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The Matriarchal-Brotherhood

- Features - Sexual politics -

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Of the myths today, probably the one least questioned is that the capitalist rulers are indispensable to the continued existence and functioning of society. The truth is just the opposite. There is only one class that is indispensable for human survival, and that is the working class, the class of labor.

Labor of modern times grew out of primitive labor, and primitive labor grew out of primeval labor. Capitalism is less than 500 years old and already dying, whereas labor is as ancient as humanity itself – probably a million or more years old – and is today the mightiest power the world has ever seen.

Far from being necessary to society, capitalism in this atomic epoch has created a social jungle that threatens to destroy all the great achievements of labor over the millenniums. It is therefore up to labor to remove this threat to itself and its social achievements.

This is, of course, a colossal task. But it is not the first time labor has been called upon to perform tasks of colossal magnitude. An even greater conquest was made in the ancient past – the conquest of the first labor collective over nature's jungle. The story of that conquest, which represents the birth of humanity itself, should serve as a guide and inspiration to modern labor.

* * *

In my article, "The Myth of Women's Inferiority," in the previous issue of this magazine, I stated that primitive society was organized and led by the women and had therefore begun as a matriarchy. In support of that proposition, I showed the decisive role played by women labor in the building and the social organization of primitive society.

But the existence of the matriarchy is perhaps the most sharply disputed issue in the whole field of anthropology. Those who uphold the capitalist system and claim that class society is a permanent fixture, demand that they be given incontrovertible proof that the matriarchy preceded the patriarchy in the evolution of human society. At the same time they present little or no evidence for their own questionable claim that the patriarchal system goes all the way back to the animal kingdom.

What are the outstanding characteristics of patriarchal society? Men play the dominant role in the labor process. Private property and class differentiations exist. The sex partners live together as man and wife under one roof, and are by law united in marriage. Fathers stand at the head of the family. The family is composed of father, mother (or mothers) and their children, and is the basic unit of society, through which property is inherited and passed on. These characteristics of the patriarchy are all features of class society.

In the matriarchy, on the other hand, women, not men, predominated in the labor process. There was no private ownership of community wealth. The sex partners did not live together under one roof – in fact, they did not even live in the same camp or compound. Marriage did not exist. Fathers did not stand at the head of the family because fathers, as fathers, were unknown. The elementary social group was composed exclusively of mothers and children – and for this reason has aptly been termed the "uterine family." Finally, the basic unit of society was not this uterine

family of mothers and offspring, but the whole group, clan or tribe. These characteristics of the matriarchy are all features of primitive society, which is sometimes described as “primitive communism” and is generally conceded to have preceded class society in the historical development of mankind.

The overwhelming weight of the evidence available indicates that the original form of human social organization was matriarchal. But the term “matriarchy” expresses only a part of the essential character of the first society, founded as it was upon the economic and social cooperation of both sexes. Out of matriarchal beginnings there arose that monumental achievement of humanity: the first communal labor collective – the Matriarchal-Brotherhood. This article will tell the story of its birth.

1. From Jungle Law to the Labor Collective

Survival of species revolves around the fulfillment of two basic needs: food and sex. Through food the individual organism maintains itself; through procreation the species is reproduced. The urge to satisfy these two basic needs – that is, the struggle to survive – is the primary driving force of all animal organisms.

In this struggle, as Darwin pointed out, only the “fittest” survive. These are not necessarily the strongest, but those which can best adapt themselves to their environment and best compete with other organisms for the means of subsistence. For in the animal world the fecundity of nature is extremely uneven, and there is not enough of the means of life to sustain all the organisms that are produced. Since many must perish, those which survive do so only through the most intense and unremitting competition.

Each animal is on its own in the struggle to satisfy its basic needs. And this competitive struggle sets every animal apart from and against every other animal. Even among the herding and gregarious species, separatism, not collectivism, prevails. This law of survival through the savage competition of each against all has been aptly called “jungle law.”

