

Filiz Garip

(1)

In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels provides us with a coherent analysis of diverse aspects of social life using ethnographic and historical data as he explores the mutual dependence of gender hierarchy, economics and politics. In Engels' analysis, gender hierarchy and the advent of the state are elements of a broader class-stratification process that characterizes part of human history. Therefore, we need to consider both elements jointly in this setting.

Engels begins his analysis by studying the transition from prior social forms to private property. As shown by Morgan, the "passion" for the possession of property does not exist in the early stages of the society. The sole division of labor is by sex, and society is not as yet divided into classes of exploiters and exploited. Even though ranks exist, they do not "convey any privileged claim to the strategic resources."

As some barbarians find animals, and start to produce more and different necessities, exchange becomes possible for the first time. Cattle become the commodity. War provides the additional labor force required by increased production: prisoners of war become slaves. Thus, from the first great division of labor arises a society with two classes: masters and slaves. Then, iron is at service of man, handicraft is separated from agriculture and the second great division of labor takes place. Slavery becomes an essential constituent part of the social system. The distinction of rich and poor appears beside that of freemen and slaves, a new cleavage of society into classes. The inequalities of property among the families break up the old communal household and the common cultivation of the soil by and for these communities. Civilization, beginning with the stage of commodity production, sharpens the oppositions between classes and it adds a third division of labor. Merchants, concerned with exchange rather than production, emerge as the class of intermediaries between the producers. Then comes the introduction of metal money and with it money capital, interest and usury, as well as the introduction of private ownership of land and the mortgage system.

As the transition from communal property to full private property is gradually accomplished, changes in gender relations take place. In the early stages of society, both sexes work to produce the goods necessary for livelihood and women possess "the decision-making powers commensurate with their contribution," as Leacock states. The division of labor by sex within the family regulates the division of property between the man and the woman. With the first great division of labor, the previous domestic relation

turns upside down. Since the cattle and tools belong to men, man's position in the family becomes more important than woman's. Descent is changed from mother right to father right, in order to ensure the inheritance of tools and cattle by children. Thus occurs –what Engels calls- “the world historical defeat of female sex.” Paralleling these changes is the transition from group marriage to pairing marriage. Parents take a hand in the choice of marriage partners, and the kin of the partners now have a vested interest in the permanence of the marriage –divorce becomes more difficult. With the transition to pairing marriage, women become scarce and sought after; the capture and purchase of women begin –women acquire exchange value. Further in time, a change from pairing marriage to monogamy accompanies the transition to full private property. In order to achieve children of “undisputed paternity” to inherit their father's property, woman is “delivered unconditionally to the power of the husband.” Now, a stronger marriage tie holds together parties of “compatible” class positions. Virginity as a value emerges from the same idea of keeping property; imposing control on female sexuality to prevent dispersion of property becomes the usual method. Thus as Engels claims, the position of women relative to men deteriorates with the advent of class society. Class hierarchy depends on unequal construction of gender relations. The transitions in women's status occur in the context of developing exploitative relations. As communal ownership is gradually undermined, the communal kin group is broken up and the individual family becomes isolated as the economic unit “responsible for the maintenance of its members and for the rearing of the new generation.”

Stated most simply, Engels claims that the separation of the family from the clan and the institution of monogamous marriage are “the social expressions of developing private property.” The subjugation of women is based on “the transformation of their socially necessary labor into a private service through separation of the family from the clan.”

According to Engels, the subjugation of women and the advent of the state result from and help maintain the class relations constructed in the society. Engels claims that the state arises “directly and mainly out of the class oppositions.” The advent of private property and the rise of commodity production create “urban centers” and a contradiction between urban and rural areas follows. Such a society is no longer able to reconcile the oppositions among classes, but finds a way of holding down the oppressed class: the state emerges as a third power, “which apparently standing above warring classes, suppresses their open conflict and allows the class struggle to be fought out at most in the economic field, in so-called legal form.” Thus, with the emergence of cities requiring administration of order, the state becomes not only the distributor of resources but also the producer of ideologies to justify its existence. In contrast to the old gentile organization, the state is distinguished by the grouping of its members on a territorial basis and

the institution of a public force, which has “legitimate” monopoly in use of violence. In order to maintain this public power, contributions from the citizens are necessary –taxation begins. In possession of the public power and the right of taxation, the officials now present themselves as “organs of society standing above society.” Therefore, the state is no more than a support to the class hierarchy. Moreover, with the emergence of the state, subordination of woman becomes more functional. Dependence of woman is used as a mechanism to insure man’s labor as well as his “docility” not to fight against exploitation. His compliance in conduct of distasteful duties like war is also secured -women being the “prize” and the “reason to fight” jointly. Thus, gender hierarchy is a fundamental constituent of class-stratified society ruled by the state, which is “the state of the ruling class and in all cases continues to be essentially a machine for holding down the oppressed, exploited class.”

