usually older people who have lived here the longest ... and have some personal qualification worthy of note as a speaker, an arguer, a ritual specialist, or a hunter.” But,

Whatever their skills !Kung leaders have no formal authority. They can only persuade, but never enforce their will on others ... None is arrogant, overbearing, boastful or aloof. In !Kung terms, these traits absolutely disqualify a person as a leader ... Another trait emphatically not found among traditional camp leaders is a desire for wealth or acquisitiveness. [\[103\]](#)

What is more – and on this Engels was wrong – there was very little in the way of warfare among hunter-gatherers. There might occasionally be clashes between different bands, but these were of marginal importance. [\[104\]](#) Among the !Kung, for instance, there is a sense in which a water hole and the area of land around it is “owned” by a group and passed from generation to generation. But other groups may use the land, provided they ask permission. “Disputes between groups over food are not unknown among the !Kung, but they are rare ...” [\[105\]](#)

Such evidence refutes completely the claims that the whole prehistory of humanity, from the time of the Australopithecines right through the emergence of literacy, was based on a “killing imperative”, that “hunter-gatherer bands fought over water holes that tended all too often to vanish under the baking African sun”, that we are all “Cain’s children”, that “human history has turned on the development of superior weapons ... for genetic necessity”, and that, therefore, only a thin veneer of “civilisation”

conceals an instinctive “delight in massacre, slavery, castration and cannibalism.” [\[106\]](#)

The “primitive communist” attributes of band societies can only be understood by looking at the way they subsist. The normal size of bands is restricted by the need to find enough food each day in the area of their camp. Within that area, the individual members will continually be moving, from one source of plant food to another or in pursuit of animals. And the band as a whole will have to move on every so often, as the food supplies in a locality get used up. The continual movement precludes any accumulation of wealth by any band member, since everything has to be easily carried. At most an individual may have a spear or bow and arrow, a carrying bag or a few trinkets. “The ultimate value is freedom of movement ... the desire to be free from the burden and responsibilities which would interfere with the society’s itinerant existence.” [\[107\]](#)

The stress on the value of generosity follows from the way the hunters and gatherers are intensely dependent on each other. The gatherers usually supply the most reliable source of food, the hunters that which is most valued. So those who specialise in hunting depend for their daily survival on the generosity of those who gather, while those who specialise in gathering – and those who are temporarily unsuccessful in the hunt – rely on valued additions to their diet from those who manage to kill animals. And the hunt itself does not usually consist of the individual male hero going off to make a kill, but rather a group of men (sometimes with the auxiliary assistance of women and children) working together to chase and trap a prey.

There is nearly always a division of labour in these societies between the men and the women, with the men doing most of the hunting and the women most of the

gathering. This is because a woman who is pregnant or breast feeding a child could only take part in the hunt by exposing it to dangers – and thus threatening the reproduction of the band. But this division does not amount to male dominance as we know it in present day society. Both females and males take part in key decisions, such as when to move camp or whether to leave one band and join another. And the conjugal unit itself is loosely structured. The spouses in any of these societies can separate without suddenly jeopardising their own livelihood or that of their children. [108]

Thus Engels was right in insisting that there was no systematic domination of women in these societies. However, he was probably wrong in one important detail – he overestimated the role played by lineages in most hunting gathering societies. The bands of surviving hunter-gatherers are loose and flexible. People are free to enter and leave them. They are not tightly controlled by lineage groups, even though the members of a band will often be related to each other and, through intermarriage, have loose ties to other bands. [109]

Engels' belief in the power of the gens or clan among *all existing* "primitive societies" was a result of the anthropological knowledge of his time. He relied mainly on Morgan's first hand account of the Iroquois and his second hand account of Polynesian society – both early agricultural (or "horticultural") societies – rather than hunter-gatherers, about which neither Engels nor Morgan knew very much.

Existing hunter-gatherer societies are not necessarily the same as those all of humanity once lived in. Peoples like the !Kung, the Mbuti, the Eskimos and the Australian aborigines have a history as long as our own – and their history will have been influenced first by the impact of

neighboring agricultural societies and then, traumatically, by Western colonialism. [110] So their patterns of social life could be different in many respects to those of our common forebears. These may possibly have had strong lineage structures, as Engels thought, but we have no evidence to prove it.

On the question of egalitarianism, however, we are on much firmer ground. The stress on sharing, the strong co-operative values and the flexible make-up of the bands must have characterized the life of our forebears for tens of thousands of years, just as it characterizes modern hunter-gatherers. These values fit perfectly with the needs of the nomadic, hunter-gatherer life. They are not the sorts of values found in class societies, and so their existence among surviving hunter-gatherers cannot be a result of external pressures. Lee quite rightly stresses, “for all its economic and military power and its near monopoly of the ideological apparatus, the capitalist state has not succeeded in eradicating innumerable pockets of communalism [primitive communism]”. [111] This in itself points to primitive communism as a stage prior to the rise of class society, as the condition of all of humanity at one stage in our history.

This is of immense importance for any arguments of “human nature”. For if such a nature exists it was molded, by natural selection, during the 2.5 million year long epoch of hunting and gathering between the first appearance of *homo habilis* and the first planting of crops by 8th millennium BC *homo sapiens*. Lee is quite right to insist:

It is the long experience of egalitarian sharing that has molded our past. Despite our seeming adaptation to life in hierarchical societies, and despite the rather dismal track record of human rights in many parts of the world, there are signs that humankind retains a deep-rooted sense of egalitarianism, a deep rooted commitment to the norm of reciprocity, a deep rooted ... sense of community ... [112]

The first agriculturalists

More than 99.9 percent of humanity today live in societies that have been molded by a change that began about 10,000 years ago. It involved the establishment of settled villages, the use of new, more varied and more intricate kits of stone, wooden and bone tools (hence the term “Neolithic”, meaning “new stone age”), the use of clay pots for storage and cooking, and, perhaps most importantly, the first cultivation of the soil.

Today this change is usually referred to by Gordon Childe’s term “neolithic revolution”. Engels equated it with the transition from “savagery” to “barbarism”. He argued it began with the introduction of pottery and then continued in the Eastern hemisphere (Eurasia and Africa) “with the domestication of animals”, and in the Americas “with the cultivation of edible plants by means of irrigation and with the use of adobe (bricks dried in the sun) and stone for building”. [113] In the Eastern hemisphere, but not in the Americas, there followed an “upper stage of barbarism” which “begins with the smelting of iron”. Here for the first time we encounter the iron ploughshare drawn by cattle, making possible land cultivation on wide scale and, in the conditions of the time, virtually unlimited increase in the means of subsistence. And “in connection with this we find also the clearing of the forests and their transformation into arable and pasture land – which again would have been impossible without the iron axe and spade. But with this there also came a rapid increase in population and dense population in small areas ...” [114] These changes in production during “barbarism”, Engels went on to argue, laid the basis for the first development of class society:

To whom did this new wealth belong? Originally, doubtless to the gens. But private ownership of herds must have developed at an early

stage ... On the threshold of authenticated history we find everywhere the herds are already the separate property of the family chiefs, in exactly the same way as were the artistic products of barbarism, metal utensils, article of luxury and, finally, human cattle – the slaves.

For now slavery too had been invented. The slave was of no value [while] human labor power at this stage yielded no noticeable surplus as yet over the cost of its maintenance. With introduction of cattle breeding, of metal working, of weaving and, finally, of field cultivation, this changed ... [\[115\]](#)

Engels' account is wrong on a number of significant points. Class society and civilisation did develop in central and south America as well as in Eurasia and Africa. Cultivation of the land (although not using the plough), began at about the same time as the domestication of animals, not after it. The first form of class society was not slavery, which seems to have been a marginal form of exploitation of the oppressed classes until Graeco-Roman times. Yet his overall picture of the rise of class society is basically correct.

The whole organisation of society did undergo radical change as human groups developed new ways of getting a livelihood. At different times they turned from hunting-gathering to cultivation, independently of each other (in several regions of the Americas, at least three distinct parts of Africa, the uplands of Iraq, the Indus valley, Indochina, the valleys of central Papua-New Guinea, and China [\[116\]](#)). And where cumulative change went furthest it did lead to the first division into classes, the first states and the first systematic oppression of women. But the full change took place over a very long period of time – 4,000 or 5,000 years in the most studied case, that of Mesopotamia (present day Iraq). And in most societies it never got this far, so that even a century and a half ago millions of people were still living in non-class agricultural societies.

The first form of agriculture (often called “horticulture”) involved clearing the land (by cutting away at woodland and brush with axes and then burning off the rest), and then planting and harvesting seeds or tubers, using a hoe and or a digging stick. Usually, after a couple of years the fertility of the land would be exhausted. It would be allowed to return to the wild and a new area was cleared for cultivation. The crop yield from a given area of land was not nearly as great from this “slash and burn” shifting agriculture as from later forms based on irrigation or the plough, but it was considerably greater than to be obtained by most forms of hunting and gathering.

This in itself had immediate social consequences. People no longer needed to be on the move all the time, as with hunting and gathering; indeed, it would have been disastrous to move between sowing and harvesting. For the first time, it made sense to construct heavy clay pots and to store things in them. And the local food supply was often enough to sustain five or ten times as many people as before, so permitting village life for the first time.

Changes also, necessarily, took place in the internal structure of each social group. On the one hand, the individual household became less reliant on co-operation with the rest of the group for obtaining its subsistence: group-wide co-operation was often needed in clearing the land, but the each household could sow and harvest its own patch of cleared land by itself. On the other hand, there had to be ways of ensuring that households with lots of labor but few mouths provided assistance to those which have lots mouth but little labor – especially those with lots of young children. [117] For children represented the future labor supply of the village as a whole, and if they were not adequately cared for, the group itself would eventually die out.

The move to agriculture produced, in fact, a very important change in the group's needs when it came to *reproduction*. Under hunting and gathering, the need to carry children, both on the daily round of gathering and on the periodic moves of the whole camp, led to a tight restriction on the birth rate. Women could not afford to have more than one child who required carrying at a time, and so births were spaced every three or four years (if necessary through sexual abstinence, abortion or infanticide). With fixed village life based on agriculture, by contrast, not only did the child not have to be carried after it was a few months old, but the greater the number of children, the greater the area of land that could be cleared and cultivated in future. Provision for reproduction became central to the dynamics of the society.

Something else had to be provided for if the group was to flourish – some new mechanism of social control. A big dispute in a band of hunter-gatherers can be solved simply by the band splitting or by individuals leaving it. This option is hardly open to a group of agriculturalists once they have cleared and planted their land. They can only survive argument, conflicts and infractions of social norms if there is a much more developed superstructure of control than among hunter-gatherers.

