

10 The Source of the Nile: In Search of the Origins of Male Domination

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A FRIEND ONCE told me about his visit to a large agricultural community in Northern Somalia living by the principle of 'Islamic communism'. Having listened to his hosts' long explanation of their egalitarian principles and structures, this friend (who was comfortably lying on a carpet drinking tea and chewing 'khat' leaves with some men of the community) asked about the role of women (who had humbly served their tea in silence). Caught off guard by the unusual question, the charismatic chief and religious leader replied with an expression exuding both irritation and 'man to man' complicity: 'Well, you know, even the Prophet says it, women are *similar* to men, but not equal.'

Spurred on by a concept so candidly expressed, I would like to travel backwards into the history of humanity in search of the origins of the idea, informing the most deep-rooted human cultures for millennia, which we can define here with the general term of patriarchal culture.

Before I set out to complete this gruelling task, some clarifications are required. First and foremost, a necessary declaration of modesty. As I embarked on this research I somewhat boldly set myself the aim of arriving at the origins of sexual inequality. Yet, as the research unfolded, my audacity was frustrated. I felt, if I may be allowed the comparison, something similar to what Livingstone must have felt when, moving up the Nile, he found only bifurcations fading into uncharted territories, and never the source he had hoped for. Once more we are reminded that there are more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy. There are many more expeditions to be organised, trails to be explored and disappointments to be suffered before we can reach its mythical source. But the adventure loses none of its fascination. Just as Livingstone in his long and troubled search could not benefit from the cold precision of

satellite images, so must we work without any sophisticated technical equipment, accepting the intrinsic limits of human knowledge. Humanity is fully immersed in its own culture and cannot hope to view itself objectively from sidereal heights. We are left with no choice but to accept the unease of a long research, armed with some certainties and many questions.

One of these certainties is implicit in the statement of our intentions: if one sets out to look for the origins it is to be taken for granted that such origins exist, that sexual asymmetry is not a fact of nature but a fact of culture. Without going into the details, which will be provided in the next pages, it is enough for now to note that if sexual asymmetry were a fact of nature, stamped on human biology, we would be caught in an inexplicable paradox: woman's refusal of her 'natural' condition. If female subordination were *genetically* determined, woman would be totally and unarguably identified with her nature, her consciousness and her being perfectly superimposed one upon the other. Quite in contrast, today (a today which began with the birth of the movement for the emancipation of women at the end of the eighteenth century) we are witnessing woman's inconceivable refusal of her 'nature'. In the very act of rebellion, conceiving of the inconceivable, women are declaring that female 'inferiority' does not arise from nature, but is a product of culture. As such, it has an origin and can be modified.

Before embarking on the search for these origins, I would like to briefly outline the forms assumed by sexual asymmetry in societies with a patriarchal culture. That is to say, those societies which have a hierarchical social structure split into a public sphere and a domestic sphere, the former shaping and determining the latter; in which women are relegated to the domestic sphere and are excluded from political power, whatever their economic roles may be, and must submit to male domination in the domestic sphere as well; in which an inegalitarian culture orders the meanings attributed to male and female attitudes and activities along hierarchical lines. Societies with a patriarchal culture are therefore societies which, while exhibiting some difference between them, are situated within the space of domination and are characterised by two intertwining divisions: the public sphere and men on one hand, and the domestic sphere and women on the other. By public sphere, I mean those institutions, activities and forms of association that exist over and above the family unit and in which domination develops, providing a hierarchical model on which the entire society is then moulded. This is the area of male competence in society. By domestic sphere, I mean those 'minimal institutions' formed around the basic social unit (that of the family, extended or otherwise) predominantly determined by the public sphere. This is the area of female competence.

How and why these divisions come into being we will consider later. For the moment it is enough to outline the general profile of this disharmonic society which combines a hierarchical social structure with a culture ordered around concepts of 'superior' and 'inferior' and, obviously, attributes the superior values to the dominating male sphere and the inferior values to the dominated female sphere.

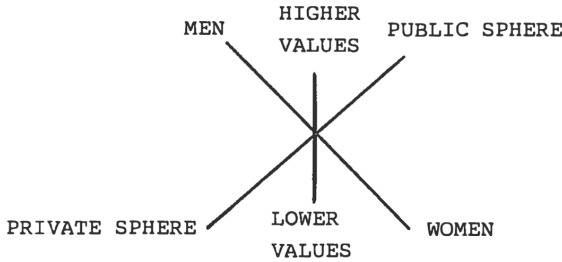


Figure 10.1 The three figures in this chapter were drawn by Amedeo Bertolo.

On the basis of this inequalitarian social order, we have antithetical images of two prevailing sexual genders. On the one hand, there is the Man, the central, determining element of society, thanks to his supposedly abstract, rational, active, assertive 'nature'. All decision-making power is in his hands; it is he who chiefly develops cultural values (including the very definition of woman); it is he who occupies the most prestigious social positions, whatever these may be. Then there is the woman, a peripheral, marginal element of the social body because of her supposedly practical, impulsive, passive, subordinate 'nature'; she occupies social positions of little or no prestige. While man, the social actor, is defined in terms of his role, profiting from the plurality of choice offered him by society, woman, the social object, is defined in terms of her relationship to a man, subjected to the only socially accepted model of life: marriage (that is, the legal passage from parental authority to marital authority) and maternity.

In patriarchal cultures, representations of social roles rely on two abstract definitions. First is the common conception of the social structure as a pyramid in which the upper part is occupied by the masculine gender, and the lower by the feminine gender.

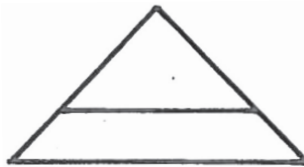


Figure 10.2

This simplification is theoretically forced and in no way does justice to the much more articulated asymmetrical relationship between the sexes. This could be better illustrated by two semi-pyramids, split along the vertical median in such a way that the vertex and every successive level of the feminine semi-pyramid is lower than the vertex and each corresponding level of the masculine semi-pyramid. Thus, *under equal conditions*, the social status of the woman is always inferior to that of the man.

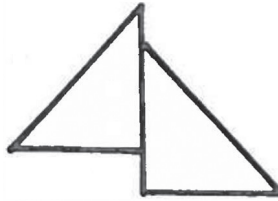


Figure 10.3

For this reason, it is preferable to use the term sexual ‘asymmetry’ to define this more complex configuration of society, avoiding the term ‘inequality’, which brings to mind the abstract dichotomic vision of the simple pyramid.

The second abstraction to be found in the above images is also due to the fact that these are generalisations, ideal models, and do not coincide perfectly with the dynamic reality of the different patriarchal cultures. This lack of alignment is evident in contemporary Western society in which such conceptions seem to be, partly, out-of-date clichés, extreme cases which are no longer fair representations of social reality. To be sure, it seems quite unthinkable to maintain that the woman in Western countries today is a mere social object, marginal and without influence.

