THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS OF THE CHANGE FROM MATRIARCHY TO PATRIARCHY

Anne W. Merrill
Department of Anthropology
University of California
Berkeley, California

The first thing that probably comes to mind when one thinks of anthropology is kinship. Societies are categorized in accordance with specific kinship systems, such as matrilineal or patrilineal, of which descent charts and linguistic analyses are made. The main task of the anthropologist interested in kinship today seems to be the detailed study of a specific kinship system, in order to discover how it works.

This particularistic method has not always been the favored approach of the discipline. In the nineteenth century, anthropologists devoted much of their energies to the development of evolutionary schemes connected with natural laws. Kinship systems were especially susceptible to this treatment. Most of the evolutionary theories produced during this period, however, were later disproven or rejected because of the data upon which they were based. While acknowledging this fact, I suggest that there is still value in examining the questions which were asked then, and the assumptions surrounding them.

If we examine the scholarship on social organization from 1860 to 1890, it becomes apparent that a very different kind of question was asked then from that to which we are now accustomed. The pressing question of the day was why so many systems of kinship differed from those found in contemporary Western society. Working in the scientific atmosphere generated by Darwin, theoreticians developed evolutionary sequences which could account for these variations. It probably was also inevitable, because of both the desire to carry hypotheses to their logical extremes and the impact of the first wave of feminism, that the concept of primeval matriarchies would be postulated.

At this point, we must define some terms. There is much confusion about what is meant by "matriarchy" and how it relates to matrilineality. For the purposes of this paper I will define "matriarchy" as a society in which an equal or greater amount of authority is vested in women than in men and in which descent is traced through the female line. The term "patriarchy" will refer to any society in which primary authority is controlled by men, with descent and inheritance traced through the male line.

The argument for the development of matriarchy goes something like this: during the evolutionary transition from animal to human, there was a period of sexual promiscuity when descent could be reckoned only through the female line, since paternity was uncertain, because of either ignorance of the male contribution to reproduction or the multiplicity of sexual partners. Until there was certainty of paternity there could be no concept of patrilineality. This idea was introduced by J. J. Bachofen in 1861 (1967:93) and later supported by McLennan (1970:65), Morgan (1877:393-504), and Engels (1954:47), among others. However, the concept of matriarchy was not universally accepted. Westermarck led the opposition in 1891 with the publishing of his History of Human Marriage, and was supported by Maine.

The central point of disagreement between the parties led by Bachofen and Westermarck was whether or not it was possible for a system of organization as comparatively strange as matriarchy to have ever existed. Westermarck was a staunch defender of the status quo in this debate. His point of view was eventually accepted by mainstream anthropology. To date, no matriarchy has been proven to have existed at any point in time. Matriarchy cannot be proven until universal patriarchy has been disproven. But even with these considerations, credit must be given to the matriarchists for their imaginativeness.

The proponents of the theory that an early period of matriarchy existed had a special problem to solve. If social organization was originally matriarchal, why is it now patriarchal? For those who did not posit a different system, the answer to "Why patriarchy?" was simply "human nature." Certainly this answer is difficult to refute, but it is hardly edifying. The defenders of matriarchy were forced to devote more thought to the question and came up with more interesting solutions to the puzzle.

Bachofen, the originator of the term "mother-right," came to his conclusions almost entirely through examination of literature. He stated, "There is only one mighty lever of all civilization and that is religion" (1967:85). Using this as his starting point, he focused his attention on myth, often in a startling, almost Levi-Straussian structuralist fashion. Bachofen maintained that, from a state of complete promiscuity which he terms "hetaerism," humankind advanced to "Demetrian matriarchy" because women, "exhausted by man's lusts," felt the need for "regulated conditions and a purer ethic" (Ibid., 94). Despite this advance, society was still tied to gross nature, and it was necessary for Apollonian principles to conquer Demetrian principles in order for civilization to develop into its true, and current, form. Bachofen here clearly expressed the male Victorian contradictory images of women as both morally superior and sinful beings. The ancient matriarchies were not part of a Golden Age but rather something which had to be destroyed in order for civilization as patriarchy to exist. This change occurred with the shift from Demetrian religion and the worship of the Great Goddess to the worship of Apollo and the gods of light. It is thus

a mystical change caused by the gods themselves. Bachofen's tone is captured in this statement: "the triumph of paternity brings with it the liberation of the spirit from the manifestations of nature, a sublimation of human existence over the laws of material life" (Ibid., 93).

In 1865, John McLennan published Primitive Marriage: An Inquiry into the Origin of the Form of Capture in Marriage Ceremonies and incorporated the concept of matriarchy in his evolutionary scheme. McLennan was the originator of the terms "exogamy" and "endogamy." The law of exogamy, he postulated, was the prime mover of early humankind. McLennan also maintained that men, as hunters, were responsible for the food and security of groups and are, thus, more valuable than women; and that all groups were mutually hostile. McLennan supported Bachofen's stages of hetaerism and matriarchy with more literary examples and data from travelers' accounts. He then went on to build an evolutionary sequence featuring alternations between homogeneous and heterogeneous groups mediated by bride capture as its central characteristic. Bride capture initially became necessary because female infanticide led to a shortage of women. Various forms of polyandry evolved until smaller and smaller numbers of sexual partners were acceptable. At the point when patriarchy became certain, patrilineality was established and bride capture again practiced because of the homogenizing nature of patrilineality in the first generation after capture.