This can explain the much enhanced role of lineages. They bind people much more tightly in early agricultural than in most hunter-gatherer societies. People now have clearly spelt out sets of rights and obligations vis-a-vis members of other households with whom they are related, either directly through kinship or indirectly through intermarriage or age group associations. Individuals who haven't got enough food can expect to get it from those designated as "uncles" or "cousins" in their lineage (not just immediate relatives, also second, third, even fourth cousins

and so on). And the way to attain social prestige is to have enough surplus food at one's disposal to enable one to be a big giver.

The lineages, by preventing any individual household going hungry, ensure the reproduction of the group as a whole. But that is not all. As they become responsible for exercising social control over their members, they become much more formalized in their mode of operation. Decision making begins to be concentrated in the hands of some members of the lineage – usually those who are among the eldest. And in many societies things go a stage further so that some lineages come to have more prestige than others. The point can even be reached, as in Tonga even before contact with Europeans, in which the leading people (“chiefs”) in prestigious lineages are able to escape from the burden of productive work and begin to try to turn themselves into an exploiting class. [\[118\]](#)

The first hierarchies

Why does this differentiation happen? The most plausible explanation goes along the following lines: Once human groups settle down in one place they can begin to store considerable quantities of food and other valuable. Those lineages which are most successful at this – even if purely for accidental reasons, like being lucky enough to cultivate land which is more fertile than the average – will be able to make bigger gifts than other lineages, and so gain greater prestige. And, similarly, within each lineage, certain households will be able to become wealthier than others and again earn great prestige. The very values of generosity built into such a society encourage a differentiation of status.

This leads to the emergence of what anthropologists call “big men”, individuals who gain prestige because of the

wealth at their disposal. Yet, and this is very important, these individuals do not use this wealth for their own well being. They gain prestige precisely because they give it to others.

In its most developed form, a whole system of collecting and giving away wealth arises. “Big men” use their prestige to gather in their hands any surplus left in the hands of other members of their lineage. But they then reinforce their prestige by giving the surplus back, through great ceremonial feasts for those who are directly and indirectly related to them. And a particular lineage can raise its prestige above that of other lineages, to whom it is connected by intermarriage, by giving feasts for those lineages.

The system is one in which some individuals and some lineages have higher prestige than others, in some cases culminating in establishment of hereditary chiefs and chiefly lineages. But it is not a class system, in which one section of society consumes the surplus which another section produces. Despite the establishment of hereditary or semi-hereditary hierarchies in terms of prestige, the mode of production remains communal, with consumption patterns marked by egalitarianism and sharing.

Richard Lee notes that “a large number of pastoral and horticultural societies in the third world share the same traits” of “communal property concepts” as hunter-gatherer societies. “In numerous chiefdoms described by anthropologists in Africa, Oceania and lowland South America one notes, for example, much of what tribute the chiefs receive is redistributed to subjects, and the chiefs’ power is subject to checks and balances by the forces of popular opinion and institutions.” [119] Thus among the Nambikwara of South America:

The chief must not just do well. He must try, and his group will expect him to try, to do better than the others ... Although the chief does not seem to be in a privileged position from the material point of view, he must have under his control sufficient surplus quantities of food, tools, weapons and ornaments ... When an individual, a family or a band as a whole, wishes or needs something, it is to the chief that an appeal is made. Generosity is, therefore, the first attribute to be expected of a new chief. [120]

This can even lead to the leader having a harder time materially than those under him. Thus among the New Guinea Busama, the clubhouse leader “has to work harder than anyone else to keep up his stocks of food ... he must toil early and late – ‘his hands are never free from earth, and his forehead continually drips with sweat’.” [121] In such societies many core values remain much closer to those of hunter-gatherer societies than to those we take for granted in class societies. Thus, an early 18th century observer of the Iroquois horticulturalists noted, “If a cabin of hungry Iroquois meets another whose provisions are not entirely exhausted, the latter share with the newcomers ... without waiting to be asked, although they expose themselves thereby to the same dangers of perishing as those whom they help ...” [122] And a similar story emerges in a classic study of the Nuer pastoralists. [123]

Yet, these communal, egalitarian values often face the beginnings of a challenge, with household trying to evade their wider obligations in a way that does not happen among hunter-gatherers. Hidden beneath the egalitarian, communal ideology are often found incipient tendencies to place the needs of the household above the needs of the community. The Bemba in East Africa, for instance, will hide beer when a visit from an elderly relative takes place, telling him, “Alas, we are poor wretches, we have nothing to eat”. [124] Among the Maoris there is a saying, “Broil your

rat (a favourite dish) with its fur on, lest you be disturbed by someone”. [125] After a hurricane caused acute shortages among the Tikopia – a people noted for their generosity – households began to avoid eating when people with whom they were meant to share were present. [126]

This contradictory behaviour is not the result of some inherently selfish “human nature”, but of a contradiction built into the productive system. Production itself does not rely on co-operation from the whole group, as in hunter-gatherer societies, but is based, by and large, on the care of crops and animals by the individual household. [127] The lineage and group are concerned with redistribution and reproduction, rather than production. As Karen Sachs puts it, there is a “contradiction” in this “mode of production” between lineage-based “relations of production” and “forces of production” that mainly depend on households. [128]

The survival of society depends on *both* the individual concerns of households which sustain production and the co-operative, altruistic, sharing within the group which ensures reproduction. And this means that the household can put up resistance to its obligations to the wider society if conditions arise in which its own survival is at stake. It is not a question of individual benefit versus social welfare, but of the needs of one element in the mode of production clashing with other elements.

Usually the household succeeds in reconciling the contradictory pressures, and the system does not break down. But it not difficult to see how internal changes (new productive techniques) or external pressures (natural catastrophes, exhaustion of the land, the impact of other societies) could create conditions of acute crisis in which the old order would no longer be able to continue, leading some wealthy household or lineages to break completely with

their old obligations. What had been wealth to be given away to others in return for prestige then becomes wealth to consume while others suffer. “In advanced forms of chieftainship ... what begins with the would-be headman putting his production to others’ benefit ends, to some degree, with others putting their production to the chief’s benefit.” [\[129\]](#)

There is another very important change in the transition from hunter-gathering to agriculture. For the first time systematic warfare makes sense. Wealth that is stored is wealth that can be stolen from other groups of agriculturalists. Whereas clashes between rival bands are very rare among hunter-gatherers, “Organised warfare for the purpose of defending or expanding territory is endemic ... among horticulturalists”. [\[130\]](#)

But warfare allows some individuals and lineages to gain great prestige as they concentrate loot and the tribute from rival societies into their hands. Hierarchy becomes more pronounced, even if it remains hierarchy associated with the ability to give things to others. And to this extent, warfare is a factor opening up the possibility of class relations emerging in the face of some great social crisis.

Thus, Christine Ward Gailey suggests the attempts between 1100 and 1400 AD by the highest ranking groups of chiefs in Tonga to cut themselves off from their obligations to lower ranking people – to attempt to form themselves into a ruling class – were a result of their victory in battle over the inhabitants of other islands.

The origins of agriculture

One problem has long perplexed those who have studied the transition from hunting-gathering to agriculture. Why did people make the change? It used to be thought the change must have led to such improvements in people's lives as to make them readily accept it. But today there is a lot of evidence refuting any such simple notion. In many hunter-gatherer and horticultural societies people have actually worked less and been at least as well fed as in societies based on intensive agriculture. Thus the !Kung of the Kalihari desert may seem to have lived in a region devoid on any great resources to sustain human life. But they enjoyed a balanced diet and a calorific input rather higher than the average in modern India – and did not need to work more than three or four hours a day. They seem to have lived in what Marshall Sahlins has called, “the original affluent society”. [\[131\]](#)

This explains why many hunter-gatherer societies have refused to make the transition to agriculture, even when they have been fully aware of certain agricultural techniques. They identify agriculture with an unnecessarily heavy workload.

More recent accounts of the transition from hunter-gatherer to agricultural societies focus, instead, on how certain changes could have produced tensions in hunter-gatherer societies before the transition to agriculture. In particular they stress that not all hunter-gatherer societies are continually on the move. Some have found a more or less static source of food to sustain them in fixed camps, which sometimes develop into villages several hundred strong. This, for instance, is true of the original inhabitants of the north west pacific coast of America, who sustain themselves from plentiful supplies of fish. Significantly, in

such societies there is already some incipient social stratification: because a surplus can be stored and because a relatively large social group has to be held together, some people gain prestige (although not power or higher living standards) by fulfilling these tasks. [132] At the same time, however, life for the majority of people has advantages over that with nomadic hunter-gathering. Young children do not repeatedly have to be carried long distances, and so there is no longer any need to space births, whether by abortion and infanticide or by abstention from sex. And the larger permanent social groupings provide more opportunities for socialising, opportunities that are usually restricted among nomadic hunter-gatherers to the few weeks in the year in which several different bands camp together.

If life is easier for nomadic hunter-gatherers than for agriculturalists, it is easier still for non-nomadic hunter-gatherers, providing they have a large, static food supply. It is not surprising that some nomadic hunter-gatherers should opt for the new way of life and that under such conditions, there should be rapid population growth.

However, the new way of life depended on the ready availability of copious local supplies of wild foodstuffs. If these supplies disappeared for some reason, people faced immense problems. Their communities were too large for them to return to a way of life based on small, wandering bands. That would involve a complete break with an established way of life, massive social disruption, the learning (or relearning) of survival techniques – and probably starvation on a wide scale at first. And so they had an incentive to look to new ways of getting food, even if this involved an intensification of work.

This is what seems to have happened in the fertile crescent of the Middle East. About 11,000 BC climatic

conditions in the region changed in such a way as to provide local “Natufian” peoples with copious source of both meat (from herds of antelopes) and wild grain, so that they could begin to live in large, sedentary groups (villages) without having to abandon the hunter-gatherer mode of subsistence. But after about three millennia, ecological conditions changed again, and they could no longer rely on the wild herds and wild grains to feed them. “The imbalance between population and resources is reflected in dietary stress, female infanticide and declining meat consumption.” [\[133\]](#)

At this point human survival for the inhabitants of the society depended upon changing their way of life. There were two directions in which change could go: towards putting effort into cultivating the crops and herding the animals they had previously collected and hunted, or, alternatively, to an abandonment of village life by splitting into small bands which would wander the land seeking naturally occurring food supplies which were not to be had close at hand. In fact, Natufians seem to have gone in both directions. Some used their knowledge of plant and animal life to undertake the planting of seeds and the domestication of herds, others reverted to the life style of their nomadic ancestors. We do not know on what basis individual groups made their choice. But it seems likely that those that adopted farming did so by accepting a reorganisation of the local economy under the direction of those prestigious individuals previously responsible for the collecting and redistribution of surpluses. [\[134\]](#)

Such an account explains why the transition to agriculture took place, independently, in so many different parts of the world. [\[135\]](#) It was the result of the emergence of hunter-gatherer societies which became so successful at exploiting local food resources that they grew too big to adapt when, after hundreds or thousands of years, those

resources dried up. At that point they had either to change or die.