While it is undeniable that, until the last few decades, the ideal model coincided with the reality in society, it is equally undeniable that the female condition is changing rapidly and widely. Even if a large number, possibly the majority, of women today still fall within the bounds of the above definition, a substantial minority show this definition to be, fortunately, obsolete. In the Western world the forms of sexual asymmetry are becoming ever more blurred and its very existence ever more opposed so that it is now possible to talk about the ‘crisis’ of the patriarchal culture. This crisis forms part of a more general subversion of the system of values on which Western society is based, a process which is too complex to be included in this study. For our purposes now it is enough to state that the problem of sexual asymmetry in Western society must be considered with an analytic lucidity that sweeps away all those clumsy theoretical simplifications which it has undergone. This lucidity will also allow us to consider an idea which

is inherent to the libertarian point of view: sexual asymmetry may be modified and even disappear without causing any substantial modification to the overall inegalitarian structure of society.

Returning to the core of the problem, the first macroscopic fact to consider when reflecting on sexual asymmetry is that its presence is so widespread as to give credence to the hypothesis of its *universality*. The vast majority of anthropologists have already expressed such a belief. This presumed universality does indeed seem to be confirmed on a first analysis, as Michelle Rosaldo (1974) tells us, by both a synchronic investigation of existing societies and a diachronic investigation of known ones. While Rosaldo, and most anthropologists with her, do not ignore the myths and archaeological evidence which would seem to prove the greater social importance of women in some prehistoric societies, they believe that the highly speculative theories interpreting such myths and evidence cannot be verified. This prudence seems further motivated by the fact that societies which seemed to have reversed the man/woman relationship, on deeper analysis reveal the 'classic' asymmetry, delegating the ultimate power to a male member of the mother's family rather than of the father's.

Human culture seems to be characterised by this homogeneous trait, which is repeated over time and space in otherwise widely different societies. Countless myths explain the origins of the asymmetric relationship between the sexes and they are surprisingly similar despite the thousands of years or miles separating the cultures which produced them.* It does not therefore seem far-fetched to proclaim that the universality of sexual asymmetry is a necessary fact of human culture.

In order to verify the validity of this hypothesis we can accept the unintended assistance of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969: 8), who declares that

it is easy to recognize universality as the criterion of nature, for what is constant in man falls necessarily beyond the scope of customs, techniques and institutions whereby his groups are differentiated and contrasted . . . Let us suppose then that everything universal in man relates to the natural order, and is characterized by spontaneity, and that everything subject to a norm is cultural and is both relative and particular.

If this definition is accepted, the supposed universality of sexual asymmetry would endow man/woman domination with the biologically inexorable

* One can note for example the extraordinary resemblance between the myths of various Amerindian tribes such as the Yámana-Yaghan or the Selk'nam (Bamberger 1974) and the Babylonian myth of Tiamat and Marduk (Stone 1978).

character that we have already challenged. On the other hand, Lévi-Strauss himself declares that where there is the Norm, there is culture. It only remains for us to determine whether sexual asymmetry is constant, uniform and uncodified, and thus natural, or if it is diversified, not constant, codified and thus cultural.

It seems clear that in no civilisation is the social behaviour of the sexes left to chance, to the realm of 'spontaneity', but is instead the subject of meticulous social regulations. In fact, once certain biological determinations have been fixed, nature withdraws, leaving sexual behaviour unspecified. This open space is immediately invaded by culture, whose primordial role, again in the words of Lévi-Strauss (1969: 32), 'is to ensure the group's existence as a group, and consequently, in this domain as in all others, to replace chance by organization', when in fact 'it is impossible for culture not to introduce some sort of order where there is none'.*

We are hence dealing with culture, not with nature, as is confirmed by the astonishing variety of gendered behaviours and roles across human civilisations: if in all societies we find a gendered division of social work, what are to be considered feminine roles and behaviours and what are considered to be masculine varies greatly across societies. This is yet another confirmation that the social behaviour of the two sexes is not based on instinctual factors which impose universal models of behaviour but rather on cultural elaborations which vary greatly across societies. After all, not only is sexual asymmetry explained by myths (which implies the necessity of providing some justification for it) but every society meticulously codifies the particular form it assumes in that cultural context. This excludes the hypothesis of a uniform and uncodified sexual asymmetry. We have yet to clarify why a large part of anthropology (feminists included) has seen sexual asymmetry as a universal phenomenon.

I shall briefly anticipate the discussion of the following pages and say that this ostensible universality is the fruit of a distorted reading, widespread in anthro-

* There are few roles that do not seem to be interchangeable between the sexes and these are apparently determined by biological factors: woman's ability to procreate and man's greater physical strength. The former seems to determine the maternal role, transforming a biological fact into a social function. The second seems to determine those male roles related to the use of violence, such as war and hunting. To us it seems, nonetheless, that, despite the apparent universality of these role attributions, they are in fact cultural elaborations of simple biological facts. The biological fact of procreation, for example, does not imply all the complex and protracted social, affective and economic relationships making up the mother-child relationship. And, equally, it does not seem at all obvious that man's *average* greater physical strength necessarily implies the monopoly of violence.

pology, which assumes as general a given fact that is in fact partial. Such an error of perspective is quite typical of Western culture's arrogant aspiration to reduce the world to 'its own image'. Imbued with ethnocentric philosophy, Western culture projects hierarchy, its organising principle, on to all other human societies, thus reducing reality to its societal model of domination.

It is for this reason that sexual asymmetry, like every other cultural trait of the society of domination, becomes universal, in the same way that domination does. Thus, the partial reality of patriarchal culture, that is, the coexistence of a hierarchical social structure with sexual asymmetry, is transformed into an absolute reality when it is in fact *a universal cultural trait of societies of domination*.

Having clarified the origin of the misunderstood universality of sexual asymmetry, we will later explore the still little-known societies without domination and without history (to use Pierre Clastres's definition) in order to verify whether the absence of domination brings about, per se, the disappearance of sexual asymmetry.

It would be as well to pause for a moment on the problem of ethnocentrism before continuing with a deeper analysis of the relationship between power and sexual asymmetry. Clastres (1989: 16–17) declares:

The still robust adversary was recognized long ago, the obstacle constantly blocking anthropological research: the ethnocentrism that mediates all attention directed to differences in order to reduce them to *identity* [my emphasis] and finally suppress them . . . Ethnology, on the other hand, wants to situate itself directly within the realm of universality without realizing that in many respects it remains firmly entrenched in its particularity, and that its pseudo-scientific discourse quickly deteriorates into genuine ideology.

