

The Creation of Patriarchy



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Oxford University Press. 1986

Introduction

WOMEN'S HISTORY is indispensable and essential to the emancipation of women. After twenty-five years of researching, writing, and teaching Women's History, I have come to this conviction on theoretical and practical grounds. The theoretical argument will be more fully developed in this book; the practical argument rests on my observation of the profound changes in consciousness which students of Women's History experience. Women's History changes their lives. Even short-term exposure to the past experience of women, such as in two-week institutes and seminars, has the most profound psychological effect on women participants.

And yet, most of the theoretical work of modern feminism, beginning with Simone de Beauvoir and continuing to the present, has been ahistorical and negligent of feminist historical scholarship. This was understandable in the early days of the new wave of feminism, when scholarship on the past of women was scant, but in the 1980s, when excellent scholarly work in Women's History is abundantly available, the distance between historical scholarship and feminist criticism in other fields persists. Anthropologists, literary critics, sociologists, political scientists, and poets have offered theoretical work based on "history," but the work of Women's History specialists has not become part of the common discourse. I believe the reasons for this go beyond the sociology of the women doing feminist criticism and beyond the constraints of their academic background and training. The reasons lie in the conflict-ridden and highly problematic relationship of women to history.

What is history? We must distinguish between the unrecorded past—all the events of the past as recollected by human beings—and History—the recorded and interpreted past.* Like men, women are and always have been actors and agents in history. Since women are half and sometimes more than half of humankind, they always have shared the world and its work equally with men. Women are and have been central, not marginal, to the making of society and to the building of civilization. Women have also shared with men in preserving collective memory, which shapes the past into cultural tradition, provides the link between generations, and connects past and future. This oral tradition was kept alive in poem and myth, which both men and women created and preserved in folklore, art, and ritual.

History-making, on the other hand, is a historical creation which dates from the invention of writing in ancient Mesopotamia. From the time of the king lists of ancient Sumer on, historians, whether priests, royal servants, clerks, clerics, or a professional class of university-trained intellectuals, have selected the events to be recorded and have interpreted them so as to give them meaning and significance. Until the most recent past, these historians have been men, and what they have recorded is what men have done and experienced and found significant. They have called this History and claimed universality for it. What women have done and experienced has been left unrecorded, neglected, and ignored in interpretation. Historical scholarship, up to the most recent past, has seen women as marginal to the making of civilization and as unessential to those pursuits defined as having historic significance.

Thus, the recorded and interpreted record of the past of the human race is only a partial record, in that it omits the past of half of humankind, and it is distorted, in that it tells the story from the viewpoint of the male half of humanity only. To counter this argument, as has often been done, by showing that large groups of men, possibly the majority of men, have also for a long time been eliminated from the historical record through the prejudiced interpretations of intellectuals representing the concerns of small ruling elites, is to beg the question. One error does not cancel out another; both conceptual errors need correction. As formerly subordinate groups, such as peasants, slaves, proletarians, have risen into positions of

*In order to emphasize the difference I will spell "history," the unrecorded past, with a lower-case h, and "History," the recorded and interpreted past, with an upper-case H.

power or at least inclusion in the polity, their experiences have become part of the historical record. That is, the experiences of the males of their group; females were, as usual, excluded. The point is that men and women have suffered exclusion and discrimination because of their class. No man has been excluded from the historical record because of his sex, yet all women were.

Women have been kept from contributing to History-making, that is, the ordering and interpretation of the past of humankind. Since this process of meaning-giving is essential to the creation and perpetuation of civilization, we can see at once that women's marginality in this endeavor places us in a unique and segregate position. Women are the majority, yet we are structured into social institutions as though we were a minority.

While women have been victimized by this and many other aspects of their long subordination to men, it is a fundamental error to try to conceptualize women primarily as victims. To do so at once obscures what must be assumed as a given of women's historical situation: Women are essential and central to creating society; they are and always have been actors and agents in history. Women have "made history," yet they have been kept from knowing their History and from interpreting history, either their own or that of men. Women have been systematically excluded from the enterprise of creating symbol systems, philosophies, science, and law. Women have not only been educationally deprived throughout historical time in every known society, they have been excluded from theory-formation. The tension between women's actual historical experience and their exclusion from interpreting that experience I have called "the dialectic of women's history." This dialectic has moved women forward in the historical process.