Once the transition to agriculture had taken place among any group in a region, something irreversible had happened. The populations of those societies practising agriculture began to grow much more rapidly than those of societies that still depended on hunting and gathering. The surpluses which their sedentary life style enabled them to store provided the basis for increased specialisation in the making of artefacts, initially of stone, later of copper and brass. And among the new artefacts were the weapons they made and stockpiled for fighting each other – weapons that could also be used to drive neighbouring hunter-gatherers from the most productive soil. The new farming societies began to spread out from their place of origin, budding out into new areas as they grew, conquering or converting the hunter-gatherers around them. So, for instance, farming spread from the fertile crescent uplands some 8,000 to 9,000 years ago across the plains of the region and through south east Europe 7,000 to 8,000 years ago and then into north Europe by 4,500 to 4,000 years ago. [\[136\]](#)

Hunting and gathering did not disappear everywhere. Ecological niches with abundant wild animal life remained in the middle of agricultural areas, allowing the survival for millennia of societies that opted to stay with hunting and gathering. And groups of agriculturalists sometimes found it expedient to return to hunting and gathering as they moved into new areas. Nevertheless, there is no mistaking the overall trend towards the dominance of whole regions by agriculture, with the remaining hunter-gatherers being driven into the areas not suitable for agriculture – the forests, the deserts, the arctic wastes.

The first class societies

Very few agricultural societies developed into full class societies as a result of their own internal development. This began to happen in Mesopotamia about 6,000 years ago, in Egypt, Iran, the Indus Valley and China several hundred years later, on the middle Nile (in what is now Sudan) and the eastern Mediterranean a thousand years after this, and in Meso-America, the Andean region, the Ethiopian highlands, and west and south east Africa between 2,500 and 1,000 years ago. [137] In all these cases the main pressures for the development of a new social order were internally generated. But in most other parts of the world external pressures were necessary. The old purely horticultural or agricultural societies continued to persist until foreign trade, military defeat or colonisation led to change. This was true, for instance, of northern Europe until between 2,500 and 1,000 years ago, and of highland New Guinea right through until the early 1930s.

Engels associated the rise of class society with intensive agriculture and the first use of metals. Gordon Childe accepted a similar view, calling the process of change, the “urban revolution” (although, unlike Engels, he recognised that it followed thousands of years after the first settled agriculture of the “neolithic revolution”).

On the one hand, the population growth associated with early agriculture eventually ran, in every locality, into limits in the amount of land that could be cultivated using existing techniques. “The growth of the neolithic populations was eventually limited by contradiction in the new economy.” This encouraged an increasing resort to warfare, with “stone battle axes and flint daggers” becoming increasingly common in “the later stages of the neolithic revolution in

Europe". On the other, the self sufficient neolithic village could never escape from the threat of natural catastrophe:

All its labours and plans might be frustrated by events still beyond its control: droughts or floods, tempests or frosts, blights or hailstorms, might annihilate crops and herds ... Its reserves were too small to tide it over any prolonged succession of disasters.

The urban revolution eventually offered a way out of both problems:

The worse contradictions of the neolithic economy were transcended when farmers were persuaded or compelled to wring from the soil a surplus over and above their domestic requirements and when this surplus was made available to support new economic classes not directly engaged in producing their own food.

But this, in turn, required technical advance – “additions to the stock of science”:

The thousand or so years immediately preceding 3000 BC were perhaps more fertile in fruitful inventions and discoveries than any period in human history prior to the 16th century AD. Its achievements made possible that economic reorganisation of society I term the “urban revolution”. [\[138\]](#)

The advances in technology included the discovery of how to smelt copper and then of how to alloy it with tin to produce bronze, the use of the plough instead of the hoe and of animal power (at first oxen) to drag it through the soil, the employment of the first wheeled carts (and war chariots), the building of regular channels and dams for irrigation, new ways of building and sailing of boats.

All of these changes involved what Childe calls “modifications in social and economic relations” – changes

in the relations of people with each other, as well as in their relations with nature. Metal smelting was a much more skilled occupation than pot making, and came to depend on groups of highly skilled specialists, passing the secrets of their trade on from generation to generation. The use of the plough tended to increase the division of labour between the sexes, since it was a form of heavy labour not easily done by women bearing or nursing children. The building and maintenance of regular irrigation channels tended to mean the co-operation of dozens or even hundreds of households, and encouraged a division between those who supervised work and those who undertook it.

The use of wheeled carts and sailing craft encouraged growing trade between widely separated groups of agriculturalists – giving people access to a range of useful things they could not produce themselves. The increased productivity of labour as a result of these changes enabled the average size of settlement to rise enormously, until in some regions the villages of the neolithic period gave way to cities. And the enlarged surplus resulting from the increased productivity provided an added motive for war preparations.

Gordon Childe describes the transformation that occurred in Mesopotamia, as people settled in the river valley of the Tigris and Euphrates. They found land which was extremely fertile, but which could only be cultivated by “drainage and irrigation works”, dependent upon “co-operative effort”. [\[139\]](#) A much more recent study of Mesopotamia by Maisels suggests that people who had already learned agriculture on naturally irrigated land found, in fourth millennium BC, “the river channels flowed between levees [mud banks] which had only to be locally breached to extend the productivity of nearby areas. High and sustained levels of output could thus be attained given

the right agricultural conditions.” But not all this increased output was consumed immediately. Some was put into reserve:

Surpluses were required for exchange against pastoral and other subsistence products, while further stores had to be held against years of drought, pests, or growing season damage, for instance by storms ... Such reserves ... mean permanent means of organising production and consumption so there is always a safety margin.[\[140\]](#)

Over thousands of years the agricultural settlements based on the new methods of irrigation grew into towns, and the towns into cities. The storage of grain came to require sizeable buildings which, standing out from the surrounding land, symbolised for people the continuity and preservation of social life. Those who supervised the granaries became the most prestigious group in society. In short, temples emerged which were watched over by priests. [\[141\]](#)

With the foundation of a permanent grouping of priestly administrators something else, of enormous historical importance, arose: a system of signs for keeping account of society's wealth, the first alphabet. As Gordon Childe put it:

To keep account of the receipts and expenditure of the deity the priestly corporations administering the temple estate devised and sanctioned a system of conventional signs – i.e. writing; the only written documents [until 2800 BC] are account tables. Thus the accumulation of a substantial social surplus in the temple treasuries – or rather granaries – was actually the occasion of the cultural advance that we have taken as the criterion of civilisation.

The deity may be regarded as a representative or projection of the community, and the priests who served him would therefore be servants of the community, though doubtless better paid than the rest of god's people. [\[142\]](#)

Over the generations, the priestly layer became increasingly separate from the rest of society, until it formed a class with quite distinct interests. Gordon Childe describes how, “Favoured priests practised various forms of extortion (overcharging for burials, for instance) and treated the god’s (i.e. the community’s) land, cattle and servants as their own private property and personal slaves”, quoting an edict of the city of Lagash from around 2500 BC:

The high priest came into the garden of the poor and took wood therefrom. If a great man’s house adjoined that of an ordinary citizen’, the former might annexe the humble dwelling without paying any proper compensation to its owner.

“This archaic text”, he concludes, “gives us unmistakable glimpses of a real conflict of class ... The surplus produced by the new economy was, in fact, concentrated in the hands of a relatively small class.” [\[143\]](#)

In Mesopotamia, the first exploited class were not slaves conquered in war, as originally suggested by Engels (and accepted to some extent by Gordon Childe), but “*erin*” people, formerly independent peasant households who had been forced into dependency on more powerful groupings, especially the temple, and who worked for rations and wages at digging canals, cultivation or in military service. [\[144\]](#)

The scale of exploitation grew until it was massive. T.B. Jones tells how in Lagash about 2100 BC:

A dozen or more temple establishments were responsible for cultivating most of the arable land. About half (the crop) was consumed by the cost of production (wages for workers, feed for draft animals and the like) and a quarter went to the king as royal tax. The remaining 25 percent accrued to the priests. [\[145\]](#)

The ordinary labourer's normal subsistence was three *silla* (about 2.4 litres) of grain a day, plus supplements of beer and oil. This diet was probably deficient in protein, minerals and vitamins, but still amounted to 3,000 calories a day, 1,000 calories a day more than most people in India or Sub-Saharan Africa get today. [146] So much for the wonders of capitalism compared with other class societies!

Mesopotamia was probably the first – and has certainly been the most studied – example of the transition to “civilization”. But as we have seen it was not the only one. The conditions that led to the first elements of urban life and of class division occurred, as we have seen, in several parts of the world. Engels was misled by the evidence available at his time to see them arising from the use of iron by the “pastoral” semitic and Indo-European speaking peoples of Eurasia. What is more, there were many more instances of agricultural societies developing, on their own accord, to a level where hundreds or even thousands of people could be mobilized to construct imposing stone edifices – as with the stone temples of third and fourth millennium BC Malta, the third millennium BC stone circles of which Stonehenge is the best known example, 18th century AD statues of Easter island and stepped platforms of Tahiti. [147]

Sometimes the development towards “civilization” would be influenced by one that had occurred elsewhere. [148] But this does not alter the fact that the processes leading to the formation of towns and cities, and often to the invention of writing, began independently in several different locations, because of the internal dynamic of society once agriculture advanced beyond a certain point. This makes nonsense of any attempt to claim that one group of the world's people are somehow “superior” to others because they arrive at “civilization” first.

