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MALE/FEMALE RELATIONS AND THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL RECORD

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I must first preface my remarks with a brief note on sexual bias and the anthropological record. Most anthropological research until twenty or so years ago was the product of men. There is nothing inherently wrong with male researchers, but in these days it should hardly require emphasizing that male researchers come from a male dominant society and thus are so imbued with a male bias towards the world that most have been totally oblivious of it and the insidious ways in which it can distort observations. Anthropologists have long recognized the importance of distortions induced by ethnocentrism. Only recently have they become more aware of sexual bias. Often implicit in much anthropological research has been the notion that what men do is somehow more important than what women do: men wheel and deal in the realm of community politics while women only sit at home and baby sit.

In human societies there exists a sub-culture identified with each sex. The male anthropologist has then had best access to that of his own sex and has invariably presented it as the culture of the whole society. I believe it is safe to suggest that a woman anthropologist can work more freely and with greater success among the men in a given society than a male anthropologist might work among the women. Certainly it is commendable to have a man and a woman researcher in the same community. In sum, the situation is improving as

anthropologists become more fully conscious of the problem and as more women enter the discipline. In the latter regard a goodly proportion of anthropologists are today women and in the United States it seems that half or more are female.

The body of the remainder of this essay will address some of the contributions of anthropology to the matter of gender relations. At the same time I should like to speak to certain related ideas which have been raised by some of those in the feminist movement -- ideas which might be called matriarchal myths.

I heartily concur with what I understand to be the major theme of this seminar. That is, humanity should be mobilized to counteract domination wherever and however it arises. Too often, feminism as a social movement has veered too closely to being anti-male and expressing a kind of chauvinism which is, as the prospectus states, a mirror image of male domination. This chauvinism has drawn upon certain ideas from ethnology and archaeology to endorse notions of female priority and preeminence. Therefore, it is appropriate to commence this review with a critique of these kinds of argument.

#### Female divinities

There seems to have been a slight revival of ideas which apparently have their roots in Bachofen (Bachofen, J.J., Das Mutterrecht, 1861). These ideas include the view that the more archaic forms of religion center around female divinities. Recently I noticed a new book (whose title I neglected to note down) which argues that the oldest religion was one oriented around female divinities. Now it is clearly so that in later Upper Paleolithic times in Europe there were



numerous female figurines often called "Venuses". These are characteristically featureless in the face, but emphasize large breasts and bellies. Hence they have been interpreted as fertility objects and as evidence of a religious cult in which woman, symbolizing fertility, was the central object of worship. For some it appears that the Venuses are evidence of a universal evolutionary sequence from female divinities later to be usurped by male divinities. This presumably parallels a transformation from matriarchy to patriarchy. We, however, have no way of knowing the specific content of the ideology and ritual of such early Venus cults nor of their place in the total religious system of the time. Additionally, such cults had a limited geographical distribution. They apparently did not exist in Africa or Asia. What may be more important is that they do not represent the earliest form of religious expression. Presently the archaeological record on religion takes us back to Neanderthal, now agreed to have been an archaic race of the species *Homo sapiens* and to have lived from approximately 100,000 to 40,000 years ago. Very little is known of the religious beliefs of these people, but there is no indication of female divinities or the worship of females in any form. It is known that the dead were buried according to customary practice sometimes with objects such as tools, bear skulls or horns. Apparently some Neanderthals practiced ceremonial cannibalism. Numerous bear skulls and their arrangement at several sites suggest a widespread bear cult.

What we may properly conclude on this topic is what has long been recognized: Males have no monopoly on divine status. There have been and there remain around the world both male and female divinities. Patrilineal and patriarchal societies give priority of place to male gods.

But no one can say that goddess worship is either the oldest or even **an** older religion. A universal evolutionary sequence from a female oriented religion to a male oriented one is as much a myth as one which holds to an original universal stage of matriarchy which is the next issue I wish to consider.

#### Matriarchy and matriliney

A persistent thesis has been that matriliney is the oldest form of human social organization. This is a slight variation on the 19th century view especially expounded by Bachofen that the original stage of human society was "promiscuity" followed by matriliney and then by patriliney. Advocates of the priority of matriliney invariably confuse it with matriarchy. But matriliney means the reckoning of descent through a line of females and the inheritance of rights and **property** through that line. Matriarchy means female domination: the rule of women. Those who equate matriliney with matriarchy and then proceed to argue that this is somehow a more original form of human social organization since usurped by men are in essence looking back nostalgically at a "dream time" when women presumably ruled men. In other words this view I believe too frequently betrays a **sexist**, anti-male bias.