We have just seen how this perspective has brought a good part of anthropology to consider as universal those societies with coercive political power (again Clastres's definition), and their specific cultural traits, such as sexual asymmetry. The rejection of this formulation has gained further critical depth in what we can define as 'feminist' anthropology, originating in the United States in the 1970s. Feminist anthropology's major contribution lies in the detection of a specific facet of Western ethnocentrism which is key for the analysis of sexual asymmetry: androcentrism.

By androcentrism, as the word itself shows, we mean Western anthropology's male-centred vision of reality. It imposes an asymmetrical reading of the relationships between the sexes on to its description of other societies, while

marginalising the role of women in society by subsuming it into that of men or ignoring it altogether. Thus, the history of the human species becomes the history of man while the ‘second sex’ sinks into an undefined world, a mere backdrop to the ‘true’ protagonist in the human adventure: the Man.

Evans-Pritchard’s (1940: 7, my emphasis) declaration in his classic research into the Nuer can be seen as paradigmatic in understanding the androcentric approach of traditional anthropology: ‘The Nuer, like all other peoples, are also socially differentiated according to sex. This dichotomy has a very limited, and negative, significance for the structural relations which form the subject of this book. *Its importance is domestic rather than political* and little attention is paid to it.’¹ The whole problem of women’s absence from the political sphere is dismissed here in a few words, to the point that it no longer appears as a problem, but rather as the given, unchallenged reality which is shared by both the person who writes and those he writes on.

Feminist anthropologists have risen up against this androcentric approach, putting the entire methodological framework of traditional anthropology on trial with the declared aim of bringing the social world of women out of the depths to which the male-centred culture has relegated it. There are two problems of particular urgency for this research: to address the startling lack of data left by Western anthropology and to critically reassess the existing data so as to extract from this history of men written by men a truer and more complete image of women, and so of the human species. This must be the preliminary aim of any definitive research into sexual asymmetry.

The enthusiasm necessary for this challenging task comes from the women’s liberation movement, which has undeniably influenced the development of feminist anthropology. The need to reconstruct the unknown identity of the second sex was born within the women’s liberation movement, and in feminist anthropology this need becomes the attempt to rewrite the history of the human species freed of the androcentric prejudices that have characterised it up to now.

Nevertheless, while we have to credit the feminist movement for imitating this revolutionary turn in anthropological research, it has also passed down some of its limits, or, better, those of the mainstream feminist movement.*

¹ See Chapter 9, footnote 2.

* It is incorrect to speak of the women’s liberation movement as one monolithic structure and sharing a single analysis. We are in fact dealing with an extremely multifaceted movement which legitimately contains opposing positions. In particular, we cannot overlook the existence of a minority with a libertarian practice and analysis (the anarcho-feminist tendency) whose positions are far from the ones to be criticised. All the same, it is undeniable that the majority of the feminist movement shares those positions.

First of all, the movement continually falls prey to the analytical simplification that we identified earlier in the horizontal stratification of the sexes (see Fig 10.2 above).² This is an optical-theoretical illusion which reduces reality to a false dichotomy in which the female element is laden with positive qualities while the male element, demonised, is laden with purely negative traits. This dichotomy gives us two images which are overly idealised and abstract, and of very little use in reaching any deeper understanding of sexual asymmetry. In fact, on a closer look, we can easily recognise the traits of a very specific historical and social category – the man and woman of the white middle class in Western countries. These social models are undeniably mainstream in Western culture (that is to say that they are the most widely represented in the body social and have determining influence on the cultural models of the lower classes), just as the Western culture is the mainstream culture (in the sense of the most influential) in the world today. Yet, within a discussion on sexual asymmetry, this particular model cannot be promoted as encompassing all the fundamental characteristics of a far more diverse concept of man and of woman.

Even more fundamental is the second analytical limitation of the women's liberation movement, which also pertains to an abstract view of the sexes. The movement lacks an in-depth analysis of power and of the resulting hierarchical structure. *Male power* and the structure of the *sexual* hierarchy have been analysed down to the deepest, darkest recesses, down to the slightest shades of meaning. But power without qualifications, power as an absolute social category, has not been discussed. Virtually unchallenged, power appears to be more or less a 'natural' fact of human society which is questioned only because of its degeneration into male power. Imprisoned in its own logic, the feminist critique moves all around that ideological space defined by hierarchy, without succeeding in connecting the rejection of a particular asymmetry with the overall rejection of the principle behind it.

This limitation in theory was unfortunately inherited by feminist anthropology which follows traditional anthropology in considering the society of domination as *the* human society. This complacent acceptance of power as an inexorable event in society reopens the way to that ethnocentric perspective which feminist anthropology has so deeply criticised: the phantasm is exorcised only to reappear again.

Moving further along in the analysis of sexual asymmetry we find ourselves at a theoretical crossroad. On the one hand, we are directed towards the identification of the mechanisms through which social asymmetry is reproduced

² The three figures in this chapter were drawn by Amedeo Bertolo.

in contemporary society. On the other, we pursue our search for the mythical source.

The first road is undoubtedly the most concrete and fertile and, unsurprisingly so, also the most trodden. Feminism, in particular, has pushed on in this direction, convinced that *whatever* may be the origin of sexual asymmetry, if we, today, wish to modify it, we must first identify and act upon those mechanisms which reproduce and perpetuate it. This entails that sexual asymmetry, having lost over time its original motivation, keeps on reproducing itself by inertia, through the persistence of its mechanisms.

Without resorting to a detailed analysis – we point at the vast existing literature on the topic, like the ‘classic’ work of Simone de Beauvoir (2010) – we will limit ourselves to a brief identification of the most important mechanisms.

The first, in both time and importance, is definitely the differentiated socialisation of the sexes, which, generation after generation, trains males and females to conform to the asymmetric sexual model from early childhood. This diversified socialisation deeply affects the psyche, contributing to the formation of the male and female personalities according to the psychological attributes which each culture considers to be ‘inherent’ in the two sexes. The rigid sexual division of labour then continues to deepen the division between the female and male roles in society, thus delineating the limits of two separate worlds which are crystallised thanks to the separation of society into a public sphere with a male stamp and a private sphere with a female stamp.

Even if we recognise the validity of this choice, we can still object that the act of defusing the mechanisms overseeing the reproduction of asymmetry is not in itself sufficient to eliminate it. If the root causes are not identified and eradicated, it is likely that other mechanisms will replace those that have been stopped, so perpetuating sexual asymmetry.

This type of approach is usually justified with an argument that we have already encountered: due to the impossibility of validating our hypotheses, we risk projecting our own desires on to the origins, in a veritable act of ‘mythical narration’.

The risk is real. But isn’t it inevitable, a risk intrinsic to human knowledge? Aren’t ‘rational’ and ‘objective’ explanations of reality – and of human reality in particular – all imbued with the founding myths of the culture they belong to (including the myth of objectivity and rationality forged by Western culture)? Myth and reality are inextricably intertwined: they form the inevitable weft on which human knowledge is woven.