In place after place, different peoples arrived at a similar end point, summed up by Gordon Childe as “the aggregation of large populations into cities; the differentiation within these of primary producers (fishers, farmers, etc), full time specialist artisans, merchants, officials, priests and rulers; the use of conventional symbols for recording and transmitting information (writing), and equally conventional standards of weights and measures of time and space leading to some mathematical and calendrical science”. [\[149\]](#)

But the exact route from hunter-gathering through horticulture and agriculture to civilization did vary considerably from one society to another. [\[150\]](#)

Studies of the beginnings of stratification within contemporary “communal” agricultural societies do suggest this can take different paths – sometimes with lineage elders emerging as tribal chiefs, sometimes with “big men” turning into village headmen, sometimes with whole lineages developing into priestly castes, sometimes with some household coming to control others. Some fully established class societies do seem to have developed in the way Engels talked about, through the immediate growth of private property in land, crops and animals. But in others the evidence points to a ruling class which initially exploited the rest of society without private property – along lines which Marx and Engels referred to (somewhat misleadingly) as “the Asiatic mode of production”. [\[151\]](#) In these cases class exploitation remained hidden within old communal forms of social organization, rather than being openly revealed through private property. It was, however, just as surely class exploitation, with the old “communal” organization of production in reality completely transformed by the enforced payment of tribute to the exploiting priests or bureaucrats. The heads of communal

organizations (whether villages, lineage groups or extended households) no longer served their needs alone, but increasingly became also the means by which the demands of the ruling class were imposed on their fellows. [\[152\]](#)

The divergent forms under which class society emerged must not make us forget the enormous similarities from society to society. Everywhere there was, in the beginning, primitive communism. Everywhere, once settled agricultural societies were formed, some lineages, lineage elders or “big men” could begin to gain prestige through their role in undertaking the redistribution of the little surplus that existed in the interests of the group as a whole. Everywhere, as the surplus grew, this small section of society came to control a greater share of the social wealth, putting it in a position where it could begin to crystallize out into a social class.

What is more, even where it crystallized into a collective social class, it could, over hundreds of years, give birth to classes of private property owners. This certainly happened in Mesopotamia [\[153\]](#) and ancient India, “where not only is there evidence to prove the existence of private property, but also ... the role of private property changes significantly over the centuries”, [\[154\]](#) and may have happened in Titohuacan in Central America. [\[155\]](#) Even in Egypt, where the power of the monarchy was enormous, there was a tendency for both temples and the governors of local provinces (“nomes”) to develop economic power of their own by the end of the old kingdom (about 2000 BC), and by Ptolemaic times a new warrior caste owned about half of the land. [\[156\]](#) The German-American ex-Marxist Wittfogel attempted to develop an overall theory of “Oriental despotism”, applicable to all these societies, in which economic power was completely in the hands of an all-powerful collective ruling class; but his own early studies of China suggest a different picture, in which a state bureaucracy, local gentry and merchants were all involved in bitter battles for control in 5th century BC China.

How class began

So far we have seen that there was, indeed, a transition from hunter-gatherer societies to urbanized societies, and that parallel to that went a transition from primitive communist to the class societies. About the fact of this transition there can today be no doubt. This, in itself, is an enormous vindication of Engels. It also undercuts some of the most basic anti-socialist arguments about humans being so intrinsically selfish as to make a co-operative commonwealth impossible.

But still unresolved are a couple of important points about the origins of class rule and the state: why did people move from hunter-gathering to agriculture and then cities? Why did they accept the rise of ruling classes? Why did those rulers come to exploit rather than serve the rest of society?

These are questions Engels did not fully answer. As Gailey points out, his explanation in *The Origin* seems at points to amount to just blaming greed – some people found they had a surplus in their hands and used it to the detriment of others. [157] In *Anti-Dühring* he puts forward a fuller account, with the stress being on the initial advantages to society as a whole of having the surplus set aside in such a way that it could not be immediately consumed by the producers. But he still does not explain why people should then be motivated to consume much of this themselves, or why others should accept this. [158]

There is an argument among academic evolutionists over precisely this question. E.R. Service has put forward what may be termed a “functionalist” theory of the rise of the state (and by implication, of classes). Rulers, it says, arose because it was in everyone’s interests that they should

do so. “This development fulfilled the tremendous potentialities that lay in centralised leadership ...” and arose from “the simple attempts of primitive leaders to perpetuate their social domination by organising such benefits for their followers”. [159] As against this, Morton Fried argues that the formation of the state was not “functional” for *all* of society, but was part of a process by which one section of society exploited and coerced the rest. [160]

But this does not explain why a group which had not previously exploited and oppressed should suddenly start doing so, nor why the rest of society put up with this new exploitation and oppression.

The only way to answer such questions lies in Marx’s stress on the interaction between the development of relations of production and forces of production. [161] Classes arise out of the divisions which occur in society as a new way of advancing production emerges. A group discovers it can increase the total social wealth if it concentrates resources in its own hands, organising others to work under its direction. It comes to see the interests of society as a whole as lying in its own control over resources. It defends that control even when that means making others suffer. It comes to see social advance as embodied in itself and in the protection of its own livelihood against sudden outbreaks of scarcity (due to harvest failure, pests, wars etc) that cause enormous hardship to everybody else.

It is not difficult to see how the spread of farming led to pressures for changes in production that required direction from above. The first farming communities probably established themselves in localities with exceptionally fertile soil. But as they expanded, survival came to depend on coping with much more difficult conditions. That required a

further reorganisation of social relations. Renfrew has argued:

The relatively small neolithic population could in fact select soils such as fertile alluvial areas whose potential yield was many times greater than the areas later taken into cultivation ... The spread of settlement to areas where yields were more vulnerable to fluctuations in rainfall, for instance, would have increased the need for redistributive mechanisms which would allow the local surpluses to be fully used. [\[162\]](#)

D.R. Harris has made a similar point in relation to tropical agriculture in Africa and south east Asia. At first it was,

small scale and depended on ecosystem manipulation rather than the creation of artificial ecosystems by large scale transformations ... The techniques ... normally being limited to human labour using simple tools such as axes, knives, planting sticks and hoes. “The unit of labour” was “the family”, and there was no need for a “level of social organisation” more complex than that of the simple segmentary tribe. [\[163\]](#)

But agriculture that produces more also demands “units of labor greater than the family” and “a more complex” level of “social organization” which is achieved through “the medium of ranked chiefdoms and socially stratified states with a dependent peasantry”. [\[164\]](#)

Groups with high prestige in preceding, non-class societies would set about organising the labour needed to expand agricultural production by building irrigation works or clearing vast areas of new land. They would come to see their own control of the surplus – and the use of some of it to protect themselves against natural vicissitudes – as in everyone’s interest. So would the first groups to use large scale trade to increase the overall variety available for consumption. So too with those groups who were most

proficient at wresting surpluses from other societies through warfare. In this way, the advance of the forces of production in each locality would turn groups and individuals who previously gained prestige by fulfilling redistributive or ceremonial functions into classes which imposed the demand of surplus extraction upon the rest of society.

In many parts of the world societies were able to prosper right through to modern times without resorting to labor intensive methods such as the use of heavy ploughs or extensive hydraulic works. This was true of much of North America, the islands of the Pacific ocean, inland Papua-New Guinea, and parts of Africa and south east Asia. But in other conditions survival came to depend on adopting new techniques. Ruling classes arose out of the organization of such activities, and so did towns, states and what we usually call civilization. From this point onwards, the history of society certainly was the history of class struggle.

Such groups could not keep the surplus in their own hands at times when the whole of society was suffering great hardship unless they found ways of imposing their will on the rest of society, unless they established coercive structures, states, and legal codes and ideologies to back them up. But once such structures and such ideologies were in existence, they would perpetuate the control of the surplus by a certain group even when it no longer served the purpose of advancing production. A class which emerged as a spur to production would persist even when it was no longer such a spur. And it would be protected by a military-juridical-ideological superstructure which could constitute a growing burden on the production of society as whole.

This was shown dramatically with all the first great civilizations when, after longer or shorter period, they collapsed amid enormous internal discontent: the great

crises of Sumerian society around the beginning of the second millennium BC, the temporary disintegration of the Egyptian state at the end of the old kingdom around 1800 BC, the collapse of the Mycenaean and Cretan civilizations after the middle of the second millennium BC, the collapse of the Teotihuacan civilization in Central America around 700 AD. It has been shown repeatedly since, from the fall of the Roman Empire to the present day crisis of world capitalism.

Class was then, as Marx and Engels always insisted, a necessary development once scarcity faced society. But, as they also insisted, once a class is established in power, further advance depends on the fight against it. Engels wrote of the downfall of primitive communism:

This organization was doomed to extinction. It ... presupposed an extremely undeveloped form of production, that is, an extremely sparse population spread over a wide territory, and therefore the almost complete domination of man by external nature, alien, opposed, incomprehensible to him ...

The power of these primordial communities ... was broken by influences which from the outset appear to us as a degradation, a fall from the simple moral grandeur of the ancient ... society. The lowest interests – base greed, brutal sensuality, sordid avarice, selfish plunder of common possessions – usher in the new civilized society, class society ... And the new society ... has never been anything but the development of the minority at the expense of the exploited and oppressed great majority; and it is so today more than ever. [\[165\]](#)

We could not go back to primitive communism even if that were what we wanted. It would mean wiping out 99.9 percent of humanity (the population of Southern France under foraging 30,000 years ago was about 400 and of the whole world 10,000 years ago about 10 million). But Marx and Engels insisted that this is not necessary. Capitalism

has created so much wealth that, for the first time in human history, it is possible to conceive, not of a primitive communism, but of an “advanced communism”. What is more, if we do not move to this, we will not see a simple continuation of existing society but a regression through “the mutual destruction of the contending classes”. As Engels put it at the end of *The Origin of the Family*, we reach “a stage in the development of production at which the existence of classes not only will have ceased to be necessary, but will become a positive hindrance to production”. [\[166\]](#)

Notes

[82.](#) E. Leacock, *Women in Egalitarian Society*, in *Myths of Male Dominance* (New York, 1981), p.31.

[83.](#) See B. Trigger, V. Gordon Childe.

[84.](#) E. Gellner, *Plough, Sword and Book* (London, 1991), p.16.

[85.](#) C. Ward Gailey, *From Kinship to Kingship* (Austin), p.16.

[86.](#) This has been true of some of the Stalinist interpretations. But it has also been true of some people from the genuine left. Thus Evelyn Reed’s account in *Women’s Evolution*, although often very good at criticizing the old anti-evolutionist orthodoxy, goes astray by seriously misinterpreting anthropological data so as to fit it in with things said by Engels at certain points in *The Origin*. This is true, for instance, of her assertions about bitter “competition” between early human males, about the alleged role cannibalism in “primitive” societies and about the alleged connection between inheritance along the male line and recognition of paternity. For a thorough critique of Reed’s work, see the review by Eleanor Leacock in *Myths of Male Dominance* (New York, 1981), pp.183-194.

[87.](#) F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Moscow, n.d.), p.6.

[88.](#) Although in Morgan’s case this materialist insight was mixed with an idealist view, arguing that “social and civil institutions, in virtue of their connection with perpetual human wants, have been developed from a few primary germs of thought”, L.H. Morgan, *Ancient Society*, p.5. Morgan was also, it should be added, not a revolutionary. He believed the

bourgeois democracy was the highest form of human society to which all others were striving.

[89.](#) *Ibid.*, p.24.