There is no evidence that matriarchy-- the rule of women-- has ever existed anywhere. Certainly among known matrilineal societies there are no matriarchies and those who tend to equate the two must have little real appreciation of how matrilineal societies operate. In <sup>those</sup> matrilineal societies in which the residence pattern on marriage requires the groom to live in the house of his bride's mother (matrilocal residence) an equality between the sexes is approached. Under these residential



conditions the married males are always outsiders while the females are a close knit group of kin settled in their own home. They acquire a kind of command by prior right and occupancy. This does not mean that women will necessarily prevail over men in all areas of social life. It is difficult to generalize for all matrilineal- matrilocal societies, but it does appear that more often than not women have the upper hand within the household and the matrilineage, while in affairs of the community at large and of major religious matters matrilineally related men are most influential.

Of all matrilineal-matrilocal societies the Iroquois Indians of New York state in the United States were probably the most egalitarian in sexual relations.

A husband has no authority over his wife. One woman, urged by her spouse to do something against her will replied; "I am my own mistress. I do what I choose; and do thou what thou chooseth." The wife enjoys strictly independent property rights. She alone exercises authority over the children. She is the mistress of the apartment in the long house occupied by the family. The husband always goes to live with his wife, and he is present in the home only on sufferance (Murdock, 302).

An Iroquois matrilineage which included the matrilineally related females in a single "long house" was administered by a senior female in the group. A number of these lineages constituted a clan which in turn was under a body of chiefs and a council upon which both men and women sat. Each of the five Iroquois tribes had its council of chiefs drawn from the member clans and for all the Iroquois there was a supreme council of fifty chiefs. These individuals were always men, but they were nominated by an assembly of women. Additionally, both men and women were allowed to participate in discussions with the chiefs at both the tribal and all-Iroquois council meetings.

With the Iroquois it is to be noted how the most local levels of social integration-- the family and the matrilineage-- are controlled

more by women. These institutions come closest to matriarchy. But with social units encompassing these smaller units and with the ultimate integrative institution of the whole society, men become preeminent. A majority of the remaining matrilineal-matrilocal societies have not been so sexually egalitarian as the Iroquois.

A considerable number of matrilineal societies do not practice matrilocal residence. George Murdock observed that of twenty seven matrilineal societies he recorded, 13 had matrilocal residence while six had avunculocal residence (where a married couple lives with the groom's mother's brother). Six others were patrilocal and two were matri-patrilocal (where matrilocal residence for a short initial period is followed by permanent patrilocal residence). Thus in more than half the cases of matrilineal residence is associated with a male-oriented household.

This suggests that matrilineal may not be a highly stable form of social organization since while descent is through the females there is pressure on the part of the males to extend their influence. Indeed, avunculocal residence is one resolution to the dialectic opposition between matrilineal and masculinity, since it preserves the former while insuring the dominance of a group of males related through females. A great number, if not a majority, of societies in the so-called matrilineal belt of south central Africa are avunculocal. This allows for a group of matrilineally related males to remain in the maternal village and so maintain close surveillance on the farm lands owned by the matrilineal group.

Where patrilocal residence or for that matter neolocal residence exists in conjunction with matrilineal descent, the household comes under the control of men who are not matrilineally related. Such a situation often leads to a transformation to a bilateral non-lineal



or patrilineal mode of descent reckoning.

In sum, a matrilineal society may provide greater equality between male and female especially where it practices matrilocal residence. The importance of the woman's role is most marked and sometimes is characterized by female preeminence at the most local levels of social integration. For more all encompassing levels men come more to the fore and tend to prevail. And for matrilineal societies which practice other forms of residence patterns these as well bring men into preeminence.

It would be my hypothesis however that sexual asymmetry is less pronounced in those societies which have no unilineal principle of descent and are bilateral. Pygmy society in the African tropical rain forest is noticeable for its egalitarian and anarchic social organization. There is no unilineal descent system and not much property either. Women participate freely in community debate as equals with men and clearly evidence equality with their husbands in the management of the household. Even modern Western societies which are non-lineal as well but where property is of paramount significance, tolerate more sexual equality today than do most matrilineal societies.