For humankind to emerge from this competitive animal world it was necessary to overturn nature’s mode of struggle for survival and to institute a new and human mode of struggle for survival, founded upon mutual support, collaboration and cooperation. But this was a gigantic task; for human collectivity was in contradiction to, and collided with, the most fundamental driving forces of nature. It required the curbing and taming of uncontrolled animal impulses. It required the creation of disciplined social bonds. It required, in other words, the transformation of animal relationships into human social relationships.

And how was this great task achieved? It was achieved through labor.

Indeed, it was in the very act of laboring and in the process of labor that the animal became transformed into the human. Human beings became the “fittest” of all organisms in the world – for they were the product not only of nature, but, more decisively, of their own labor. They placed their stamp upon other animals, taming and domesticating them for their uses, just as they placed their stamp upon nature, “taming” and “domesticating” plants (cultivation or agriculture). Thus labor, as Engels emphasized,

“... is the prime basic condition for all human existence, and this to such an extent that, in a sense, we have to say that labor created man himself.” (The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man.)

The natural or biological bridge to labor, however, was through the maternal functions of the females. This has been

convincingly demonstrated by Robert Briffault in *The Mothers* (1927), which sets forth the case for the matriarchal theory of social origins. In this work, which marks a milestone in anthropology, Briffault summarized a mass of evidence to prove that it was maternal care and responsibility for the young which provided the natural bridge to humanity.

The only exception to the general rule of separatism and competitive struggle in the mammalian world lies in the relationship between mothers and young, where the mothers provide for, nourish and protect the young, although requiring assistance from the males. As Briffault writes:

“Paternity does not exist. The family among animals is not ... the result of the association of male and female, but is the product of the maternal functions. The mother is the sole center and bond of it. There is no division of labor between the sexes in procuring the means of subsistence. The protective functions are exercised by the female, not by the male. The abode, movements, and conduct of the group are determined by the female alone. The animal family is a group produced not by the sexual, but by the maternal impulses, not by the father, but by the mother.”
(*The Mothers*.)

The Ape “Patriarchy”?

Briffault’s evidence, however, is repugnant to all those anthropologists who want to believe, and therefore contend, that the “father” has always stood at the head of the family and dominated it, even in the animal world.

As evidence, they point out that among the apes, for example, there is usually only a single adult male present in a horde composed of females and young. Having jealously driven away all other male rivals, including his own “sons,” this adult male – as represented by these anthropologists – is the “ape patriarch,” monopolizing his “harem” of wives and their children.

This absurd picture simply seeks to reproduce in the animal world the family relationships and marriage system of modern class society.

The presence of only a single adult male in an ape horde of females and young is indeed a fact. But this does not prove that ape males are patriarchs. All it proves is that in the animal world males are antagonistic and hostile to other males, that they fight each other for access to females, and that sex competition and rivalry prevail in the animal world.

Indeed, sex competition is in some respects even fiercer than the competition for food. The breeding season takes place only periodically and upon its outcome depends the survival of the species. Moreover, in the food quest, animals can avoid one another but not in the quest for sex, where they are inescapably thrown together. Sex-fighting among the males is one of the prominent features of the animal kingdom, and among the carnivora, extremely savage.

Because of its violent character, sex competition disrupts and dismembers herd and horde formations in the animal world. If an ape horde of females and young is to band together and remain together, only a single adult male can be tolerated in group.

Sex competition was therefore a colossal roadblock in the path of the formation of the first human hordes required to build the labor collective. Indeed, until separatism and sex struggles were eradicated, a human collective of men cooperating with other men as well as with women, could not be built. As Engels writes:

“Mutual tolerance among the adult males, freedom from jealousy, was ... the first condition for the building of those large and enduring groups in the midst of which alone the transition from animal to man could be achieved.” (Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State.)

Thus it was that in the course of this struggle to create the labor collective, there arose in the human world a category of males which does not exist in the animal world – the social brothers. Social brotherhood is not a natural, but an artificial creation. And this creation of the social brotherhood represents the crowning achievement of the social motherhood that inaugurated the human labor collective.

2. The Social Motherhood and Brotherhood

The term “matriarchy” came into common use after the publication of *Das Mutterrecht* by J. J. Bachofen in 1861. In this book, the title of which means “mother-right,” Bachofen produced evidence that women had occupied a very high social status in primitive society.