[90.](#) *Ibid.*, p.18.

[91.](#) Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, *op. cit.*, pp.42-43.

[92.](#) In fact, modern archaeologists extend the definition a little to include certain societies in which cities do not play the major part, like early Ancient Egypt and the Maya culture of Central America, because they contained most of the other features usually associated with urban societies – separate groups of artisans and administrators, the widespread use of metals, literacy etc. In the same way they usually include societies like those of the Incas or of pre-Islamic West Africa, in which there were cities and states but no alphabet.

[93.](#) Although one of the gurus of Thatcherism, Hayek, dissented, arguing that thousands of years of primitive communism had produced what he regarded as very dangerous “innate instincts”, leading the mass of people today to want “a just distribution, in which organized power is used to allocate to each what he deserves”, to “pursue perceived desirable common objects” and “to do good to known people”.

[94.](#) Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, *op. cit.*, pp.157-159.

[95.](#) E. Friedl, *Women and Men, the Anthropologist's View* (New York, 1975).

[96.](#) E. Leacock, *Women's Status in Egalitarian Societies, Myths of Male Dominance*, *op. cit.*, pp.139-140.

[97.](#) R. Lee, *The !Kung San* (Cambridge, 1979), p.118.

[98.](#) The “l” at the beginning of !Kung denotes a “click” sound which does not exist in Indo-European languages.

[99.](#) R. Lee, *op. cit.*, p.244

[100.](#) Guago, quoted in Richard Lee, *op. cit.*, p.244

[101.](#) Le P.P. Lejeune (1834), quoted in M. Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (London, 1974), p.14.

[102.](#) Colin Turnbull, *The Forest People* (New York, 1962), pp.107, 110 and 124-5.

[103.](#) R. Lee, **op. cit.**, pp.343-345.

[104.](#) E. Friedl, *Women and Men*, *op. cit.*, p.15.

[105.](#) R. Lee, **op. cit.**, p.336-338.

[106.](#) All the quoted phrases are from R. Ardrey, **op. cit.**, pp.300, 30 and 399.

[107.](#) W. Lloyd Warner, *A Black Civilisation* (New York, 1964), quoted in Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, *op. cit.*, p.12

[108.](#) E. Friedl, *Women and Men*, *op. cit.*, p.14

[109.](#) See R. Lee, *op. cit.*, p.55, see also C. Turnbull, *The Forest People*, *op. cit.*, p.127; M. Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, *op. cit.*, p.123.

[110.](#) As M. Sahlins has noted, “The surviving food collectors are displaced persons ... occupying marginal haunts ... untypical of the mode of production ... barred from the better parts the earth, first by agricultural, later by industrial economies”. There is the “possibility that the ethnography of hunters and gatherers is largely a record of incomplete cultures. Fragile cycles of ritual and exchange could have disappeared without trace, lost in the earliest stages of colonialism, when the intergroup relations they mediated were attacked and confounded”: *Stone Age Economics*, *op. cit.*, p.8 and p.38. For evidence that some different principles of social organisation may have applied among the !Kung a century ago to now, see R. Lee, *op. cit.*, p.340. For speculation about how palaeolithic hunter-gatherer societies may have differed from thriving ones, see R. Foley, *Hominids, humans and hunter-gatherers*, in T. Ingold, D. Riches and J. Woodburn, *Hunters and Gatherers*, Vol.I (London, 1988, p.207-221.

[111.](#) R. Lee, *Reflections on primitive communism*, in T. Ingold, D. Riches and J. Woodburn, *Hunters and Gatherers*, Vol.I (New York, 1991), p.262.

[112.](#) R. Lee, *Reflections on primitive communism*, *op. cit.*, p.268.

[113.](#) F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, *op. cit.*, p.37.

[114.](#) *Ibid.*, p.41.

[115.](#) *Ibid.*, p.87.

[116.](#) See J.V.S. Megaw (ed.), *Hunter Gatherers and the First Farmer Beyond Europe*, and the essays by M. Dolukhanov, G.W.W. Baker, C.M. Nelson, D.R. Harris and M. Tosi in C. Renfrew (ed.), *Explaining Cultural Change*, *op. cit.*

[117.](#) This is one of key arguments in M. Sahlins’ *Stone Age Economics*.

[118.](#) C. Ward Gailey, *Kinship to Kingship* (Austin 1987), pp.67.

[119.](#) R. Lee, *Reflections on primitive communism*, as above, p.262.

[120.](#) C. Levi Strauss, quoted in M. Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, *op. cit.*, p.132.

[121.](#) H.I. Hogbin, quoted in M. Sahlins, *ibid.*, p.135.

[122.](#) J.F. Lafitau, quoted in R. Lee, *Reflections on primitive communism*, *op. cit.*, p.252.

[123.](#) E. Evans-Pritchard, quoted in R. Lee, *Reflections on primitive communism*, *op. cit.*, p.252.

[124.](#) A Richards, quoted in M. Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, *op. cit.*, p.125

[125.](#) R. Firth, quoted in M. Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, *op. cit.*, p.125

[126.](#) R. Firth, quoted in M. Sahlins, *ibid.*, p.129

[127.](#) So M. Sahlins refers to “the domestic mode of production”, *Stone Age Economics*, *op. cit.*. By contrast, K. Sachs refers to “the corporate mode of production”, see *Sisters and Wives*, *op. cit.*, p.109

[128.](#) K. Sachs, *ibid.*, *op. cit.*, p.116-117

[129.](#) M. Sahlins, *op. cit.*, p.140

[130.](#) E. Friedl, *Women and Men, an Anthropologist's View* (New York, 1975), p.51.

[131.](#) See M. Sahlins, *op. cit.*, chapter one, R. Lee, *!Kung San*, *op. cit.*, and C. Turnbull, *The Forest People*, *op. cit.*.

[132.](#) This is a point made A. Testart, *Les chasseurs-cueilleurs ou l'origine des inégalités*, Paris 1982.

[133.](#) D.O. Henry, *From Foraging to Agriculture* (Philadelphia, 1989), p.227.

[134.](#) D.O. Henry argues that the collapse of the ecological conditions for “complex” foraging was caused from climatic changes. But the cause could have been the cumulative impact on the environment of growing numbers of foragers. The growing human population could have had a dramatic impact on the size of the wild mammalian herds it fed on, producing sudden, acute shortages. This would explain why there are repeated historical instances, in different parts of the world, of society based on complex foraging (sometimes, as in parts of Latin America with limited recourse to horticulture) suddenly either going over completely to agriculture or reverting to nomadic hunting and gathering.

[135.](#) For accounts of the transition to agriculture in the Americas see, for example, R. McAdams, *The Evolution of Urban Society* (London, 1966), pp.39-40; F. Katz, *Ancient American Civilisations* (London, 1989), pp.19-22; W. Bray, *From Foraging to Farming in Mexico*, in J.V.S. Megaw (ed.), *Hunters, Gatherers and the First Farmers outside Europe*, p.225-234.

[136.](#) According to P.M. Dolukhonov, *The Neolithisation of Europe: a chronological and ecological approach*, in C. Renfrew (ed.), *Explaining Cultural Change* *op. cit.*, p.331-336. The datings here, as elsewhere, are approximate and might well be subject to revision in the light of more recent knowledge.

[137.](#) For estimates of dates, see C.K. Maisels, *The Emergence of Civilisation* (London, 1990); M. Rice, *Egypt's Making* (London, 1990); M.I. Finlay, *Early Greece: the Bronze and Archaic ages* (London, 1981);

F. Katz, *Ancient American Civilisations*, *op. cit.*; and G. Connah, *African Civilisations* (Cambridge 1987).

[138.](#) V. Gordon Childe, *What Happened in History*, *op. cit.*, pp.59-62.

[139.](#) *Ibid.*, p.80-81.

[140.](#) C.K. Maisels, *The Emergence of Civilisation: from hunting and gathering to agriculture, cities and the state in the Near East* (London, 1993), p.297.

[141.](#) C.K. Maisels, *ibid.*, p.297.

[142.](#) V. Gordon Childe, *Social Evolution* (London, 1963), pp.155-6.

[143.](#) V. Gordon Childe, *What Happened in History*, *op. cit.*, p.88.

[144.](#) See C.K. Maisels, *op. cit.*, p.146.

[145.](#) T.B. Jones, quoted in C.K. Maisels, *op. cit.*, p.184.

[146.](#) T.B. Jones and J.W. Snyder, quoted in C.K. Maisels, *op. cit.*, p.186.

[147.](#) See for a discussion on these pre-urban stone constructions, see C. Renfrew, *Before Civilisation* (Harmondsworth, 1976).

[148.](#) Thus it is certain that developments in the Aegean were encouraged by what had happened on the Asian mainland to the south east and the African mainland to the south, it is likely that some of the developments in Egypt (the sorts of grains which were sown, some of the artefacts) were influenced, to a limited degree, by contacts with the earlier developing Mesopotamian civilisation; and it is just possible that the Latin American civilisations had had some contact with those of East and South East Asia.

[149.](#) V. Gordon Childe, *Social Evolution*, *op. cit.*, pp.160-161.

[150.](#) *Ibid.*, pp.160-161. Gordon Childe argues: "No doubt in the old world plough cultivation had everywhere replaced hoe cultivation before the rise of civilisation. But the plough was unknown to the civilised Mayas, who had in fact no domestic animals at all ... In Crete and temperate Europe as well as in Hither Asia wheeled vehicles were used before civilisation was achieved, but on the Nile such were unknown for 1,500 years after the rise of civilisation ... In Egypt and Crete and among the Celts civilisation was preceded by the rise of chiefs to the status of divine kings who concentrate the social surplus. In Mesopotamia, on the contrary, it was the temple of a superhuman divinity that performed this function ... while 'royal tombs' are recognisable only later ..."

[151.](#) Marx's insights into the possibilities of a society in which a bureaucratic ruling class owned property and exploited the rest of society collectively were probably misapplied in his writings on early 19th century India, where there had been widespread private ownership of land for more than a thousand years. See R. Tharpar, *Ancient Indian Social History* (Hyderabad, 1984).