Is matrilineality the oldest form of human social organization or did it everywhere precede patrilineality? The nineteenth century evolutionary argument held that all societies evolved from an original state of promiscuity, followed by a condition of universal matrilineality and eventually, the ultimate victory of the male in patrilineality. In the present state of our knowledge there is no evidence for a stage of promiscuity within the history of human or human-like populations possessing culture. For all cultures for which there is any record there have been mechanisms of social control. Sex and kinship

relations especially have been matters of careful definition, even though some people's definitions might appear promiscuous to others. Matriliney seems to have arisen in conjunction with the rise of horticulture as a major source of subsistence. This would have been about ten or twelve thousand years ago. In all likelihood the earliest gardeners were women, transferring their older practice of seed and plant gathering to garden activity once domesticated plants were adopted. In such a situation gardens would pass from mother to daughter and one would have matrilineal descent, particularly as the gardens became an increasingly important source of sustenance. And as gardens became more important matrilineal residence would become more widespread since the family household should be centered with the main source of wealth-- the woman's garden. However, as gardening transformed into agriculture where there is extensive cultivation of permanent fields with the use of draft animals and where large populations are sustained totally by an agricultural mode of production the role of men became more important. Men usurped the females, coming to command the fields and instituting patriliney. However, it cannot be said that this scenario is universally true. Many societies were never matrilineal at all and not a few have been patrilineal and later transformed to matriliney.

Older than any form of dependence upon domesticated plants or animals is the hunting-gathering mode of production which characterized human societies for a couple of million years and still survived until most recently in a few isolated parts of the globe. The typical pattern



of social organization of such societies is what has been called the patriloc~~al~~ band. This is a small group of from ten to fifty individuals who move about together and exploit a common territory. The group is centered~~d~~ around a core of related males, mostly fathers and sons. It is called patriloc~~al~~ because the typical practice is for a man to remain in the band of his father and bring his wife to it from another band. This, it is suggested, arises because, for whatever reason, hunting **is** considered of primary importance and a **man**, who is the hunter, raised within a certain territory would know it best and so be more successful in it than in some strange location.

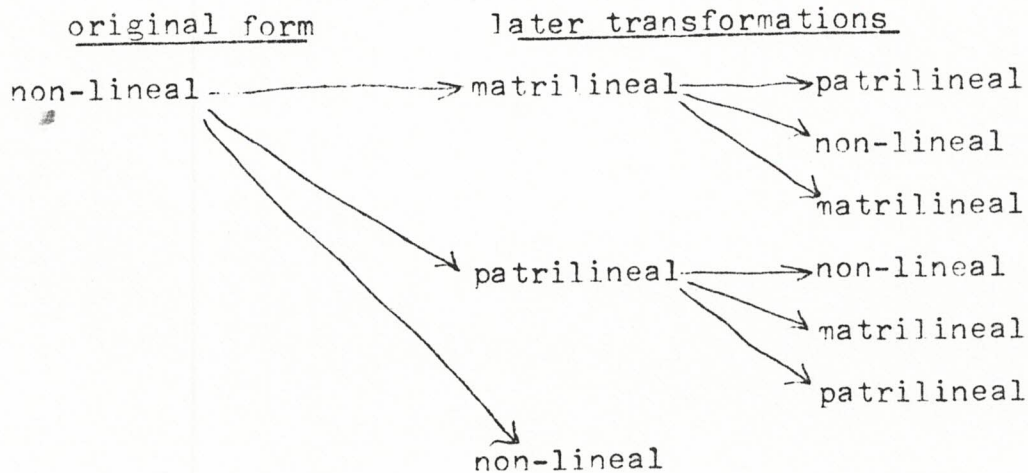
Despite this paternal emphasis such societies are not patrilineal. As in modern western society they were non-lineal. Neither my father's kin nor my mother's kin achieves a monopoly status. It is bilateral since both sides of the family are seen as approximately the same. Thus, kinship terms of reference are the same for both sides of the family ( e.g., uncle refers to both father's brother and mother's brother. Aunt refers to both father's sister and mother's sister and cousin refers to any offspring of these<sup>\*</sup>).