The first theory advanced to explain this phenomenon of women’s high social position (in such striking contrast to their inferior status in modern society) was based upon conceptions of family descent and inheritance of property. Fathers were unknown; therefore – so went the theory – the descent of the children could be traced only through the mothers; therefore, property could be passed on only from mothers to children – and it was this that gave women their “mother-right” and their dominant social status.

The flaw in this theory was, of course, the fact that it derived from modern and not primitive social relations and concepts. The fact is that all the social property and wealth of primitive society were communally owned and shared. Thus there was no need to trace the descent of the children in order to know who was to inherit private property. Furthermore, it was not the family, but the whole group or clan, that was the basic unit of primitive society.

The great discovery that the gens or clan was the unit of primitive society was made by Lewis Morgan and set forth in his book *Ancient Society*, published in 1877. Marx and Engels considered Morgan’s contribution so important that they ranked it with the discovery of the cell in biology. Indeed, Morgan’s 40-year research among the North American Indians constitutes the cornerstone of the modern science of anthropology.

In contrast to the social organization of modern times, which rests upon the individual family as the basic unit, primitive society was founded upon the gens or clan, that is, the whole community. A federation of gentes or clans, in turn, composed the tribe. Society was composed of communal, not family cells, the individual “uterine families” being subsumed within the clan.

Social Mothers

Blood relationship, which occupies such an important place in modern social organization had no significance whatever in primitive society. Primitive peoples knew nothing about the blood relationship between children and unknown fathers; they knew and cared just as little about the blood relationship between children and their known mothers. On this score, Hans Kelsen writes:

“Physical motherhood... is nothing to these people. The Australians, for instance, have no term to express the [blood] relationship between mother and child. This is because the fact is of no significance, and not because of the meagerness of the language.” (*Society and Nature*.)

The Matriarchal-Brotherhood

The mother was regarded not as the mother of a family – but as the mother of society. As Sir James Frazer emphasizes:

“We confuse our word ‘mother’ with the corresponding but by no means equivalent term in the language of savages. We mean by ‘mother’ a woman who has given birth to a child. The Australian savages, mean by ‘mother’ a woman who stands, in a certain social relation to a group of men and women, whether she has given birth to any of them or not. She is ‘mother’ to that group even when she is an infant in arms ...

“The true relationship between mother and child may always have been remembered, but it was an accident which did not in any way affect the mother’s place in the classificatory system; for she was classed with a group of mothers just as much before as after her child was born.” (Totemism and Exogamy, vol. 1.)

A good illustration of this social motherhood – which is so distinctive from our own puny individual family form, based upon private property and personal possession – is contained in a report by Melville and Frances S. Herskovits:

Angita [a boy child] was first pointed out to us by Tita ...

“Look,” she said ... “This is Angita. He dances well. He is my son.”

... The following day Angita came to our camp bringing with him Kutai, a woman of about Tita’s age ... “Have you seen Angita’s carvings?” she asked us. “He is one of the best young carvers at Gankwe ... I am his mother ...”

About the fifth day ... we came to a village where Angita stopped to supplement his food for the journey ...

Behind him came a young girl with a bottle of palm oil, and some rice in an open calabash ... A woman of middle age, whom both the young girl and Angita resembled, took the rice from the girl and ... gave it to us. “This is rice for you. I am Angita’s mother ...”

Later that day ... we lost no time in questioning him. “Angita,” we called, “is the woman who gave us the rice your mother?”

He nodded.

“But what of Tita, who said she was your mother, too?”

He was a quick-witted lad, and he saw at once what we had in mind. He said with a laugh, “You are asking about my true, true mother, the one who made me? It is not this one, and it is not Tita, who made me. It is Kutai.”

“But who are the other two?”

“They are her sisters.” (“The Bush Negro Family,” from Primitive Heritage, edited by Margaret Mead and Nicolas Calas.)

Does this mean that Angita’s three “mothers” were blood sisters? Not anymore than that they were all blood mothers to the boy. They were social sisters to one another, just as they were social mothers to this boy and to all other

children.