- [152.](#) A point made by C. Gailey, *op. cit.*, p.22.
- [153.](#) See, for example, C.K. Maisels, *op. cit.*, p.269.
- [154.](#) R. Tharpar, *Ancient Indian Social History, op. cit.*, p.19.
- [155.](#) See the discussion on this question in F. Katz, *Ancient American Civilisations, op. cit.*, p.70.
- [156.](#) Estimates given in A.B. Lloyd, *The late period*, in B. Trigger, Kemp, O'Connor and Lloyd, *Ancient Egypt, A Social History, op. cit.*, p.310.
- [157.](#) C. Gailey, *op. cit.*.
- [158.](#) And, to be honest, Gailey does not succeed in such explanation either.
- [159.](#) E.R. Service, *Classical and modern theories of the origins of government*, in R. Cohen and E.R. Service (eds.), *Origin of the State*.
- [160.](#) M.H. Fried, *The state, the chicken and the egg, or what came first?*, in R. Cohen and E.R. Service, *ibid.*, p.35.
- [161.](#) Especially in the famous *Preface to The Critique of Political Economy*.
- [162.](#) C. Renfrew, *The emergence of civilisation*, in C. Renfrew (ed.), *Explaining Cultural Change, op. cit.*, p.421 and p.424. What is more, cultivation itself could destabilise the environment – by lowering the water table level or exhausting the soil – leading to “increased instability” in society and “local pressures on population, provoking change”. C. Renfrew, *op. cit.*, p.427.
- [163.](#) D.R. Harris, *The prehistory of tropical agriculture*, in C. Renfrew (ed.), *Explaining Cultural Change, op. cit.*, p.398-9.
- [164.](#) *Ibid.*, p.399.
- [165.](#) F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, op. cit.*, p.160-161.
- [166.](#) *Ibid.*, p.286.

III) The origins of women's oppression

The Origin of the Family was not, of course, just about the rise of classes and the state. It was also about the origins of women's oppression. A central argument is that women were not subordinate to men until the rise of classes, that "the first class antagonism which appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression with that of the female sex by the male". [167]

On this Engels was undoubtedly right. The evidence, meticulously put together by Eleanor Leacock and others, is that there was no domination of men over women among the nomadic hunter-gatherers European settlers encountered in the 17th to 19th centuries. [168] There was a division of labour between men and women, with men doing most of the hunting and women most of the gathering. But since gathering usually produced more of the average diet than hunting, this did not necessarily lead to any higher evaluation of men and their work than of women and theirs. The anthropologist Ernestine Friedl does accept that in the few societies, for instance among Australian aborigines, in which meat was the central component of the diet, men were more highly ranked than women. [169] But she insists:

Individual decisions are possible for both men and women with respect to their daily routines ... Men and women alike are free to decide how they will spend each day: whether to go hunting or gathering and with whom ...

She notes that when it comes, for instance, to discussion on whether to move camp to a new area, women and men both take part. [170] And women still exercise enormous powers in their own right. So, for instance, among Australian

aborigines, “older women exercise influence over their own marital careers, and on those of their sons and daughters”, and married women often have affairs with young unmarried men – a state of affairs anathema to the sexual codes of conduct of almost all class societies. [171]

Anthropologists of the Eleanor Leacock school go even further. They discount the evidence accepted by Friedl for men ever having higher status than women, arguing that this simply reflects prejudices of the Western observers who gathered it. [172]

Class society’s notions of “the place of women” are also absent in societies based on horticulture. There is sometimes the beginning of a hierarchy which gives men a higher standing than women, just as there can be the beginning of a hierarchy between lineages and households. Men (or at least, *some* men) may have greater decision making power than women. But there is still no systematic oppression of women. Women retain their own spheres of decision making, and can counter decisions made by their spouses.

Structures usually exist which restrict who people can marry, and this is interpreted by the influential structuralist school of anthropology, inspired by Claude Levi Strauss, as meaning that women are treated simply as objects of negotiation between men. But, as Karen Sachs, Christine Gailey, Ernestine Friedl and others have emphasized, it is not men as such who lay down who people are permitted to marry, but the “kin corporate” lineages. And older women as well as older men usually have a say in these decisions.

This is most obviously the case in societies which are described by anthropologists as “matrilineal” and “matrilocal”. In matrilineal societies descent is reckoned

down the female line: someone's most important ties are not be to their father (who belongs to a different lineage), but with their mother and their mother's brother; in the same way, a man's main responsibility is not to his biological children but to his sister's children. In matrilineal societies a man does not run a household himself, but moves into one run by his wife, her sisters and her mother.

Where society is both matrilineal and matrilineal, men exercise very little authority in the households in which they actually live. A man's formal rights and responsibilities are always with another household, which is part of another lineage – that of his mother, his sister and her children. There they may exercise some authority – which is why these societies are not “matriarchies”, societies ruled by mothers. But their absence from that household necessarily means this is a limited authority, no greater than that of the women.

Significantly, the structuralist school, with its insistence that women are everywhere the object of arrangements between males, hardly refers to such instances. [173]

Not all matrilineal societies are matrilineal. Among, for instance, the Ohaffia, an Ibo people in Eastern Nigeria, descent is reckoned along the female line but residence is in with the husband's kin. But even here wives are not subordinate to husbands. [174] In this society, “divorce is usually granted merely at the wish of either spouse”, “daughters are highly prized”, and “the relationship ... of husband and wife ... seems to be one of mutual respect and accommodation to each other”. [175]

Finally there are horticultural societies where descent is through the male line and residence after marriage is with the husband's family. But even here women still have much

greater influence than is usual in class societies. This is exercised through the lineages. A woman is not just a wife, a subordinate in a strange household and lineage. She is also a sister, someone with influence in the decision making of her own lineage. And her husband's kin will want to maintain good relations with that lineage. Her position as a wife gives her husband's kin (including his mother and sisters) some control over her productivity. But her position as a sister in turn gives her some claim over the produce of her brothers and their wives. In the course her lifetime, she will move from being mainly regarded as a subordinate, as a "wife", to being mainly seen as a "sister" and "mother". And as such she is a "controller" of "labour and productive means". [\[176\]](#)

This is not a world of isolated nuclear families in which the individual woman is subject to the whims of her partner. Nor is it a world of patriarchal households in which fathers lay down the law for wives, children and servants. It is a world in which everyone, male or females, is tied into a network of mutual rights and responsibilities which vary from one stage in life to another, delimiting people's freedom in various ways, but still leaving them with more autonomy than is general in class societies. [\[177\]](#)

The movement of a woman from one household (that of her father), to another (that of her husband) is seen by structuralist anthropologists as an "exchange" of women between men. But the woman does not move between men, but between lineages, each of which involves other women. Her standing is such that she is seen as a loss to one household and a gain to another. The husband's father often had to hand over goods to her parental household (what is called by Europeans the "bride-price") to compensate for its loss, a situation markedly different to that in societies which devalue women, where the women's family have to pay a

dowry to get rid of her. And in marrying, the woman herself can gain “an increase in individual status and autonomy”, as Gailey tells of Tonga. [\[178\]](#)

The structuralists confuse reciprocal obligations that tie different lineages together in pre-class societies with the commodity exchange of capitalism, and so confuses a situation in which ‘women move back and forth as valued people, actively operating within and manipulating the networks of relations their moves creates’ with their reduction to virtual commodities. [\[179\]](#)

The confusion is made easier by the integration of the economies of almost all surviving horticulturalists into the world economy with the use of money. [\[180\]](#) People’s need for money to spend on market goods leads them to see old relations of reciprocal obligation in a new way, as a means of realising cash. It is usually males who relate directly to the market outside the village and this tends to give them a power and a standing they never used to have. Contact with the capitalist world causes the horticultural societies to mimic its social relations – and Western anthropologists then claim this proves those social relations typical of capitalism are universal to all societies.

Any scientific analysis of early agricultural societies has to cut away such distortions.

We may never know whether matrilineal descent was once universal, as Eleanor Leacock suggests, since we have no way of studying in detail preliterate societies before the impact of the world economy. What we can say, however, is that there was no universal experience of female oppression and that it only became a systematic aspect of society with the division into classes and the rise of the state. On this Engels was 100 percent right.

Minor mistakes

Engels was, however, badly wrong on a couple of subordinate questions which he himself took so seriously as to make *The Origin of the Family* a misleading work if not read critically.

He took over from Morgan the view that the classifications of relatives that exist in lineage societies (where, for instance, every woman in the lineage who is of your own generation is called “sister”, every male of your parents’ generation is called “uncle”, as so on) harked back to a previous, quite different form of social organization. [181] The system of classifying relatives was, he held, a “social fossil” that enabled one to decipher the history of the family. He also took over from Morgan the conclusion that these “fossils” proved that there had existed a stage of “group marriage”, when a group of brothers married a group of sisters. [182] This, he argued, was “characteristic of savagery”, while “the pairing family” was characteristic of barbarism. [183]

In fact, as we have seen, nomadic hunting and gathering (“savagery”) is not characterized by strong lineages let alone group marriage but by the flexible organization of couples and their children into bands. [184] Engels saw lineage organizations as relics of a time when sexual relations had a “naive, primitive, jungle character”. [185] In fact, they were complex mechanisms which co-ordinated society once early agriculture had allowed the formation of villages of hundreds of inhabitants – they were in fact, an expression of the development of the forces of production, not some hangover from old “relations of reproduction”. Engels was wrong, not because his basic Marxist methodology was wrong, but because he did not apply it consistently enough.

He was also mistaken to try to decipher an even earlier form of the family, that which he refers to as “primitive promiscuity”. He claimed such a stage must have existed as ancestral apes evolved into humans, because it alone could have prevented “jealous males” disrupting all attempts at the co-operation needed to cope with nature. Yet, his logic breaks down only a page or so later, when he notes, “jealousy is an emotion of comparatively late development” – a conclusion which, as we have seen, research into gorillas and chimps suggests to be correct. [186] And his own conception of what “primitive promiscuity” amounted to is by no means clear, since at one point he suggests it was little more than what we would today call “serial monogamy”, based on “separate pairings for a limited time”. [187]

In fact, Engels here makes the mistake of falling into blind speculation about a very long period (more than 3 million years) about which neither he nor we know anything with certainty. We do not know whether the ancestral apes were organized in male centered groups like the common chimpanzees or female centered groups like the pygmy chimps, and we certainly do not know how the form of organization characteristic of modern nomadic hunter gatherers arose. It is preferable to stick with what we do know – that the relations between women and men among surviving hunter-gatherers, have been very different to those taken for granted in class societies and embodied into most notions of human nature. [188]

There is one other mistake that Engels himself did not actually fall into, but which is often ascribed to him by both supporters and opponents. That is the use of the term “matriarchy” implying a period of female rule prior to that of male domination. Those who employ it presuppose there has always been something akin to class domination and the state, but that at one time it was under aegis of women not

men. Engels explicitly rejected any such notion. He took over the term “mother right” from the German writer Bachofen to describe the reckoning of descent along the female line which, he believed, was universal at one stage. But he added, “I retain the term for the sake of brevity. It is however an unhappy choice, for at this social stage there is no such thing as right in the legal sense.” [189] Certainly, the characteristic of both hunter-gatherer and early agricultural societies is that both women and men take part in decision making, not that either excludes the other.