Following these thoughts and spurred on by some crucial questions that still await an answer, we remain firm in our intentions and choose to go down the second road, fully aware of its problems and perils.

Let us, first of all, delve deeper into the existing hypotheses. The first great division between the interpretations of the origins of sexual asymmetry is based on the binary Nature/Culture. On one side we can classify those theories which seek to explain sexual asymmetry in terms of biological motivations and on the other we can group together those theories which see the human species as a chiefly cultural phenomenon, and so place sexual asymmetry within the field of human choice. The second major division, which partly overlaps the first, is concerned with power, and divides the field into those who recognise a causal link, or at least a correlation, between the two social phenomena, and those who do not see any such nexus. All the 'naturalistic' hypotheses, which obviously do not recognise power as a determining factor in sexual asymmetry, fall into the first group, while the second includes its 'culturalistic' interpretations. The first group contains those theories (rapidly declining today) which see no origin for sexual asymmetry, holding it to be a fact of nature. These are the theorists who see in the passive and subordinate 'nature' of woman – as opposed to the active and dominating one of man – a hierarchical order dictated, inexorably, by biological factors.

Even if this crude instinctual determinism (sociobiology apart) seems to be losing credibility, it was the founding concept of sexual culture for thousands of years. Such a 'naturalist' conception proves to be essential in analysing the purely cultural argument that man has built upon biological difference. Patriarchal culture interprets the indisputable biological differences in an antagonistic light, reducing them to that fundamental pair of concepts around which the human species revolves: Nature and Culture. Man appropriates for himself that which is human *par excellence* – culture – and relegates woman to the realm of nature, to an almost pre-human stage of the species. This assimilation is justified by the all-invasive presence of biology in the life of the female, whose cyclical existence seems to move to the same rhythm as the cycle of nature. Man considers himself to be immune to that biological determination so obvious in woman and elects himself as the sole representative of the species, capable of transcending nature and of embodying the peculiar trait of our species – the symbolic capacity. Taking for himself the role of the sole producer of culture, man condemns woman to immanence. The social sphere, thanks to its intrinsically transcendent character, becomes the privileged zone of male activity. The female world is delimited by a domestic sphere which is determined and limited by biology. 'Humanity is male,' declares Simone de Beauvoir (2010: 26), and

man defines woman, not in herself, but in relationship to himself, she is not considered as an autonomous being . . . She is determined and differentiated in

relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other.

Objectifying the woman and making her into the Other, man creates the terms of another inseparable pair: 'Once the subject attempts to assert himself, the Other, who limits and denies him, is nonetheless necessary for him: he attains himself only through the reality that he is not' (Beauvoir 2010: 193). Woman is therefore the object that allows man to define himself. The definition of woman handed down to us by the patriarchal culture is therefore of more use in understanding man.

The reason why man initiated this process of cultural dispossession, depriving woman of her symbolic capacity and condemning her to a state of immanence, calls for deeper consideration. We can, in part, accept the not entirely satisfying thesis that this sense of revenge in man was born out of his envy of woman's reproductive capacity. As Ida Magli³ affirms, man sees a power of life and death in this procreative capacity that must be controlled by culture.* As biology excludes man from procreative capacity, he can assert his superiority over woman only by appropriating for himself the capacity of intellectual creativity, then going on to proclaim the superiority of Culture over Nature, and thus of the One over the Other.

In fact, the widely proclaimed symbolic incapacity of woman, which relegates her to nature, is nothing but an invention of patriarchal culture, aimed at justifying her dispossession. It is patriarchal culture that prevents woman from developing her capacity for abstraction, as Merlin Stone (1978) demonstrates in her excellent book on the predominantly female religious culture which reigned for thousands of years before patriarchal culture appeared. This is yet another confirmation that female 'nature', as proposed by asymmetric culture, had a definite date of birth confirming its cultural origin.

Before we leave the field of 'naturalistic' hypotheses, there is a second and more insidious current proposing a more subtle interpretation of the biological fact. Woman is no longer considered to be 'naturally' inferior but is rather the victim of a 'biological destiny' that constrains her to a marginal role in society

³ Ida Magli (1925–2016), Italian anthropologist and philosopher. Some of her key texts are available in English, including *Cultural Anthropology: An Introduction* (2001); *Women and Self-Sacrifice in the Christian Church* (2003); *Taboo and Transgression: Jesus of Nazareth* (2009).

* For others, like Clastres, man, taking the exclusive right to the use of violence, rises in the eyes of society as the dispenser of death to himself and to others, putting up this (cultural) power of death against woman's (natural) power of life.

and, in the longer run, to her subordinate condition. Maternity, the neoteny of the human infant, her inferior physical strength, all exclude woman from fundamental human activities, like hunting, around which the species developed. Thus, although the source of woman's social inferiority is no longer written in female 'nature', it is nonetheless biologically determined. In this case, the origins of society would coincide with the origins of sexual asymmetry.

This is an extremely ethnocentric reading of human evolution, one that projects the asymmetry of our hierarchical and inegalitarian culture on to radically different socio-historical formations, like nomadic hunter-gatherer societies, thus overestimating the male contribution to evolution. Sally Slocum's essay (1975) destroys this theory by demonstrating how those evolutionary events associated solely with hunting (that is, with men) are to be equally found in the sphere of female competence. The need for greater cooperation is to be found in both the male organisation of hunting and female domestic organisation. The sophistication of language, which leads to the development of symbolic capacity, is equally indispensable to the hunt and to the socialisation of children, which is allotted to women; the invention of new tools, which leads to the development of technological capacity, is required by both man for his hunting weapons and woman for her domestic tools and the transport of food.

Once we lay bare this shamelessly androcentric vision of human evolution, we must ask why woman's biological functions, by determining her role in society, *force* her into a subaltern position. It is by no means obvious why the bearing, rearing and socialising of children, a task essential to the survival of the species, or the management of the domestic sphere, which is essential to the survival of the community, should be inferior *in itself*. And it is equally hard to understand why hunting should be socially superior *in itself*, or, widening our perspective, why are *all* men's activities in society, whatever they may be, always socially superior, and women's social activities socially inferior? Clearly it is not the intrinsic value of a particular role in society that determines its placing, but rather the gender that personifies it: masculine is superior, feminine is inferior. The origin of woman's subordination lies neither in her 'nature' nor in her 'biological destiny', but rather in a cultural interpretation of sexual differences and related social roles.