The contradiction between women's centrality and active role in creating society and their marginality in the meaning-giving process of interpretation and explanation has been a dynamic force, causing women to struggle against their condition. When, in that process of struggle, at certain historic moments, the contradictions in their relationship to society and to historical process are brought into the consciousness of women, they are then correctly perceived and named as deprivations that women share as a group. This coming-into-consciousness of women becomes the dialectical force moving them into action to change their condition and to enter a new relationship to male-dominated society.

Because of these conditions unique to themselves, women have

had a historical experience significantly different from that of men.

I began by asking the question: what are the definitions and concepts we need in order to explain the unique and segregate relationship of women to historical process, to the making of history and to the interpretation of their own past?

Another question which I hoped my study would address concerned the long delay (over 3500 years) in women's coming to consciousness of their own subordinate position in society. What could explain it? What could explain women's historical "complicity" in upholding the patriarchal system that subordinated them and in transmitting that system that subordinated them and in transmitting that system, generation after generation, to their children of both sexes?

Both of these are big and unpleasant questions because they appear to lead to answers indicating women's victimization and essential inferiority. I believe that is the reason these questions have not earlier been addressed by feminist thinkers, although traditional male scholarship has offered us the patriarchal answer: women have not produced important advances in thought because of their biologically determined preoccupation with nurturance and emotion, which led to their essential "inferiority" in regard to abstract thought. I begin instead with the assumption that men and women are biologically different, but that the values and implications based on that difference are the result of culture. Whatever differences are discernible in the present in regard to men-as-a-group and women-as-a-group are the result of the particular history of women, which is essentially different from the history of men. This is due to the subordination of women to men, which is older than civilization, and to the denial of women's history. The existence of women's history has been obscured and neglected by patriarchal thought, a fact which has significantly affected the psychology of men and women.

I began with the conviction, shared by most feminist thinkers, that patriarchy as a system is historical: it has a beginning in history. If that is so, it can be ended by historical process. If patriarchy were "natural," that is, based on biological determinism, then to change it would mean to change nature. One might argue that changing nature is precisely what civilization has done, but that so far most of the benefits of that domination over nature which men call "progress" has accrued to the male of the species. Why and how this happened are historical questions, regardless of how one explains the causes of female subordination. My own hypothesis on

the causes and origins of women's subordination will be more fully discussed in Chapters One and Two. What is important to my analysis is the insight that the relation of men and women to the knowledge of their past is in itself a shaping force in the making of history.

If it were the case that the subordination of women antedated Western civilization, assuming that civilization to have begun with the written historical record, my inquiry had to begin in the fourth millennium B.C. This is what led me, an American historian specializing in the nineteenth century, to spend the last eight years working in the history of ancient Mesopotamia in order to answer the questions I consider essential to creating a feminist theory of history. Although questions of "origin" initially interested me, I soon realized that they were far less significant than questions about the historical process by which patriarchy becomes established and institutionalized.

This process was manifested in changes in kinship organization and economic relations, in the establishment of religious and state bureaucracies, and in the shift in cosmogonies expressing the ascendancy of male god figures. Basing myself on existing theoretical work, I assumed these changes occurred as "an event" in a relatively short period, which might have coincided with the establishment of archaic states or which might have occurred perhaps somewhat earlier, at the time of the establishment of private property, which brought class society into being. Under the influence of Marxist theories of origin, which will be more fully discussed in Chapter One, I envisioned a kind of revolutionary "overthrow" which would have visibly altered existing power relations in society. I expected to find economic changes leading to changes in ideas and religious explanatory systems. Specifically, I was looking for visible changes in the economic, political, and juridical status of women. But as I entered into the study of the rich sources in the history of the Ancient Near East and began to look at them in historical sequence, it became clear to me that my assumption had been too simplistic.

The problem is not one of sources, for these are certainly ample for the reconstruction of a social history of ancient Mesopotamian society. The problem of interpretation is similar to the problem faced by a historian in any field approaching traditional history with questions pertaining to women. There is little substantive work on women available, and what there is, is purely descriptive. No interpretations or generalizations concerning women have as yet been offered by specialists trained in the field.