Engels’ argument revisited

Engels is at his best when he describes the rise of women’s oppression, “the world historic defeat of the female sex”, as he put it, and relates it to the rise of class society. Yet his argument sometimes falters when he tries to spell out mechanisms behind this defeat. He does not show why it is necessarily *men* who dominate in the new class society. He says men came to produce both the food and the tools of production, that this necessarily gave them ownership rights and control over the surplus, [190] and that they wanted to pass on ownership to their sons, not to their wife’s relatives. But he does not show *why* they should suddenly get this desire after thousands of years in which their closest relationships were with their sisters’ children. [191] Two sorts of attempts have been made to fill the gap in his argument.

First there is the account of those like Eleanor Leacock and Christine Gailey who have emphasized the impact of the rise of the state in smashing the old lineages in which women exercised their influence. The state subordinates the rest of the society to the newly emerging ruling class. But that means destroying “the relative authority and autonomy” of the old kin communities. Insofar as they

survive, it is as transmission belts for imposing the demands of the state and the ruling class on the mass of people. And this involves taking not just productive, but also reproductive decisions away from the members of these communities. Women, as the biological reproducers, lose out. [192]

But this account, by itself, does not explain any better than Engels' why women should not have an equal share of power and influence with men in the new ruling class and state – nor why women should usually also be reduced to a subordinate role among the exploited class. It explains the collapse of the old order, but not the gender hierarchy that exists in the new.

An alternative account, put forward in different ways by Gordon Childe and Ernestine Friedl, stresses the productive role of women and the role played by biology at different points in historical development.

Childe points out that in the early neolithic period women played a major role in production. There was a division of labour, in which men looked after the flocks and herds. But the key to the neolithic revolution, he argued, was:

to discover suitable plants and appropriate methods for their cultivation, devise special implements for tilling the soil, reaping and storing the crops and converting it into food ... All these inventions and discoveries were, judged by ethnographic evidence, the work of the women. To that sex too may be credited the chemistry of pot making, the physics of spinning, the mechanics of the loom and the botany of flax and cotton. [193]

And, “owing to the role of women’s contributions in the collective economy, kinship is naturally reckoned in the female line and the system of ‘mother right’ prevails.” [194]

All this changed, however, once the plough replaced the hoe and the digging stick as the major agricultural implement. Stock keeping was already a male sphere, and the plough turned arable farming into one as well, sharply reducing women's place in production:

The plough ... relieved women of the most exacting drudgery but deprived them of their monopoly over the cereal crops and the social status that it conferred. Among the barbarians whereas women normally hoe plots, it is men who plough. And even in the oldest Sumerian and Egyptian documents the ploughmen really are males. [195]

Ernestine Friedl argues that the relative standing of men and women in horticultural societies depends on their contribution to production. There are, for example, some horticultural societies in which women produce the basic crops and men the ones that are exchanged, and others in which men produce the basic crop and women the one that is exchanged. [196] It is in the first sort that men have the higher standing. "The prevalence of male dominance is a consequence of the frequency with which men have greater rights than women to distribute goods outside the domestic group." [197]

She points out that certain activities tend in most societies to be done by men rather than women. In some hunter-gatherer societies women do hunt, but "are barred from hunting in the later stages of pregnancy ... [and] after childbirth by the burden of transporting the child". [198] In early agricultural societies, crafts can be done by either sex, but "metal working is almost entirely a man's skill". [199] And in most societies – although not all – men are the only warriors.

An interaction between biological imperatives and social needs underlies such changes in the division of labour. The human species has to reproduce itself if any society is going to survive. But the scale of its reproduction – how many children are needed from each adult woman – varies enormously. In a nomadic hunter-gatherer society, as we have seen, there is a premium on spacing children so that no woman is responsible for more than one infant at a time. By contrast, for agricultural societies, each child is, potentially, an extra cultivator, and there is the need to compensate for a higher death rate, the result of a greater vulnerability to infectious diseases, and the ravages of interminable wars. [200] So the higher the birth rate the more successful that society is likely to be. It is in the interests of the whole society (including its women) for women not to take part in activities (such as warfare, long distance travel and heavy agricultural tasks) which expose them to the greatest risks of death, infertility or abortion – or which expose to danger infants dependent on their mother's milk for food.

This would explain why women often do most of the food producing in societies which rely on the hoe and the digging stick, but not in those which rely on the plough or on cattle herding. The first set of activities may involve hard and tiring physical labour, but is not likely to affect the reproduction rate unduly in the way that the second set would. The women of such a society are of more value to the village, the lineage or the household when it comes to physical reproduction than the men – and so are kept clear of activities which might endanger them, or at least their reproductive potential.

The result is that women are central to production, as well as reproduction, in hunter-gatherer and early agricultural societies. But they are excluded from the sorts of production that produce the biggest surplus with the rise

of heavy agriculture, the urban revolution, and the shift from “communal” or “kin corporate” society to class society.

An account just in terms of the plough and cattle farming is not sufficient, since classes emerged in the New World a millennium and half before the European conquest led to introduction of the plough. [201] However, there was a turn to a different sort of heavy agriculture with the first use of local irrigation works. And there was a growth of other activities from which women were usually excluded by their reproductive role – long distance trade and warfare. All these activities increased the surplus available to a particular society. All of them tended to be performed by men rather than women. And all of them encouraged the transformation of highly esteemed groups of people into dominating classes.

Most of the men who carried through the burden of these new productive activities did not become part of the dominant class. Most ploughmen did not become princes and most soldiers did not become warlords, and neither of them made up the priesthood which often came to constitute the first ruling class and which *never* got involved in heavy work of any sort. But the new forms of production encouraged the breakdown of the old lineage based communal forms of organisation, the key element in the account of Gailey and Leacock.

So long as much of food production was carried out by women it made sense to everyone for land and other means of production to be under the control of lineages running through the female line. This guaranteed a continuity of cultivation across generations. A woman, her sisters and their spouse would be able to look forward to their daughters cultivating the lineage’s land and so providing for them in their old age. The fact that land did not pass to the

son did not matter to either the mother or the father, since he would not be responsible for the main burden of food production.

Once, however, the main food producers became the men, the situation changed. A couple became dependent on the production of the next generation of males to keep them once they were no longer physically able to provide fully for themselves. The survival of any particular household came to depend much more on the relationship between the males in one generation and the next than between the females. Relying on the father's sisters sons, who would themselves work on land controlled by other lineages (that of their wives) was much less dependable than trying to keep the couple's sons attached to the parental household. Patrilineality and patrilocality began to fit in with the logic of production much more than matrilineality and matrilocality.

The replacement of shifting (or slash and burn) agriculture by continual cultivation of the same land encouraged this development. It necessitated measures to improve the land over more than one generation, measures which would be carried through mainly by the men and would therefore be encouraged by a new stress on relations between successive generations of male cultivators, tied to the same piece of land.

Finally, the rise of classes and the state at the expense of the lineages encouraged male dominance among the lower classes once men were the main producers of the surplus. It was on them that the newly emerging authorities would place responsibility for handing over part of the crop. And they would then have to impose these demands on the household unit as a whole, beginning to direct its work and control its consumption.

Class, the state and women's oppression

Whether or not matrilineal-matrilocal relations were originally universal hardly matters in this scheme. For, even if they had only existed in a minority of cases, they would almost everywhere be replaced by patrilineal relations once agriculture developed beyond a certain point. And the development of classes and the state would, in turn, begin to transform patrilineality – descent through the male line, checked by a complex network of kinship relations – into patriarchy, the domination of the household by the senior man.

But the development of classes and the state did not take place over night. It was a process taking hundreds, even thousands of years. Those who made up the first ruling classes were those whose ancestors had acquired high standing in the pre-existing non-class societies by concentrating in their hands resources, albeit resources to be redistributed back to the rest of society. And since these societies had already begun to make the transition to patrilineality, they tended to be male.

What was involved was not one single moment of transition, but a long, dialectically developing process. The move to patrilineality would encourage the emergence of men as the key figures controlling society's resources. This, in turn, would encourage the emergence of patriarchy in the households. And patriarchy in the household would then encourage the domination of males within the ruling class and the state. They would begin to turn the old control of lineages over marriage arrangement to their own advantage, so that the intermarriage between lineages that had once bound whole societies together through ties of reciprocity was transformed into a conscious "exchange of women"

aimed at enhancing the flow of resources into the hands of the dominant male line.

Women, who had been key producers as well as reproducers, now became subservient to males at all levels of society. Among the exploited classes they still worked. But even in the frequent cases where they actually produced more than the men in total terms, they did not produce and control the key surpluses which determined the household's relationship to the rest of society, and so were still subordinate to the men (or, more accurately, to the one man who ruled over both the women and the younger men in the patriarchal farming or artisan household). The only exceptions were in the occasional cases where the absence of the male from the household (for instance in some fishing communities or among some groups of artisans when there was the early death of the husband) or the participation of the women in certain forms of trade (for instance, in parts of West Africa) gave them control over the surplus. The woman, in these cases, became a sort of female patriarch. But these cases were necessarily the exception, never the rule. And, of course, in cases where production was based on gang labour by slaves, there was no household and no male dominance at all at the base of society.

Among the ruling classes women became oppressed in a different way. They became playthings in the maneuvering between different rulers, used to enhance the standing of one at the expense of another. So although they participated in the exploitation of the rest of society, they were rarely full equals to the ruling class men, initiating events on their own behalf. And in extreme instances, they were confined to a world of their own, a world of *purdah* or of the harem, in which the only sort of participation they could hope for in the wider world was at one remove, through manipulation of the affections of a husband or a son. Again, there were

occasional exceptions, of the queen or the dowager who took total power into her own hands. But again, the exception never became the rule.

Engels, then, may have been wrong in his explanation of some of the processes involved in the rise of the patriarchal family. But he was right to insist on its historical novelty and to see it as a “world historic defeat” for women, as not simply a “revolution”, but “one of the most decisive ever experienced” in the history of humanity. He was also right to add that it happened in a way which “need not have disturbed one living member” of the society.

The transformation in the reality at the top and bottom of society was necessarily reflected in transformations in ideology. Among the remains of prehistoric societies of the early neolithic period female statuettes abound, suggesting the worship of goddesses, while phallic statues are lacking. [202] Once class societies develop, the stress is increasingly on the role of gods, with the great religions which dominated from the 5th century BC onwards across most of Eurasia characterized by the omnipotence of a single male god. The ideology of both rulers and ruled became one of male dominance, even if female figures were sometimes allowed a subordinate role.

