Margaret Ehrenberg. Women in Prehistory

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COERCIVE PRECIVILIZATIONAL MATRIARCHY?


At the outset, the author declares herself to be both an archeologist and a feminist. And the back cover of her book clearly implies that, pedagogically, she is as involved in women’s studies as in anthropology. Her text, however, presents far more archeological data and anthropological information than feministic interpretation or material specific to women’s studies.

Facts and artifacts abound in this volume, but sensitivity to nuances does not. Ehrenberg writes as though unaware that two of the most crucial terms used in her work are ambiguous. These two terms are “feminism” and “matriarchy.” Feminism can be construed in various ways, two of the more obvious being the belief that women should be more like men and the belief that men should be more like women. Though both these beliefs are equalitarian, the equalities involved are quite different.

“Matriarchy” is no more self-defining than “feminism.” Even in classical Greek, the form -arch- could mean either “first in dominion” (as in monarch) or “first in sequence” (as in archaic). In each case, the author has taken the more aggressive or male-oriented meaning for granted, as evidenced by her focus on such early figures as Queen Boudica [Boudicca or Boadicea], who led the southern Britons in battle against the Roman Colonists, and Morrigan, a Celtic goddess of war. This impression is strengthened by Ehrenberg’s complete disregard of the work of the well known contemporary archeologist Marija Gimbutas, who regards pre-Aryan Europe as having been peaceful and female-centered.

It is unfortunate, though perhaps significant, that the author has selected as her cover design a rather enigmatic Mesolithic rock painting from Cuevas de la Arana in Spain. While she describes it as “depicting a woman with a basket gathering wild honey from a hive in the top of a tree” (p. 56), none of this description is beyond question: the “hive” could be a bush; the “tree” could be a stream; the marks around the “woman” could be animal tracks; and—worse yet—the “woman” (as is conceded on p. 56) could be a man.

Ehrenberg’s view of the relation between the sexes seems to focus largely on coercive power, as witness her definition of matriarchy (in the Glossary, on p. 176) as “a society in which women regularly dominate all aspects of life . . . and have authority over men.” But it also appears to involve a strong secondary emphasis on material advantage as expressed in her assertion (on p. 173) that “if a woman plays no part in production . . . she will certainly not be able to gain status within the society.”

The author concludes “that it is possible to study women in prehistory...
...and...it is possible to write a prehistory of women." In this precise and professional book, she may well have actualized the first of these two possibilities for herself. For most laymen, however—especially for those in search of a distinctively feminine vision—she has hardly begun to actualize the second.

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A CRITIQUE OF CIVILIZATIONAL RATIONALISM


We don’t talk about the primitive as much as we did just two decades ago when Stanley Diamond wrote his critique of civilization by contrasting it with the primitive. It may be that the primitive, like many other terms, seems now to evoke pejorative, indeed odious comparisons. The implied note of superiority in such comparisons stems from the view that the premodern, or the traditional, or the primitive, was somehow less developed, less humanly accomplished, less expansively creative than the modern.

One line of reasoning was based in the set of dichotomies whereby sociologists contrasted some previous societal form with the current, societal frame. There was society based on status as opposed to contract, or on tradition as opposed to rationality, or on mechanical solidarity as opposed to organic solidarity, and so on.

Another approach was less neutral in seeking analytical categories for the study of various societies. It seemed propelled by the modern conviction that progress was to be found principally in society itself. The modernization of society could be traced in its economic, its political, and indeed in its cultural characteristics. The modern economy was industrial, the modern polity was a state, usually a nation-state, and the modern culture was literate, sponsoring education, and a range of art forms in music, painting, literature and poetry. What preceded the modernized society offered little if anything that was thought to be pertinent, and useful, for the contemporary ways of life. The prior circumstance, whatever it was called, and however it was analyzed, filled out the more exotic ranges of human behavior, and was instructive about what modern men and women had now left behind and transcended.

Stanley Diamond takes a strong position in opposition to the comparison of the contemporary, so-called civilized world and what had preceded. He introduces the book with the statement: "Civilization originates in conquest abroad and repression at home." Although he discusses some of the characteristics of archaic and modern civilizations, his principal theme is the human meaning of the "breach between civilized and primitive culture."