For Margaret Mead (1977: xv) it is startling to see how 'human imagination has been at work, re-evaluating a simple biological fact'. In reality, the biological fact is, in itself, neutral, assuming a positive or negative value only in the framework of a culturally defined system of values. This is not to say that the importance of the biological fact should be denied but, while this does differentiate between the sexes, it does not decide their social behaviour. The culturalist

interpretation of sexual asymmetry goes so far as to overturn the cause-effect link between cultural and biological facts. Indeed, with the concept of ‘cultural plasticity’ this relationship is inverted: it is man’s cultural capacity which elaborates the biological factors and not vice versa. A certain culture, writes Mead (1977: xiv), ‘may bend every individual born within it to one type of behaviour, recognizing neither age, sex, nor special disposition as points for differential elaboration’. The strength of this cultural fact, which is capable of forcing most human beings into the suggested models over and above their individual temperaments, serves to explain not only the diffusion of ‘female’ characteristics among women and of ‘male’ characteristics among men, but also that characteristics considered to be ‘female’ in one culture become, in an equally diffuse and ‘natural’ way, the ‘male’ characteristics of another culture.

Claude Lévi-Strauss’s (1969) position on the problem of sexual asymmetry, as far as one can infer from *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, is contradictory. Even if he does not deal directly with this theme, it provides the background to his theory on the prohibition of incest. There, Lévi-Strauss maintains that the prohibition of incest marks the precise ‘place’ of passage from nature to culture, thus constituting the founding act of society. The aim of this prohibition ‘tends to ensure the total and continuous circulation of the group’s most important assets, its wives and its daughters’ (ibid. 479). Thanks to this generalised exchange ‘the bond of alliance with another family ensures the dominance of the social over the biological, and of the cultural over the natural’ (ibid.). But women, who are defined as the group’s most precious good, are also a rare good. In fact, ‘this deep polygamous tendency, which exists among all men, always makes the number of available women seem insufficient’ (ibid. 38). Polygamy (or rather polygyny), being biologically unfeasible on a universal scale because of the demographic equilibrium between the sexes, becomes a privilege reserved to chiefs: ‘the reward for and the instrument of [their] power’ (ibid. 44).

Although Lévi-Strauss’s overall discourse is about the pre-eminence of culture over nature in human evolution, when we consider the underlying problem of sexual asymmetry, such pre-eminence appears to be contradictory. This feeling arises from the lack of a convincing explanation of why women (and only the women) must circulate in order to weave the structure of kinship on which society is grounded. One has the impression that the groups overseeing this exchange identify with their male element, while women become the objects of this generalised exchange between men. If the woman is the good *par excellence*, the man is the possessor of this good. It remains unclear why man’s ‘polygynous tendency’ is not mirrored by an equally logical ‘polyandric tendency’ of the woman. In fact, no sexual tendencies at all are attributed to her; she is assigned

an implicit passivity which makes her adaptable to the sexual choices of her male counterpart. Equally unclear remains the reason why polygyny should be the distinctive mark of power. This implies not only the existence of a monopoly of power when society is birthed, but also that power itself is gendered at birth (needless to say: male). Woman seems to participate at the founding moment of society – the incest taboo – the ‘place’ of passage from nature to culture, already laden with cultural meanings that paradoxically exist prior to the birth of culture. This suggests that woman’s subordinate condition and her social value are not a fact of culture but of nature, that is, universal. We have already addressed this with the words of Lévi-Strauss.

Lévi-Strauss sees the existence of domination as an undisputed fact in human society, taking a very clear stance on sexual asymmetry. This is hardly surprising, as such is the view of mainstream anthropology. As mentioned, feminist anthropologists have put on trial only ‘male’ power, forgetting to extend their critique beyond gender. Only libertarian anthropology can hope to undertake an investigation of power as an absolute category, as the cultural unconscious that needs to be made explicit in order to identify the ideological underpinnings of knowledge.

Here, we refer to the work of French anthropologist Pierre Clastres and, more recently, of the American ecologist Murray Bookchin. While they pave the way to a lucid libertarian analysis of human evolution, much is left to do, especially with respect to the problem of sexual asymmetry.

The first theoretical challenge facing libertarian anthropologists was the need to move away from the ethnocentric vision which allows Western culture to project its own hierarchical structure on to all societies, and consider itself as the *only* model of present and past society. To abandon the ideological space of domination in order to understand other societies: this is the categorical imperative of libertarian anthropology. Thanks to this ability to recognise and analyse difference, libertarian anthropology can begin to formulate hypotheses about the origins of domination.

Before embarking on a closer examination of this perspective, let us conclude our review of the existing theories on the origins of sexual asymmetry by touching upon a ‘classic’ topic: matriarchy. Is it myth or reality?

The controversy around matriarchy has been brought back into sharp relief by the women’s liberation movement, which has shown the full utopian scope of the idea of female superiority. Feminist anthropology has taken a more ‘scientific’ approach to an emotionally loaded topic. All the same, when faced with the ritual question as to whether matriarchy was a myth or an historic reality, feminist anthropology is divided into two opposing camps, like traditional

anthropology. One camp declares that there is no concrete historical proof of an archaic gynaeocracy; the other replies with archaeological evidence of a higher status of women, whose implications for the overall social structure are yet to be verified. Already in 1935 Margaret Mead (1977: xviii) wrote that ‘there had been and still were matriarchal institutions which gave to women a freedom of action, endowed women with an independence of choice that historical European culture granted only to men’. Far from proclaiming the indisputable existence of a matriarchal regime, Mead supports the idea that the whole archaic matricentric culture (the greatest proof of which is that female-oriented religiosity to which we have already referred) had to be reflected in its related social structure. This hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that, even limiting ourselves to matrilineal societies in history, it is easy to see how the status and the value of women in society are already higher, on average, than in patrilineal societies.

The myriad myths of matriarchy in primitive and archaic societies, demonstrating how the world moved from chaos and social iniquity under women’s domination to the order and justice of men’s domination (we can easily guess the gender of their unknown authors), are proof of a *new* social order brought by male domination; such order was in need of cultural legitimisation through the production of a justifying myth. This is considered to be the birth of ‘male power’, as a fact of human history, in contrast with the assumptions of those who consider male supremacy to be a timeless fact (including scholars who think that matriarchy is purely mythical). In reality, those scholars are themselves prisoners of the ‘myth of patriarchy’, that is, the illusion that patriarchal culture is the only historical reality known to the human species.

For the Italian anthropologist Ida Magli (1978), who can be taken as representative of this trend, matriarchy is not only a myth, but in fact a sexist one. Such a myth is useful for understanding the deep-seated motivations of the society which has created it, less so for increasing our overall knowledge of history. Magli here has in mind anthropologists who, like Bachofen, have revived the myth of matriarchy in our culture, giving it a markedly patriarchal interpretation.*

We recognise some merits to Magli’s thesis, yet it seems reductive to dismiss as a sexist myth important evidence pointing toward the existence of a society with a different gendered culture. As many reduce the ‘difference’ to a matriar-

* It was, in fact, Bachofen who first brought the hypothesis of matriarchy back into view with an interpretation that was far from feminist. He interpreted it as a ‘state of nature’ which was to be followed by patriarchy, identified as the ‘state of culture’, thus restating the same explanations of archaic myths in modern terms.

chy that perfectly mirrors patriarchy, thus restating the inevitability of domination in social life, we concur with Bookchin (1982: 79) when he says ‘here, I must reiterate the point that a “matriarchy”, which implies the domination of men by women, never existed in the early world simply because domination itself did not exist’. This statement brings us back to the heart of the problem.