Engels also insisted on something else. The further development of the means of production brought about further changes in the form of the family and the character of women’s oppression. This, he claimed, happened with the replacement of the ancient slave mode of production by feudalism, which, according to him, was accompanied by the replacement of the “patriarchal household” by the “monogamous family”. “The new monogamy ... clothed the domination of men in milder forms and permitted women

to occupy, at least with regard to externals, a far freer and more respected position than in ancient antiquity.” [\[203\]](#)

The details of the change do not concern us here. What is important is Engels’ insight that there have been variations, even within class society, in the nature of the family and the character of women’s oppression. The whole process cannot be subsumed under one single category of “patriarchy” in the way that many modern feminist theorists have tried to do. There have always been enormous differences between the families of the exploiting class and the exploited classes: you cannot simply equate the family of the Roman slave owner and the family of the Roman slave, nor the family of the feudal lord and the family of the feudal peasant. And there have been considerable differences in the family as you move from one ruling class to another. A society in which ruling class women play a public but subordinate role – as in feudal Europe as viewed by Chaucer or Boccaccio – is different in significant respects to one in which they live in purdah. A society in which bride-price exists is different than one in which dowry payments exist. To say this is not to ignore women’s oppression in each case, but to insist on the changes it undergoes – a precondition for recognising it is not some expression of human nature, but a product of concrete historical developments, something that can be done away with by further developments.

Some of the most important passages in *The Origin of the Family* begin to outline these further developments. Engels emphasizes that even under capitalism the women of the working class enter the workforce, and so get incomes of their own – on a scale unknown in previous class societies:

Since large scale industry has transferred the woman from the house to the labour market and the factory, and makes her, often

enough, the bread winner of the family, the last remnants of male domination in the proletarian home have lost all foundation – except, perhaps, for some of that brutality towards women which became firmly rooted with the establishment of monogamy. Thus the proletarian family is no longer monogamian in the strict sense, even in cases of the most passionate love and strictest faithfulness of the two parties ... The woman has regained, in fact, the right of separation, and when the man and woman cannot get along, they part. [204]

But if the entry of women into the paid workforce offers the potential for liberation, the continued organization of reproduction within the individual family prevents the realization of this potential:

When she [the proletarian woman] fulfils her duty in the private service of her family, she remains excluded from public production and cannot earn anything; and when she wishes to take part in public industry and earn her living independently, she is not in a position to fulfill her duties. [205]

Thus women in existing society are in a contradictory situation. They can see the possibility of full equality and therefore challenge male dominance with a confidence unparalleled since the destruction of communal production. But they are still hindered from achieving this equality unless they forego having children. No amount of legislation could overcome this painful contradiction, although, Engels insisted, legislation was to be welcomed, since it would bring into the open the need for a further, revolutionary, change:

It will then become evident that the first premise for the emancipation of women is the reintroduction of the entire female sex into public industry; and that this again demands the quality possessed by the individual family of being the economic unit of society be abolished ...

With the passage of the means of production into common property the individual family ceases to be the economic unit of society. Private housekeeping is transformed into a social industry. The care and education of children becomes a public matter. [206]

This will transform completely relations between the sexes. Once the obsession with reproduction and property rights is gone, Engels argues, people will be free to relate to each other in, new, genuinely liberated ways. We can only “conjecture” about what the new relations will be like:

That will be settled after a new generation has grown up ... Once such people appear, they will care not a rap about what we today think they should do. They will establish their own practice and their own public opinion on the practice of each individual – and that’s the end of it. [207]

If other sections of *The Origin of the Family* suffer from using outdated material and, occasionally, for the use of circular arguments, these passages shine because of their modernity. Engels was, in fact, far ahead of his time when he wrote them. As Lindsey German and others have written, after virtually abolishing the family among the working class in the early stages of the industrial revolution, capitalism sought to impose a form of the bourgeois family in the second half of the 19th century as the only way of ensuring the socialization of the next generation of workers. [208] Hence attempts to use the law and religious preaching to limit women’s involvement in the workforce. Since the Second World War, however, the relentless drive of capital accumulation has everywhere broken through these restraints, so that even in countries dominated by Catholic moralizing or by Islamic codes, the proportion of women in the workforce has climbed relentlessly, while in parts of Britain women are now the majority of the employed working class.

Yet, reproduction remains privatized, even if the state is compelled to play a much larger role than in Engels' time in the provision of social services and education. Most women are wage earners and expect, as never before, to live a life of independence, yet still find themselves forced back into bearing the burden of childcare within the confines of the nuclear family. Out of this has grown a resistance among both women and men to many things which were taken for granted in the past – unequal pay, sexual stereotyping of jobs, the treatment of women's bodies as commodities, domestic violence, frustrating and soul destroying marriages. It is a resistance that raises everywhere the vision of a better life for all, yet within a society which prevents that vision becoming a reality.

Conclusion

Very few scientific writings from 100 years ago still inspire current research. This is not surprising, given the explosion of research, knowledge and theorizing that has accompanied the frenetic accumulation of capital. *The Part Played by Labour* and *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* were attempts both to develop and popularize the insights of the science of their time. It is an enormous credit to Engels and to the method that he and Marx developed in the mid-1840s that they still provide us with insights which are lacking in so many present day writings on the evolution of our species and of society. They contain much which has to be discarded or rejigged on the basis of what had been discovered since Engels died. But what remains is still of immense value. It forms an invaluable starting point for anyone who wants to make sense of the mass of empirical material produced on an almost daily basis by archaeologists and anthropologists. And so it helps us today to refute the nonsense of “sociobiologists” and “naked ape” theorists when they claim that capitalism is inevitable because it rests on the foundations of an unchanging “human nature”.

Notes

[167.](#) F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, *op. cit.*, p.105. N.B.: the passage should not be misread, as it is occasionally, as saying the first class oppression is that of the female sex by the male sex. The key expression is “coincides”.

[168.](#) See E. Leacock, *Myths of Male Dominance*, *op. cit.*.

[169.](#) This is the argument of E. Friedl, *Women and Men, an Anthropologist's View*, *op. cit.*, p.22.

[170.](#) *Ibid.*, p.29

[171.](#) *Ibid.*, p.25

[172.](#) M. Etienne and E. Leacock, *Introduction*, in M. Etienne and E. Leacock, *Women and Colonialism: Anthropological Perspectives*, (New York, 1980). “Most description of Australian culture suffer from-male bias ... Recent work ... has discovered evidence of female autonomy the participation of women in ceremonial decision making ceremonies, the marriage of older women to younger men, the building of female solidarity among in-laws, the women’s section of the camp which is off-limits to men and whose women can carry on affairs with men they wish to without any obligation to formal marriage.” See also D. Bell, *Descent politics*, in the same work.

[173.](#) As E. Leacock points out, Levi Strauss only devoted one and a half pages of his massive *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* to matrilineal-matrilocal societies – and makes four inaccurate statements in the course of doing so. See E. Leacock, *Myths of Male Dominance*, *op. cit.*, p.235.

[174.](#) P.S. Nsugbe, *Ohaffia: a Matrilineal Ibo People* (Oxford, 1974), p.68. The adult women have a law making body, the *Ikipirikpe*, which “is the one and only body which can deal with offenses committed by women”. If the men were to make a decision the women disapproved of, it would take counter-measures – for example, it could rule that “the village housewives leave their homes and husbands en masse, abandoning all children temporarily, and not return unless their views were heard”.

[175.](#) P.S. Nsugbe, *ibid.*, pp.82, 83, 85.

[176.](#) K. Sachs, *Sisters and Wives*, *op. cit.*, p.117 and 121.

[177.](#) For an elaboration of this point, see E. Leacock, *Myths of Male Dominance*, *op. cit.* p.120.

[178.](#) Gailey, *Kinship to Kingship*, *op. cit.*, p.12.

[179.](#) E. Leacock, *Myths of Male Dominance*, *op. cit.*, p.217.

[180.](#) E. Friedl, *Women and Men*, *op. cit.*, p.46.

[181.](#) F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, *op. cit.*, p.47.

[182.](#) For Morgan's views, see L.S. Morgan, *Systems of Consanguinity and Knowledge of the Human Family* (New York, 1871), p.487, and *Ancient Society*, *op. cit.*, p.31.

[183.](#) F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, *op. cit.*, p.85.

[184.](#) See, for instance, E. Terray, *Marxism and "primitive societies"* (New York, 1973), p.139-40.

[185.](#) F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, *op. cit.*, p.84.

[186.](#) *Ibid.*, p.55.

[187.](#) *Ibid.*, p.56.

[188.](#) C. Fluer Lobban notes that Marx was "rather sarcastic about the notion of primitive promiscuity" in his own *Ethnological Notebooks*, see C. Fluer Lobban, *Marxist reappraisal of matriarchy*, *Current Anthropology*, June 1979, p.347.

[189.](#) F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, *op. cit.*, p.65-6.

[190.](#) *Ibid.*, p.88.

[191.](#) K. Sachs makes exactly this point, see *Sisters and Wives*, *op. cit.*, p.104.

[192.](#) This is a summary of Gailey's argument. It is possible that in summarising it, I may have put my own gloss on an argument which, at times, I found slightly obscure. See C. Gailey, *Kinship to Kingship*, *op. cit.*, px.

[193.](#) V. Gordon Childe, *What Happened in History*, *op. cit.*, p.52-3.

[194.](#) *Ibid.*, p.59. Childe seems, later, to have become more sceptical about a "matriarchy" stage. See his *Social Evolution*, *op. cit.*, pp.66-67.

[195.](#) V. Gordon Childe, *What Happened in History*, *op. cit.*, p.72.

[196.](#) E. Friedl, *Women and Men*, *op. cit.*, p.54.

[197.](#) *Ibid.*, p.9.

[198.](#) *Ibid.*, p.17.

[199.](#) *Ibid.*, p.59.

[200.](#) Due to the greater density of population.

[201.](#) A point made by Gordon Childe in *Social Evolution*, *op. cit.*, p.159.

[202.](#) It has been argued, for example by Gordon Childe (*Social Evolution*, *ibid.*, p.67), this need not, necessarily, have meant a society in which females were equal to men – after all, modern Hinduism contains a significant goddess and the Catholic church has the cult of the Virgin Mary. But there is all the difference in the world between an ideology in which female gods can be supreme and one in which female figures play a mediating role between worshippers and the dominant male figure.

[203.](#) F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, *op. cit.*.

[204.](#) *Ibid.*, p.116

[205.](#) *Ibid.*, p.120

[206.](#) *Ibid.*, p.119

[207.](#) *Ibid.*, p.134-5

[208.](#) See L. German, *Sex, Class and Socialism*, (second edition, Bookmarks, 1994). Notes to Chapter Four.