Thus, the history of women and the history of the changing relations of the sexes in Mesopotamian societies still need to be written. I have the greatest respect for the scholarship and technical and linguistic knowledge of scholars working in Ancient Near Eastern Studies and am certain that from among their ranks will eventually come a work, which will synthesize and put into proper perspective the largely untold story of women's changing social, political, and economic status in the third and second millennia B.C. Not being a trained Assyriologist and being unable to read the cuneiform texts in their original languages, I did not attempt to write such a history.

I did, however, observe that the sequence of events seemed to be rather different from what I had anticipated. While the formation of archaic states, which followed upon or coincided with major economic, technological, and military changes, brought with it distinct shifts in power relations among men, and among men and women, there was nowhere evidence of an "overthrow." The period of the "establishment of patriarchy" was not one "event" but a process developing over a period of nearly 2500 years, from app. 3100 to 600 B.C. It occurred, even within the Ancient Near East, at a different pace and at different times in several distinct societies.

Further, women seemed to have greatly different status in different aspects of their lives, so that, for example, in Babylon in the second millennium B.C. women's sexuality was totally controlled by men, while some women enjoyed great economic independence, many legal rights and privileges and held many important high status positions in society. I was puzzled to find that the historical evidence pertaining to women made little sense, when judged by traditional criteria. After a while I began to see that I needed to focus more on the control of women's sexuality and procreativity than on the usual economic questions, so I began to look for the causes and effects of such sexual control. As I did this, the pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place. I had been unable to comprehend the meaning of the historical evidence before me because I looked at class formation, as it applied to men and women, with the traditional assumption that what was true for men was true for women. When I began to ask how class definition was different for women than for men at the very inception of class society, the evidence before me made sense.

I will, in this book, develop the following propositions:

- a) The appropriation by men of women's sexual and reproductive capacity occurred *prior* to the formation of private property and class society. Its commodification lies, in fact, at the foundation of private property. (Chapters One and Two)

b) The archaic states were organized in the form of patriarchy; thus from its inception the state had an essential interest in the maintenance of the patriarchal family. (Chapter Three)

c) Men learned to institute dominance and hierarchy over other people by their earlier practice of dominance over the women of their own group. This found expression in the institutionalization of slavery, which began with the enslavement of women of conquered groups. (Chapter Four)

d) Women's sexual subordination was institutionalized in the earliest law codes and enforced by the full power of the state. Women's cooperation in the system was secured by various means: force, economic dependency on the male head of the family, class privileges bestowed upon conforming and dependent women of the upper classes, and the artificially created division of women into respectable and not-respectable women. (Chapter Five)

e) Class for men was and is based on their relationship to the means of production: those who owned the means of production could dominate those who did not. For women, class is mediated through their sexual ties to a man, who then gives them access to material resources. The division of women into "respectable" (that is, attached to one man) and "not-respectable" (that is, not attached to one man or free of all men) is institutionalized in laws pertaining to the veiling of women. (Chapter Six)

f) Long after women are sexually and economically subordinated to men, they still play active and respected roles in mediating between humans and gods as priestesses, seers, diviners, and healers. Metaphysical female power, especially the power to give life, is worshiped by men and women in the form of powerful goddesses long after women are subordinated to men in most aspects of their lives on earth. (Chapter Seven)

g) The dethroning of the powerful goddesses and their replacement by a dominant male god occur in most Near Eastern societies following the establishment of a strong and imperialistic kingship. Gradually the function of controlling fertility, formerly entirely held by the goddesses, is symbolized through the symbolic or actual mating of the male god or God-King with the Goddess or her priestess. Finally, sexuality (eroticism) and procreativity are split in the emergence of separate goddesses for each function, and the Mother-Goddess is transformed into the wife/consort of the chief male God. (Chapter Seven)

h) The emergence of Hebrew monotheism takes the form of an attack on the widespread cults of the various fertility goddesses. In