(2)

One of the most sophisticated thinkers of our time, Baudrillard, bases his theory on the criticism of traditional, critical scientific thinking, replacing reality with the illusion of truth. The danger, according to Baudrillard, lies in harboring this illusion as truth. The quest for a social theory of gender is often impeded by such an illusion created by projections of today’s cultural values to previous social forms.

Leacock, in the *Introduction to The Origin of Family, Private Property and State*, points out an often-undermined fact: “Our interpretation of the reality may heavily rely on projections of rationales and explanations incorporated into institutionalized ideologies.” This bias becomes even more critical for a scientist questioning the gender relations in elemental societies. Literature shaped by projections of our historical and political situation and by unconscious cultural assumptions hinders progress. Slocum in *Toward an Anthropology of Women* reveals the male bias in a widely accepted theory of anthropology: the “Man The Hunter” concept developed by Washburn and Lancaster. In Washburn and Lancaster’s argument, hunting constitutes the pivotal element in human progress; it is assumed to be the basic adaptation of the species from which “flowed all the traits we think of as specifically human.” Culture emerges as a male creation, resulting from selection pressure on males to develop skills. As Slocum points out skills required for women’s work are undermined. The romantic image of the “hunter” providing women and children with protein is constructed. However, protein ingestion is exceptional in elemental societies as was discussed in lectures. Thus, notion of progress in culture as related to hunting rather than gathering presented by Washburn and Lancaster is more ideological than factual. Slocum claims that there is a strong male bias in the questions asked and interpretations given. She points out that

the word “man” is used in an ambiguous fashion in the literature, whether it relates to males or all humans is uncertain.

Leacock discovers a similar flaw in the majority of extant ethnographic materials: more common contact of scientists with native **men**, who speak a European language. Hence, most social theories are unable to assess women’s position in previous societies. As Leacock suggests: “There is a real need for studies that reconstruct from extant materials on primitive communal and transitional societies something of women’s functioning before the development of the male dominance and that accompanied European economic and colonial exploitation.”

Therefore, the European expansion and colonial domination emerge as another artifact haunting gender research in elemental societies. Exposure to European practices by elemental societies renders it difficult to interpret the conclusions drawn. For instance, in her *Introduction* Leacock refers to the work of Speck, who argues for the existence of private ownership in elemental societies. Speck uses the example of Montagnais Indians who divided their lands into tracts or “hunting grounds,” which he states were individually owned and were passed down from father to son, to reject the existence of primitive communism. However, later shown by Jennes is the evidence that the hunting ground system had indeed developed as a result of the fur trade, and further, that it did not involve true land ownership. Therefore, ignoring the trade networks and European contact misguides research in elemental societies. As Leacock claims, from the attitudes first held by missionaries and traders subject people “learn appropriate attitudes to express to whites.”

This is more clearly seen in Draper’s research on the change of the experiences of !Kung women in foraging and sedentary contexts. Draper focuses on the sedentary !Kung, who live in villages close to Bantu-speaking pastoralists and shows that moving to villages is not neutral. Sedentary life results in a decrease in women’s autonomy. However, she is not concerned with the additional question –whether or not Bantu sex-role ideals influence the changes in !Kung sex roles, in the direction away from egalitarianism. She argues that in some respects (especially goat herding and crop planting) the local Bantu pastoralists are model for the settled !Kung, however does not analyze a similar effect on cultural values which renders her analysis flawed. Therefore, as Leacock states, instances where data on pre-class social relations predating external contact are clear acquire great importance.

The scientist, who is still committed to understand gender relations in pre-capitalist societies, yet faces another problem: the inadequacy of literature and the misinterpretations in the existing materials. Rubin,

in *The Traffic in Women*, attempts to construct a theory of “sex/gender” systems by borrowing concepts from anthropology and psychoanalysis. She studies Freud and Levi-Strauss, who present the underlying factors of sexual oppression and recognize the profound differences between the social experiences of men and women. However, both Freud and Levi-Strauss tend to ignore the critical implications of their theory- rather they choose to “rationalize the femininity as it is.” As Rubin states, they keep the implications of the theory “firmly lodged in the theoretical unconscious.” Such subtle manipulations throughout history ensure sexism endemic even to science. Therefore, that scientist must also fight theoretical repression inherent in the literature in order to understand gender relations.

(3)

Geraldine Casey, in her article *The Struggle Over Warfare*, reviews the anthropological research on warfare in order to discredit the biological determinism inherent in popular theories. Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, in her book *Mother Nature*, is concerned with a similar goal: to reject the assumption that women are “designed by nature” to be mothers. Both writers object not only to the reduction of social constructions to biology, but also to gendered theories that only serve to justify the status quo. In order to achieve their goal, they do not refrain from challenging the “authorities” and accepted theories or from revealing to the readers the ideological commitments underlying.