As promised, we have now reached the point where we must untangle the knot of power to come as close as possible to an explanation of sexual asymmetry. We have already seen how sexual differences have assumed asymmetric values under an inegalitarian culture such as that of hierarchical society, and how, due to a methodological approach tainted with ethnocentrism, this society, this culture and this asymmetry have come to be seen as universal realities. We must turn to Clastres to subject this distorted vision to a critique which opens the door into an unknown universe: society without domination.

We cannot think of western society’s ethnocidal inclinations without linking it to this characteristic of our own world, a characteristic that is the classic criterion of distinction between the Savage and the Civilized, between the primitive world and the western world: the former includes all societies without a STATE, the latter is composed of societies with a STATE. And it is upon this that we must attempt to reflect. (Clastres 2010: 107, my capitalisation)*

The absence of a formal, hierarchical political structure had always relegated savage societies to the limbo of apolitical societies, to a primitive stage in human evolution, which is seen as moving inexorably towards the appearance of the State, the symbol of the political maturity of the human species, of ‘civilization’. Clastres pits himself against this arrogant conception of evolution, rejecting the apolitical nature of savage societies and showing how they in fact demonstrate a *different* way of conceiving politics. While, in fact, the society of the State ‘shows

* Clastres laments that these societies are defined in negative terms as societies *without* the State, societies *without* economy, as stated by certain anthropologists that fix these societies at the level of mere subsistence, a hypothesis that has been brilliantly contested by Marshall Sahlins (1972). In reality, these definitions in negative terms denote a limit intrinsic to Western culture rather than any real ‘lack’ in the societies described; Western culture does not in fact succeed in understanding and defining other societies except by starting from its own reality which is that of domination. The forms of the existing inevitably determine the ways of knowing. For the same reason we should not marvel at the negativity of the term ‘an-archy’. Since this doctrine of equality and freedom was born in the cultural reality of domination it is only logical that it hypothesises an alternative that *negates* the present, the existing.

this *divided* dimension unknown to the others', for in societies without a State, 'power is not separated from society' (Clastres 1976: 3).

Political power, far from being absent, escapes the logic of coercion peculiar to divided society and resides in the social body.*

This analysis gives us a new political figure which Clastres paradoxically calls 'the chief without power' – a chief who does not command, whose words do not have the force of law. If the social body is the realm of actual power, we must see him as the realm of virtual power. He personifies social power without possessing it, while society as a whole keeps him under control, aware of the implicit threat that lies in domination and in the division it brings. The thirst for prestige, which is the moving force of the 'chief with power', is held in check by society through a series of obligations, the first of which is a generosity, close to economic self-spoilation, that represents the 'debt' which the 'chief without power' has to society for his particular function. The political significance of this new figure cannot therefore be understood as falling into the category of 'domination' but rather into that of 'social prestige', a concept to which we will return later.

Let us pause to consider the terms 'power' and 'domination' (up to now used as synonyms) in order to avoid their misleading conceptual and terminological confusion. We can refer to the definitions proposed by Amedeo Bertolo in Chapter 4 of this volume. The aim is to disaggregate the 'nebula-power' into its different and often contradictory meanings. Bertolo proposes that the term 'power' be reserved for the social regulatory function (a neutral function in itself). It signifies the totality of the processes through which society regulates itself, producing, applying and enforcing norms. This function is 'necessary, not only to the existence of society, culture and of humanity itself, but also to the exercise of freedom as freedom to choose between determined possibilities' (Bertolo, Chapter 4, p. 73).

By domination, on the other hand, we can understand those hierarchical social relationships which are characterised by relationships of command/obedience and which distinguish the 'social systems in which the regulating function is exercised, not by the collectivity on itself, but rather by one part of

* Let us leave to a later date the evaluation of the complex relationship between social power and tradition in savage and primitive societies. This 'desire to repeat the cosmic order', to use Clastres's words, seems to paralyse the self-regulating capacity of these societies, compelling the entire body social to passively conform to roles and behaviours that it hasn't elaborated. As Bertolo (Chapter 4) says, this is a situation of 'socially diffuse totalitarianism', the influence of which on the problem of sexual asymmetry has yet to be investigated.

the collectivity (generally, but not necessarily, a small minority) over another (generally the great majority); that is, systems in which the access to power is the monopoly of one part of society (individuals, groups, classes, castes . . .)' (Bertolo, Chapter 4, p. 76).

If we apply this fundamental distinction to both historical and primitive societies identified by Clastres, we can define the former as *societies of domination*, in which a part of the social body has ensured its monopoly of power – that is, of the social regulatory function – expropriating it from the other part, and thus dividing society. And we define the second as *societies of equality*, in which power is spread throughout the entire undivided social body. The former are hierarchical societies formed around the relation of command/obedience; the latter are egalitarian societies formed around relationships of reciprocity.

It is implicit that the 'universal' sexual asymmetry found in the society of domination is not a cultural trait of egalitarian societies. In those societies that Bookchin (1982: 44) defines as 'organic', 'notions such as "equality" and "freedom" do not exist. They are implicit in their very outlook. Moreover, because they are not placed in juxtaposition to the concepts of "inequality" and "unfreedom" these notions lack definability.' The idea of difference exists but it is not yet ordered along a vertical axis, as it is in hierarchical societies: 'To such communities, individuals and things were not necessarily better or worse than each other; they were simply dissimilar' (ibid.). Both societies – of domination and of equality – perform the human act *par excellence* by 'patterning bare existence with meaning' (Mead 1977: xvi), but one follows hierarchical values, whereas the other values every person and every thing on the basis of its own uniqueness.

Thanks to Bookchin's work, the fragmentary vision of societies of equality is reassembled into an intelligible organic system, in a comprehensive picture. In particular, with regard to the man/woman relationship, what was implicit in Clastres becomes more detailed and articulated in Bookchin.