the writing of the Book of Genesis, creativity and procreativity are ascribed to all-powerful God, whose epitaphs of "Lord" and "King" establish him as a male god, and female sexuality other than for procreative purposes becomes associated with sin and evil. (Chapter Eight)

i) In the establishment of the covenant community the basic symbolism and the actual contract between God and humanity assumes as a given the subordinate position of women and their exclusion from the metaphysical covenant and the earthly covenant community. Their only access to God and to the holy community is in their function as mothers. (Chapter Nine)

j) This symbolic devaluing of women in relation to the divine becomes one of the founding metaphors of Western civilization. The other founding metaphor is supplied by Aristotelian philosophy, which assumes as a given that women are incomplete and damaged human beings of an entirely different order than men (Chapter Ten). It is with the creation of these two metaphorical constructs, which are built into the very foundations of the symbol systems of Western civilization, that the subordination of women comes to be seen as "natural," hence it becomes invisible. It is this which finally establishes patriarchy firmly as an actuality and as an ideology.

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP OF IDEAS, and specifically of ideas about gender,* to the social and economic forces that shape history? The matrix of any idea is reality—people cannot conceive of something they have not themselves experienced or at least that others have before them experienced. Thus, images, metaphors, myths all find expression in forms which are "prefigured" through past experience. In periods of change, people reinterpret these symbols in new ways, which then lead to new combinations and new insights.

What I am attempting to do in my book is to trace, by means of historical evidence, the development of the leading ideas, symbols, and metaphors by which patriarchal gender relations were incorporated into Western civilization. Each chapter is built around one of these metaphors for gender, as indicated by the chapter title. In this book I have endeavored to isolate and identify the forms in which Western civilization constructed gender and to study them at moments or in periods of change. These forms consist of social norms

*Sex is the biological given for men and women. Gender is the cultural definition of behavior defined as appropriate to the sexes in a given society at a given time. Gender is a set of cultural roles; therefore it is a cultural product which changes over time. (The reader is urged to consult the sections sex and gender in Definitions, pp. 231-43.)

embodied in social roles, in laws, and in metaphors. In a way, these forms represent historical artifacts, from which it is possible to deduce the social reality which gave rise to the idea or to the metaphor. By tracing the changes in metaphor or image, it should be possible to trace the underlying historical developments in society, even in the absence of other historical evidence. In the case of Mesopotamian society, the abundance of historical evidence makes it possible, in most cases, to confirm one's analysis of symbols by comparison with such hard evidence.

The major gender symbols and metaphors of Western civilization were largely derived from Mesopotamian and, later, from Hebrew sources. It would of course be desirable to extend this study so as to include Arabic, Egyptian, and European influences, but such an enterprise would demand more years of scholarly work than I can, at my age, expect to undertake. I can only hope that my effort at reinterpretation of the available historical evidence will inspire others to continue to pursue the same questions with their specific expertise and the more refined scholarly tools available to them.

When I began this work, I conceived it as a study of the relationship of women to the making of the world's symbol-system, their exclusion from it, their efforts at breaking out of the systematic educational disadvantaging to which they were subjected, and, finally, their coming into feminist consciousness. But as my work in ancient Mesopotamian sources progressed, the richness of the evidence compelled me to enlarge my book to two volumes, the first volume ending in approximately 400 B.C.. The second volume will deal with the rise of feminist consciousness and cover the Christian era.

Although I believe that my hypotheses have wide applicability, I am not, on the basis of the study of one region, attempting to offer "a general theory" on the rise of patriarchy and sexism. The theoretical hypotheses I offer for Western civilization will need to be tested in and compared with other cultures for their general applicability.

AS WE UNDERTAKE THIS EXPLORATION, how are we, then, to think of women-as-a-group? Three metaphors may help us see from our new angle of vision:

In her brilliant 1979 article, Joan Kelly spoke of the new "doubled vision" of feminist scholarship:

. . . woman's place is not a separate sphere or domain of existence but a position within social existence generally. . . . [F]eminist thought

is moving beyond the split vision of social reality it inherited from the recent past. Our actual vantage point has shifted, giving rise to a new consciousness of woman's "place" in family and society. . . . [W]hat we see are not two spheres of social reality (home and work, private and public), but two (or three) sets of social relations.¹

We are adding the female vision to the male and that process is transforming. But Joan Kelly's metaphor needs to be developed one step further: when we see with one eye, our vision is limited in range and devoid of depth. When we add to it the single vision of the other eye, our range of vision becomes wider, but we still lack depth. It is only when both eyes see together that we accomplish full range of vision and accurate depth perception.