(a)

Casey presents a well-known anthropologist, Harris, who argues for the existence of innate, universal human needs and a fixed “human nature,” characterized as aggressive, competitive and selfish. Harris proposes that warfare is innate, universal and genetically determined and is a functional adaptation for human society. Similarly, Hrdy is interested in the image of motherhood in our society as an innate, instinctual and biological relation between mother and child. Conveniently, Harris’ argument on warfare and the idea of motherhood as an “instinct” both serve to justify contemporary forms of social inequality and “imperialist aggression” as natural phenomena and tend to undermine the social consequences.

Casey rejects Harris’ theory of human culture and argues that the theory cannot account for “features that are only partially integrated into the social whole, dysfunctional or differentially functional.” In order to reject Harris’ theory of warfare, Casey introduces Leacock, who shows that warfare results from complex social pressures and cannot be totally explained by biology. Leacock discredits the claim that war is

innate by asserting that the hunting and gathering societies, the type of society that has characterized by far the largest part of human existence, are the most peaceful type of society. Moreover, she suggests that historical records be examined in order to determine whether or not warfare predated contact with European colonialism. As Casey uses historical and ethnographical data presented by Leacock to discredit the biological determinism inherent in Harris theory, Hrdy follows a similar approach to reach similar conclusions denying biological explanations: motherhood is not innate or universal but is determined in natural environments for reasons of survival. Hrdy shows how flexible maternal emotions can be by providing examples in the animal kingdom as well as in human societies. Female langur not bearing a grudge after male langur kill the infants, the widespread practice of wet-nursing in 18th century France and today's women preferring economic security to motherhood are examples provided to deny the assumption of a universal and unchangeable motherhood.

(b)

Casey and Hrdy refuse to accept “sex-linked differences” as a justification of social inequality and oppose gendered theories on warfare and motherhood respectively. They also attempt to demonstrate how stereotyped assumptions underlie the “scientific” explanations of female subordination as a “natural” consequence in the theories of Harris and Spencer.

Casey opposes Harris' theory as a gendered concept of war. This theory suggests that institutionalized female subordination is functional and causally linked to the practice of warfare. Warfare requires exaggerated male sexual aggression resulting in “Male Supremacist Complex,” according to Harris and Divale. Leacock rejects the stereotyped assumptions about innate femininity and masculine natures inherent in their proposition. While she opposes notions of innate male aggressiveness, Leacock also does not accept “the idealized notions of female passivity and nurturing in order to project the idea that women are, by nature, more peaceable than men.”

Similarly, Hrdy mentions infanticides and non-nurturing mothers in history, which undermine the arguments about mothers being “genetically programmed to nurture babies.” The example given in class of the ape female that maximizes sexual availability so that offspring can be assumed to be of any male, also contradicts with the self-negating mother image in our society. Providing similar examples and credits to feminists of the time, Hrdy rejects Spencer's idea that “predestined to be mothers, women are born to be passive and noncompetitive, intuitive rather than logical.”

(c)

Hrdy and Casey point out the ideological pressures that compel social scientists to present arguments justifying the status quo. Casey suggests that the rewards offered by the system are a force that brings the research in line with current cultural values. For instance, in the case of Divale and Harris, “fabrication of evidence to prove the ideological commitment” nevertheless provided the researchers with opportunities that Leacock never had. Or similarly, as Spencer’s theory of physiological division of labor by sex providing a rationale for assuming male intellectual and social superiority gained broad popularity, feminists of the time were unheard. Both writers credit researchers who challenge the status quo, and who are ignored by the society for failing to “fit rationales for inequality and for the prevalence of war and violence.”

References:

[1] Eleanor Burke Leacock (1972), “Introduction” in Frederick Engels (1884), *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. New York: International Publishers: 7-68

[2] Frederick Engels (1884), “The Family” – “Barbarism and Civilization” in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. New York: International Publishers: 94-146; 217-237.

[3] Sally Slocum (1975), “Woman the Gatherer: Male Bias in Anthropology” in Rayna R. Reiter (Editor), *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. New York: Monthly Review Press: 36-50.

[4] Patricia Draper (1975), “!Kung Women: Contrasts in Sexual Egalitarianism in Foraging and Sedentary Contexts” in Rayna R. Reiter (Editor), *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. New York: Monthly Review Press: 77-109.

[5] Gayle Rubin (1975), “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex” in Rayna R. Reiter (Editor), *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. New York: Monthly Review Press: 157-210.

[6] Geraldine J. Casey (1991), "Eleanor Leacock, Marvin Harris and the Struggle Over Warfare in Anthropology" in Anne E. Hunter (Editor) *Genes and Gender*. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York: 1-33.

[7] Sarah Blaffer Hrdy (1999), *Mother Nature: Maternal Instincts and How They Shape the Human Species*. New York: Ballantine Books: 3-54.