From what we know of hunting gathering societies it would appear that the oldest form of human social organization is some kind of non-lineal, bilateral band organization. At the same time it is interesting to note that the non-lineal kin system of western societies arose out of an older patrilineal system during the first millenium of the Christian era.

Perhaps the various transformations in social organization can be summarized in the following diagram:

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\* Not all hunting-gatherers had this kind of terminology. The above is an example of bilaterality having common occurrence.



### Patriarchy and patriliney

The majority of people in the world today live in patrilineal patriarchal style societies (China, Southwest Asia, most of India and most of Africa and much of southeast Asia). Such societies are particularly associated with agriculture, a rural/urban dichotomy, the centralized state, social classes, <sup>and</sup> hierarchical religious systems. In a word practically all the forms of domination are fitted together under one roof. How this situation came to be and especially how it arose out of an original much more egalitarian society is a complex question which will undoubtedly never be fully answered. Engels, of course, blamed the enormous increase in the significance of private property although it is not exactly clear how we get from a society with an egalitarian ethos to one of domination and property. To help explain this process others have stressed the increasing role in simpler, more egalitarian societies of important men as centers of the redistribution of goods, as, for example, the "Big Men" in New Guinea or the "chiefs" among potlatching West Coast American Indians. At any rate it does seem to be a common process that as an activity acquires more central economic and political significance it comes more under male control.



This seems to be what happened with the expansion of horticultural activity into agriculture. While there are both matrilineal and patrilineal horticultural societies there are very few matrilineal agricultural societies. In the vast majority of agricultural societies men prevail, and agricultural societies involve considerable property in land, livestock and implements. In the western world today it seems that many sports at the amateur level are shared by members of both sexes, but when they become professional, money making operations they become a male monopoly. One might wonder whether the ultimate reason for such a process -- if it is a process -- must go back to human dimorphism and its implications: Men are bigger and more muscular than women. Also child bearing and nursing delimit a woman's activities outside the home, whereas men are far less curtailed.

Above I have tried to show that there is a wide variation in the relations between the sexes in matrilineal societies. Similarly the extent of male domination in patrilineal societies varies considerably and as with matrilineal societies so in the patrilineal ones women have more influence in the family group than they do in the community or society at large. I believe that as men have not fairly gauged the role of women in many societies so also feminists have unfairly evaluated it in some patrilineal societies. Muslim societies have been frequent objects of castigation for their treatment of females. Muslim society is obviously a male dominant world and despite what Muslim modernists might say the teaching of Islam is that men and women are inherently unequal. Men are above women. At the same time in its early days Islam was a liberalizing force for women in Arabia as well as elsewhere and many women were active in public affairs. Soon

however, the movement became frozen and static. Among other things Muslims came to adopt the veil from Byzantine upper classes where it was a sign that the family was so wealthy that women did not have to work. Yet there is no regulation in Islam that women must be veiled. Indeed, Islamic rules gave greater freedom in many areas of life to women than members of that sex enjoyed in much of the western world down to the early twentieth century. For instance, Islamic law provides that a woman may own and manage property independently of her spouse which was not the case <sup>in</sup> most of the west until very recent times. Also in Islamic society women on marriage do not adopt their husband's name but retain their own. Finally, in Muslim society women have been active behind the scenes operators and in the close family circle have exerted great influence. In the Egyptian peasant village the senior woman in the family is in full control of the kitchen, a situation which can have extremely widespread repercussions, since male prestige is based heavily upon the demonstration of generosity and hospitality, symbolized most often in food.

#### The division of labor

The anthropological literature has long recognized the arbitrary nature of the sexual division of labor in different societies, the point being that there are actually only two jobs which are determined by one's sex: child bearing and breast feeding. Other activities are determined by local cultural tradition. Yet, hunting, feuding and warfare seem to be almost exclusively male domains. There is recent evidence to suggest that prolonged, vigorous physical activity in women inhibits fertility and, thus, it is argued, those societies which curtailed such activity in women would produce more offspring and have a higher likelihood of survival ( See, e.g., Graham, Susan B.).



Depending upon the cultural milieu, men in one society may be seen as the only individuals to make pots, while in another this is a job appropriate only for women. The same is true for basket-making or house building or other crafts. It is no more 'natural' for women to be nurses or office secretaries than it is for men to be dentists or carpenters.