The computer provides us with another metaphor. The computer shows us a picture of a triangle (two-dimensional). Still holding that image, the triangle moves in space and is transformed into a pyramid (three-dimensional). Now the pyramid moves in space creating a curve (the fourth dimension), while still holding the image of the pyramid and the triangle. We see all four dimensions at once, losing none of them, but seeing them also in their true relation to one another.

Seeing as we have seen, in patriarchal terms, is two-dimensional. "Adding women" to the patriarchal framework makes it three-dimensional. But only when the third dimension is fully integrated and moves with the whole, only when women's vision is equal with men's vision, do we perceive the true relations of the whole and the inner connectedness of the parts.

Finally, another image. Men and women live on a stage, on which they act out their assigned roles, equal in importance. The play cannot go on without both kinds of performers. Neither of them "contributes" more or less to the whole; neither is marginal or dispensable. But the stage set is conceived, painted, defined by men. Men have written the play, have directed the show, interpreted the meanings of the action. They have assigned themselves the most interesting, most heroic parts, giving women the supporting roles.

As the women become aware of the difference in the way they fit into the play, they ask for more equality in the role assignments. They upstage the men at times, at other times they pinch-hit for a missing male performer. The women finally, after considerable struggle, win the right of access to equal role assignment, but first they must "qualify." The terms of their "qualifications" are again

set by the men; men are the judges of how women measure up; men grant or deny admission. They give preference to docile women and to those who fit their job-description accurately. Men punish, by ridicule, exclusion, or ostracism, any woman who assumes the right to interpret her own role or—worst of all sins—the right to rewrite the script.

It takes considerable time for the women to understand that getting “equal” parts will not make them equal, as long as the script, the props, the stage setting, and the direction are firmly held by men. When the women begin to realize that and cluster together between the acts, or even during the performance, to discuss what to do about it, this play comes to an end.

Looking at the recorded History of society as though it were such a play, we realize that the story of the performances over thousands of years has been recorded only by men and told in their words. Their attention has been mostly on men. Not surprisingly, they have not noticed all the actions women have taken. Finally, in the past fifty years, some women have acquired the training necessary for writing the company’s scripts. As they wrote, they began to pay more attention to what women were doing. Still, they had been well trained by their male mentors. So they too found what men were doing on the whole more significant and, in their desire to upgrade the part of women in the past, they looked hard for women who had done what men did. Thus, compensatory history was born.

What women must do, what feminists are now doing is to point to that stage, its sets, its props, its director, and its scriptwriter, as did the child in the fairy tale who discovered that the emperor was naked, and say, the basic inequality between us lies within this framework. And then they must tear it down.

What will the writing of history be like, when that umbrella of dominance is removed and definition is shared equally by men and women? Will we devalue the past, overthrow the categories, supplant order with chaos?

No—we will simply step out under the free sky. We will observe how it changes, how the stars rise and the moon circles, and we will describe the earth and its workings in male and female voices. We may, after all, see with greater enrichment. We now know that man is not the measure of that which is human, but men and women are. Men are not the center of the world, but men and women are. This insight will transform consciousness as decisively as did Copernicus’s discovery that the earth is not the center of the universe.

We may play our separate parts on the stage, sometimes exchanging them or deciding to keep them, as it works out. We may discover new talent among those who have always been living under the umbrella of another's making. We may find that those who had previously taken upon themselves the burden of both action and definition may now have more freedom for playing and experiencing the pure joy of existence. We are no more under an obligation to describe what we will find than were the explorers sailing to the distant edge of the world, only to find that the world was round.

We will never know unless we begin. The process itself is the way, is the goal.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. Joan Kelly, "The Doubled Vision of Feminist Theory: A Postscript to the "Women and Power" Conference, *Feminist Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Spring 1979), 221-22.