Bookchin's image of an egalitarian society (which he situates in the historical epoch of transition from the nomadic conception of life, typical of hunter-gatherers, to the sedentary one of horticultural communities) is one bound together by the blood oath, a society based on the absolute parity of individuals, sexes and age groups; on usufruct and the principle of reciprocity; on the rejection of social relationships based on coercion; on the 'irreducible minimum' (the right to receive that which will allow one to survive, whatever one's own contribution to the life and wealth of the community may be); a society which develops the ideal of *homo collectivus* instead of the concept of *homo economicus*. 'Home' and 'world' are one and the same in this organic society, which is devoid of that fatal split between the public and the private spheres, whose appearance marks

the end of a single, undivided community. Both sexes are sovereign, autonomous and independent in their respective spheres of competence which are based on the gendered division of labour. This functional division reflects an economic complementarity and has neither positive nor negative meaning, since an essential role for the survival of the community is attributed to both sexes.

This is a culture of gender parity in which Bookchin (1982: 58), in fact, discerns a prevalence of the female element, to the point of defining it as matricentric.*

By using this term, I do not wish to imply that women exercised any form of institutional sovereignty over men or achieved a commanding status in the management of society. I merely mean that the community, in separating itself from a certain degree of dependence on game and migratory animals, began to shift its social imagery from the male hunter to the female food-gatherer, from the predator to the procreator, from the camp fire to the domestic hearth, from the cultural traits associated with the father to those associated with the mother.

Ultimately, social asymmetry is alien to this culture, as it is the principle of hierarchy which reshapes society in a pyramidal form, transforming diversity into inequality.

While considerable progress has been made towards explaining how the hierarchical principle has made its mark, that is, in describing how we move from an egalitarian society to one of domination, we are still far from fully explaining why domination originated in the first place. This is uncharted territory, where we must move cautiously, from one hypothesis to another, from one uncertainty to another.

It is worth considering Bertolo's (Chapter 4, p. 86) exploratory idea that '[d]omination could be seen to be a mutation, that is to say, a cultural innovation which, in certain conditions, proved advantageous, in terms of survival, for those social groups who adopted it – for example, for greater military efficiency – and was subsequently imposed as a model either by conquest or by imitation for defensive purposes'.

This cultural mutation slowly invades and conditions the psychology, language and the very unconscious of humankind, reshaping it along inegalitarian

* Clastres (2010: 314) agrees with the attribution of an overall feminine stamp to this nonetheless egalitarian culture. 'To state it more clearly: in primitive societies, often marked by masculinity in certain aspects, indeed by a cult of virility, *men are nevertheless in a defensive position in regards to women.*'

lines. Each and every role, behaviour, person or thing is assigned a value, which will determine its position in the hierarchy.

Paradoxically, it is within egalitarian society that we must seek the origin of the process of social transformation leading to domination.* There are at least four phenomena which have, over the course of millennia, broken the unity-totality of egalitarian society, bringing it to the point of crumbling. All form part of the vast and tormented process of *social differentiation* within the single and undivided primeval community, which will eventually give rise to the concept of the individual as opposed to the collectivity. This process does not necessarily lead to the society of inequality, but in combination with the accidental 'cultural mutation' represented by hierarchy, it brought about that society of domination which still prevails today.**

The first phenomenon (without any given order in time or importance) is economic in nature. Demographic growth and increases in productive capacity led to differing degrees of wealth among members of the community. The danger inherent in this individual accumulation of wealth is very clear to egalitarian society, which consciously seeks to prevent it through the practice of usufruct, the gift and the principle of reciprocity (the 'institutional generosity' of the chief without power must be understood in the context of this lucid awareness).

Secondly, egalitarian society is slowly eroded by the progressive crystallisation of social roles. Based on sex, age and descent, sexual roles define individual responsibilities towards the community and fundamentally shape the division

* Clastres is of a quite different point of view, denying that there is a necessary logical continuity between the figure of the chief without power and that of the chief as privileged possessor of power and warning not to fall prey to a clumsy, evolutionist logic. On the other hand, it seems to me that it is through just such a process (perhaps not inevitable – but this too has yet to be shown) that humankind found itself prisoner of its own disastrous invention, domination. If it is right to contest the logic according to which the existing is the only possible reality, we must also avoid the reversal of this logic whereby seeing the events of human culture in causal succession is always dire evolutionism.

** One further consideration in this respect: these primitive or savage societies do *not* correspond to the anarchist ideal of the egalitarian society. They do not represent a mythical golden age, the original anarchy to which we must return. And, furthermore, it is unthinkable to propose, in this day and age, a single and undivided community in which the individual would once again disappear. Far from cancelling out the millennia of cultural evolution of the human species, the anarchist conception of the egalitarian society is an attempt at a harmonious synthesis of the binomial individual/collectivity that, throughout the history of the human race, has always seemed unbalanced towards one or other of the poles.

of labour which seems to characterise all human societies. The origins of this division are uncertain,* but they do arise from the need for rational organisation of life and work in the community. We have already seen that the attribution of roles is entirely cultural (with a few well-known but contested exceptions) and so varies enormously. Nevertheless, in every culture, the perpetuation of the same division of roles over long periods eventually ends up crystallising the two sexes and their respective spheres of competence. Such a process of differentiation is institutionalised and inherited through new forms of socialisation. This differentiation also affects the very character structure of the sexes thanks to thousands of years of selection of those traits compatible with the assigned roles (without, however, arriving at a cultural cloning, as the persistence of deviation shows). This crystallisation of roles entails the permanent gendered attribution of certain social activities, like mobility, that play a fundamental role in determining the exclusive appropriation of previously shared social fields.

A third key phenomenon destroying the unity of egalitarian society is the emergence of a public sphere as distinct from the domestic one. This is perhaps the most dramatic split that organic society was to undergo. The emergence of a public sphere does not imply that egalitarian society lacked a social dimension. The public sphere does not come about by parthenogenesis, but by splitting from the sphere that can be defined as domestic only *a posteriori*. As we have seen, in the egalitarian society 'home' and 'world' are one and the same; society is undivided. As differentiation progresses, the unity is broken into two spheres which slowly become estranged until they reach the point of antagonism and disequilibrium that characterises them in the society of domination. Thus 'home' becomes the private sphere of female competence: the sphere of nature, of immanence, of the inessential; the 'world' becomes the public sphere of male competence: the sphere of culture, of the transcendent, of the essential.

* Taking up an idea mentioned by Bertolo (Chapter 4), one can put forward the hypothesis, yet to be demonstrated, that the division of roles arises through *cultural imitation* of the instinctual behaviour of those social animals which most closely resemble the human species. Such imitation would also explain why the procreative capacity of the woman and the physical strength of the man have been associated respectively with the maternal role in society and with those roles connected with the monopolistic use of violence. The surprising resemblance between the so-called 'maternal instinct' of the woman and that of the female of many animal species and between the aggressive behaviour of man and of the males of those species could be seen as the result of this process of imitation. It is by no means unthinkable that the human species, having to invent all its cultural forms *ex novo*, turned to the world of nature in search of models to imitate and reproduce.