McLennan's explanation of the change in descent systems should be examined closely because he is the first to connect the transition with property:

> Paternity having become certain, a system of kinship through males would arise with the growth of property, and a practice of sons succeeding, as heirs direct, to the estates of fathers; and descent through females would--and chiefly under the influence of property--die away (1876:98).

Plausible as this explanation is, and it has been taken up by many notable thinkers, including Marx, it leaves questions still unanswered. Why are men the owners of property, especially in a system that was formerly matrilineal? Why are sons the exclusive heirs?

Morgan's Ancient Society, published in 1877, postulates an evolutionary model similar to that of McLennan. Morgan finds in the evolution from the "consanguineal family" to the "monogamian" that the guiding principle is a consistent limitation of the number of acceptable sexual partners. Morgan's greatest contribution was his theory that, although aspects of culture such as government and the family develop according to their own laws, these developments are coordinated by changes in the "arts of subsistence." Thus Morgan presents an essentially materialist analysis. He argues for a relationship between property, monogamous marriage, and patriarchy: "When property began to be created in masses and the desire for its

transmission to children had changed descent from the female line to the male, a real foundation for paternal power was for the first time established" (1877:478). Morgan does nothing more than McLennan, however, to explain why men are the owners of property or why only sons are heirs. In a strictly monogamous family, a man's offspring could just as well be guaranteed inheritance through the female line in cases where all children inherited equally.

Engels, too, fails in this respect, although he is the first to articulate the full implications of the change from matriarchy to patriarchy. In The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, he says: "The overthrow of mother right was the world historical defeat of the female sex. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude, she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children" (1954:50; original emphasis). Engels is also conscious of the importance of explaining how this revolution took place:

> Thus, on the one hand, in proportion as wealth increased, it made the man's position in the family more important than the women's and on the other hand, created an impulse to exploit this strengthened position in order to overthrow, in favor of his children, the traditional order of inheritance. This, however, was impossible so long as descent was reckoned according to mother-right. Mother-right, therefore, had to be overthrown, and overthrown it was. This was by no means so difficult as it looks to us today. For this revolution one of the most decisive ever experienced by humanity could take place without disturbing a single one of the living members of a gens. All could remain as they were. A simple decree sufficed that in the future time the offspring of the male members should remain within the gens, but that of the female should be excluded by being transferred to the gens of their father. The reckoning of descent in the female line and the matriarchal law of inheritance were thereby overthrown, and the male line of descent and the paternal law of inheritance were substituted for them (Ibid., 43).

Engels' assumption, shared by his predecessors and followers, is that "According to the division of labor within the family at that time, it was the man's part to obtain food and the instruments of labor necessary for that purpose" (Ibid., 48). Why? Engels also reveals his male bias when he claims that no member of the gens would feel any disturbance as the revolution took place. Surely mothers of female children would feel something at their disinheritance and at the prospect of their marriage into alien gentes. The position of women currently married would be significantly undermined. Engels also oversimplifies when he states that the change

could be made by "simple decree." Issuing decrees is one thing; enforcing them is quite another.

This was how the concept of matriarchy had developed by the end of the nineteenth century. Robert Briffault made a further contribution in 1927, when this subject was no longer popular. His book, The Mothers, has accordingly received little attention. Yet this work questions old assumptions about property in a way which permits development of a new approach. Briffault joins in the consensus that it was the rise of property acquisition which led to patriarchy: "It is the development of private property and the desire of the male to possess it which is the commonest cause of the change from matriarchy to patriarchy, the other frequent motive being the desire for a monopoly of certain magical powers" (1959:95). Briffault maintains that the domestication of animals formerly associated with hunters accounts for the male monopoly of property. He also considers why hunters were predominantly male, since it is possible to cite many instances of female hunting. First, Briffault suggests hunting became a male prerogative because of the necessity for women to take care of offspring. Then, after listing examples of societies where childcare, including suckling, is communal and pointing out that women are in no way physically unfit for hunting, Briffault is forced to suggest that, "In short, the primitive division of labour has become established more by a spirit of professional exclusiveness than by a difference in aptitude" (Ibid., 99).

With Briffault we have come full circle in our search for an answer to the question: why patriarchy? "Professional exclusiveness" comes very close to the "human nature" explanation provided by Westermarck and his colleagues. By now, the pun in the title of this paper must be obvious since, although many pages have been written on this topic, outside of the suggestion of "human nature" no explanation has been provided for the establishment of universal patriarchy. The nineteenth century provided no comprehensive explanations of this phenomenon. Briffault presents us with the unsettling proposition that the explanation may lie in a human psychological universal.

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