In recent years anthropological investigations have given greater recognition to the contribution of women in various societies. This is in part because more women have become involved in research so that one is given a different perspective than the traditional male's eye view. It was once thought that man the hunter provided the great bulk of the food for hunting gathering communities. Now it is recognized that the hunting activity outside the Arctic regions provides less than half of the food requirements and woman's foraging the bulk of it. Studies show as well that among horticultural and agricultural people women often contribute more than their share of the physical labor.

In an interesting book, On Becoming Human, Nancy Makepeace Tanner convincingly argues a crucial role for women in the early evolution of our species. She holds that the "key innovation" for the transition from a pongid (ape-like) to a hominid population was perhaps the sharing of food between mother and offspring. Food sharing and nursing were also the crucial elements in the survival of offspring. The most effective food gatherer was a woman who thus could better feed herself and her young, could live longer, bear more children and with a higher survival rate. In so doing she would make a major if not the major contribution towards the improvement of the stock.

We are prone to attribute technological innovations to men, but Tanner believes the invention of early gathering technology-- tools and containers

/ for acquiring and processing seeds, nuts, roots, fruit and leaves-- must have been achieved by women. They were the gatherers and additionally the nutritional stress of child bearing and nursing may have added a spur to such invention.

Among peasant societies women are frequently portrayed as being immersed in drudgery. This, however, is the general condition of peasant life for both men and women. Nevertheless, the employment of draft animals by peasants and by others has tended to alleviate the woman's lot. Much of the carrying and pulling by women is taken over by draft animals and men. The latter have invariably been the teamsters of the world and thus work with oxen or horses has been under male direction.

Another interesting case of "women's liberation" brought about through the adoption of a domesticated animal is that of the Plains Indians, the buffalo hunters of the North American plains. In the days before the adoption of the horse women carried most of belongings on a change of campsite and ,of course, everyone walked. With the acquisition of the horse it became the beast of burden as well as providing everyone with a ride.

I will conclude this section with a final note of irony. The Muslim practice of veiling and of the seclusion of women as well as the Chinese practice of foot binding inhibit labor in the fields. Indeed, a strict enforcement of veiling and seclusion has freed women from such work.



### Female mutilation

• In the past decade or so feminists have discovered that in various places around the world-- especially in Africa-- women are subjected to bodily mutilations. Particularly disturbing to them are those involving the sexual organs. The most drastic of these operations is infibulation. Less traumatic is clitoridectomy. Some years ago I published a book on my investigations of a village in the northern Sudan (Buurri al Lamaab, A Suburban Village in the Sudan). Much to my surprise I now find that perhaps its only notoriety is derived from the few pages I devoted to a description of infibulation. Obviously an objective evaluation of this operation would only show that it produces totally unnecessary pain and trauma. It certainly achieves nothing of what its advocates allege. Even the alleged ends are unacceptable. Yet I cannot help but question those who make a single minded crusade to wipe out infibulation (Their inevitable solution is to have the state suppress it). These individuals usually see the operation in vacuo, as not being integrally tied up with other aspects of the social life. They see it as well as a form of torture imposed upon women by a dominant and sadistic class of old men. Actually infibulation is a ritual for acceptance into the female society and elderly grandmothers are among its chief advocates. Like any other long established practice merely to attempt to extricate the mutilation alone may create considerable social repercussions producing more stress than peace. It is not only the mutilation which must disappear but a host of related ideas as well and this can only be accomplished by education.

It is interesting that sexual mutilations are so stressed when

in Africa there are innumerable other forms as well: scarification of the face, the back, the chest, knocking out teeth, stretching the neck and stretching the lips by use of enormous lip plugs. And finally several of these forms of mutilation including sexual mutilations are performed on men as well as women. In a great many societies mutilation rites apply only to men and not to females. In some areas male sexual mutilation can be as traumatic as infibulation for a girl. Thus, there is the practice of the circumcision of adolescent boys and there are cases where this means flaying the penis. Tribes of Australian aborigines have not only practiced circumcision of adolescent boys, but sub incision and even removal of a testicle.\* Happily many of these forms of mutilation are dying out as also infibulation and circumcision of females is on the decline in many parts of Africa. It may give cause for thought to consider that if all the various mutilations concocted by humankind were performed on a single living human body its appearance, at least to us, would be more like a hacked up piece of meat. Those who anguish only over female sexual mutilation practices would be taken more seriously if they anguished as well over all forms of mutilation including those performed upon males.