This is not the place for an in-depth analysis of the chain of phenomena causing the split between public and private. Such a process deserves careful consideration, if we wish to answer fundamental questions about the origins of sexual asymmetry which remain unanswered. Why was it men who appropriated the public sphere? One hypothesis is that by assigning the greater share of domestic work and childcare to the woman, primitive societies left the man free for social activity. Furthermore, conditions such as the greater mobility of men may have favoured extra-community relationships. But we are still far from having found a comprehensive and satisfying answer. And why did the women passively accept a process that made them marginal, ultimately interiorising a conception which undervalued them? We could perhaps resort to Simone de Beauvoir's concept of female 'complicity',* but even this proves insufficient to explain such disconcerting acquiescence. We are faced with crucial and complex questions whose answers can only be found through a collective effort.

In conclusion, when this process of social differentiation comes into contact with domination, the latter will absorb into its hierarchical conception all differences at place in egalitarian society, transforming them into inequalities. When usufruct and reciprocity are replaced by exchange, when political relationships are set against natural ties, when undivided society is succeeded by one ordered around concepts of superior and inferior, egalitarian society and its organic and symmetrical view of the world are dead. Not one but hundreds, thousands of asymmetries will develop within the social body, some tied to biological factors (sex, age, etc.), others to socio-economic factors (artisan against agriculture, intellectual work against manual labour, urban against rural . . .). In short, the society of domination will slowly take shape, and with it the ideological space in which we still live and think today.

* In Simone de Beauvoir's (2010: 30) view, there is a certain element of psychological 'complicity' in the subordination of women: refusing to be the Other, refusing complicity with man, would mean renouncing all the advantages an alliance with the superior caste confers on them. Lord-man will materially protect liege-woman and will be in charge of justifying her existence; along with the economic risk, she eludes the metaphysical risk of a freedom that must invent its goals without help. This is an unpleasant and perhaps extreme view of female subordination but nevertheless contains an element of truth. However, as Kathy Ferguson (1983) also maintains, those traits which are often defined as 'female' are those which are typical of subordination, that can be found in all social categories, regardless of sex. Thus the psychological 'complicity' is no longer to be seen as a typically female attitude but rather as a psychological characteristic which is intrinsic to all relationships based on command/obedience.

The last of the four phenomena contributing to social differentiation is of particular importance: *social prestige*. As a category which is frequently confused with domination, social prestige inhibits the understanding of societies that do not fall within this logic:

We detect here the rather widespread confusion in ethnological literature between prestige and power. What makes the big-man run? What is he sweating for? Not, of course, for a power to which the people of the tribe would refuse to submit were he even to dream of exercising it, but for prestige, for the positive image that the mirror of society would reflect back onto him celebrating a prodigious and hard-working chief. (Clastres 2010: 202)

We can define prestige as a different, higher valuation that society attributes to certain individuals and/or roles. As such, it is a 'positional good', a privilege in its own right that, in primitive societies, is not connected with other social privileges (economic, political, etc.). Individual prestige is tied to certain personal abilities or gifts, while the prestige attached to certain roles involves the possession of those abilities that are connected with the role itself. Ultimately, what allows us to distinguish domination from social prestige is the relationship of command/obedience, which shapes the former but forms no part of the latter.

Thus any asymmetry of role that, even if informal, involves a command/obedience relationship falls within the realm of domination, while any asymmetry of role, even if formal, which does not involve the command/obedience relationship falls within the ideological space of social prestige. Referring to Bertolo's definitions, we could say that individual prestige, manifested through personal relationships, falls into the category of *influence*, while prestige attached to a role, manifested through functional relationships, falls into the category of *authority* (see Chapter 4). While they are distinct and interact differently with the social body, individual prestige and the prestige of certain roles are two successive moments in the same process of individualisation. However, while the former, which is chronologically first, does not involve the shattering of the egalitarian social order, the latter, which does not cause the absorption and disappearance of individual prestige, goes a step further, succeeding in shifting prestige from the person to the function and thus institutionalising the difference.

Having broadly defined the concept of social prestige, we can now see its relationship to sexual asymmetry. Yet, however convincing and acceptable the picture of egalitarian society outlined here may be, there is one fact which requires deeper examination: when individual prestige is transformed into the prestige attached to certain roles, the high-prestige roles are all male. Two

opposing hypotheses are possible here: either the very exclusion of women from these roles implies the existence of domination, or else sexual asymmetry comes about in egalitarian society and precedes the rise of domination.

The analysis of egalitarian society clearly reveals how woman loses social prestige as man acquires it: from a single, undivided society where prestige was equally divided, but in which the culture was predominantly female, to a differentiated society with a predominantly male culture. While initially the groups that 'invented' a prestigious position for themselves, such as the oldest age groups or the shamans (see Bookchin 1982), are made up of men and women indifferently, over time the female element tends to disappear. There is no clean-cut separation in this process, so that even today the social prestige of the old woman is still considerable in certain matricentric societies, just as woman shamans existed in many primitive societies. Nevertheless, in societies preceding that of domination, women disappear from the most valued roles.

The social figures that assert themselves – the chief without power, the shaman and the warrior (see Clastres 2010) – are all male, and when hierarchical culture begins to assert itself, women are excluded from those roles which monopolise political, magic-religious and military power. We could almost say that when prestige is individual, both men and women enjoy it, but when prestige is connected with roles and is formalised, it is exclusively male. Nonetheless (and with this we exclude the first of the two hypotheses), if we accept the fundamental difference between domination and prestige – that is, the presence or absence of the command/obedience relationship – we must admit that the relationship between the sexes is not one of domination. But it is equally clear that we are not faced with a situation of perfect equality. Thus the second hypothesis seems more reasonable.

Turning once again to Bertolo's (Chapter 4) definition, within societies without domination we can find *social asymmetries of authority* which do not fall within the category of domination but still contradict social equality. The man/woman asymmetry of authority seems to fall into this category.

Our expedition has come to an end. Like Livingstone, we have not succeeded in discovering the mythical source. Even if many questions remain unanswered, a map of the explored area is beginning to take shape, if imprecisely. In identifying those social asymmetries of authority between the sexes that precede the appearance of domination, we have cautiously entered the currents of the river Kagera, towards what has conventionally been defined as the source of the White Nile. However, unlike those geographers who have bestowed on the Kagera the honour of being proclaimed the source of the White Nile, we remain convinced that this honour shall go to all the tributaries feeding Lake Victoria.

Leaving aside the metaphor, we do not believe in a single origin of sexual asymmetry. On the contrary, its sources are complex and ramified, just like those of the Nile. And we must search for those sources. Their discovery will provide an essential contribution to the drawing of another fundamentally important map which remains incomplete: the genesis of domination.

To conclude, let me quote a scathing observation attributed to Saint Augustine by Beauvoir (2010: 141) which greatly motivated me during this research: 'A woman is a beast who is neither firm nor stable.'

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