#### Inborn sexual attributes

A common western notion is that men are by their inherent nature dominant and aggressive, competitive and rational.

Women are alleged to be retiring, passive and emotional.

Comparative ethnography demonstrates that these qualities are heavil

\* The latter also has a scattered occurrence in Africa.



influenced by differing cultural values. No doubt in a majority of cultures men are considered properly more dominant and aggressive. Yet there are people in Sub-Saharan Africa and New Guinea, for example amongst whom women are quite aggressive. There are others such as Hutterites, Amish or some Pueblo Indians, who strongly discourage aggressive behavior in both sexes. In Iran it is the men who are expected to be emotional and to weep in public; women should be more stoic and self-controlled. I do not suggest that all these qualities are entirely culturally determined-- that is, learned. Men and women are biologically different and the behavior of males amongst mammalian species does differ from that of females. "Unisex" may be so for ameoba, but it isn't for humans and other mammals. The peculiarity of the human species is, however, that what is biologically given is so often of less importance than the ability of humans to mould and alter behavior through the cultural process.

### Conclusion

The anthropological record suggests that there are certain social and cultural forms which are more compatible with sexual equality. The most favorable mode of subsistence would be either horticultural or hunting-gathering. Among other things there is in this context less opportunity for property accumulation and the creation therefore of social differences in power and wealth. Reciprocity, which reinforces the concept of equality, is a central mechanism for economic distribution. Markets and redistribution tend to be less important and the lesser their importance the greater likelihood for more equality.

The appropriate society would have either a non-lineal bilateral or a matrilineal- matrilocal form of kinship organization. Most political milieux which approach sexual equality are acephalous and stateless. Others may be organized around elected councils. It must be borne in mind that none of these factors alone means sexual equality, nor is the presence of all of them in one society any guarantee. Exceptions are significant. There are matrilineal societies where sexual asymmetry is more pronounced than in some patrilineal societies. Australian aboriginal societies have been noted for their dominance by elder males. Finally, these remarks are not to be taken as advocacy of one or another of these social patterns. I do not support a return to a hunting gathering or a horticultural way of life.

It might be suggested that those societies which downplay warfare and feuding would also tend towards sexual equality since this would mean a deemphasis upon the macho male aggressive image. On the other hand, let us recall that the Iroquois were one of the most sexually egalitarian societies. They were hardly pacifists. Indeed, they acquired no small reputation for their refinement of techniques for the torture of war prisoners.

Sexual equality does not correlate with patriliney and the history of state organization indicates the clear association of that institution with male dominance. The contemporary state in the western world is somewhat of an anomaly in that women have been achieving some improvement in their status within it and perhaps in spite of it. One may suspect that within the present circle of power brokers the sexual factor is no longer perceived as that important.



We know that a Margaret Thatcher can be as warlike and aggressive as a Ronald Reagan. In other words reflecting on earlier remarks above, the female of the species is not inherently passive and retiring. She can and will learn and employ the tricks of state management as readily as her male counterpart. Further current events indicate that state domination is not merely some aspect of a monster conspiracy for male domination. State systems are adaptable -- one reason for their good survival record-- and if they can be made to prosper with female participation and direction we are learning that this makes no difference. The state is more important than the sex.

In the religious-ideological realm Christianity, Islam and Judaism have long been incompatible with sexual equality. In the last decade, however, certain Protestant denominations of the non-"fundamentalist" variety have assumed the cause of women's equality. This suggests that these male dominated religions can be altered. As with the state and sex, so with religion, when it is a matter of survival of the religious system or of male dominance in that system, it is the latter which will give way.

In this essay I have tried to suggest that the female contribution to human society has been underestimated. In stressing economic contributions I have slighted the women's role in other areas of life. The often subtle influence of the female in communal decision making and family affairs is more fully recognized. Of course, we will never know what the full contribution of the female might have been to human society since it has been so widely

inhibited. But at the same time we will never know what the contribution of millions of peasants and other exploited people around the world might have been either and for similar reasons. This gets back to my early observation on the theme of this seminar: that it is domination in all its forms which is the adversary. Feminists who direct their energy and hostility against males are not attacking the enemy. The enemy includes all those-- male and female alike-- who perpetuate systems of oppression.

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