In primitive society blood ties and “family connections” meant nothing. All the women in the clan were “mothers” to all the children, and, at the same time, “sisters” to each other. Social ties were everything.

The matriarchy was a maternal collective in the same way that it was a labor collective. In this communal form of social organization, the social status of every female, whether she was one week or 60 years old, was that of producer and procreator for society. And primitive society was founded upon this fusion of collective maternity and collective labor. As E. S. Hartland writes:

“The word mother in most, if not all languages, means producer-procreatrix.” (Primitive Maternity.)

The children produced by these social mothers were, of course, social children. The individual child of each individual mother was as merged in the total community of children as the individual products made by each woman were merged in the total wealth of the community. And since all the children were children of all the mothers, they were all equally nourished, cared for and protected. The matriarchy represented the heroic epoch of women; for a woman was far more and far greater than the mother of an individual child: she was one of a collective of maternal creators of human society.

The term “matriarchy” is, therefore, a designation of communal and not family relationships. Evidence to corroborate the existence of the matriarchy and its social meaning can be found in the language of surviving primitive tribes. These peoples, who have doubtless never heard the word “matriarchy,” nevertheless call themselves by terms which are essentially equivalents – such as “The Mothers,” or “The Motherfolk,” or “The Mother People.” And these language survivals exist in every stage of primitive development, from the lowest to the highest.

Language Survivals

The Seri Indians of Lower California, for example, who are classified on the lowest level because they lacked knowledge of agriculture and had only the crudest technology, call themselves Km-kaak or Kun-kaak. This term, according to W.J. McGee means: “Woman or Elderly Woman; or, more descriptively and inclusively, Our Living Ancient Strongkind Elderwoman Now Here; or, Our Great Motherfolk Now Here.” And, as is usually the case in these backward regions, there is no word in the language for father, nor any knowledge of paternity. (The Seri Indians.)

On a higher level are the Melanesians, who, according to W.H.R. Rivers, call themselves Veve – which means “Motherhood” or “Motherfolk.” Not only is the large collective (or tribe) called Veve, but all the sub-divisions (or daughter-clans) are also Veves. These daughter-clan “Motherhood” are then distinguished from each other through secondary and obviously totemic names, such as Shark, Owl, Banyan Tree, Sacred Creeper and so on. (The History of Melanesian Society.)

On the highest level of surviving primitive peoples, as among the hill tribes in Assam, India, we find the same feature. The Kacharis of this region, Frazer writes, call themselves Machong – which again means, literally, “Motherhood.” Similarly, the 13 daughter-clans are also called Machongs, and are distinguished from each other by secondary, totemic names. (Op. cit.)

Social Brothers

But primitive society was composed of men as well as women. And it was men and women together who formed the basis of the kinship system. Although almost everything else about primitive society is disputed, this fact is undisputed: that primitive society was organized into groups of kinfolk, or kinsmen and kinswomen.

The essence, however, of the primitive kinship system – which is often overlooked or misunderstood – is this: kinship meant, not blood relationship (which it means to us today), but social kinship. As A. R. Radcliffe Brown writes:

“The term ‘consanguinity’ [blood-relationship] is sometimes used as the equivalent of ‘kinship’... but the word has certain dangerous implications which must be avoided. Consanguinity refers properly to a physical relationship, but in kinship we have to deal with a specifically social relationship. A social relationship is not the same thing as physical relationship, and may or may not coincide with it.” (Social Structure.)

Thus the same group or clan that called itself the “Motherhood” from the female side of the compound, also called itself the “Brotherhood” from the male side. And the fact that the term “brother” did not signify a family connection but was rather a social designation is pointed out by K. L. Little, in describing the West Africans of Sierra Leone:

“The nearest equivalent of the term ‘family’ is Ndehun, literally ‘brotherhood,’ which implies the closest possible relationship of persons.” (The Mende of Sierra Leone.)

We today can understand this reality enough through our own use of the terms “brothers” and “sisters” in the union movement. While some of these workers may be blood brothers and sisters and may belong to the same family; this fact is irrelevant and immaterial. Union bonds of fraternity are forged through social, not blood or family connections.

Social Bonds

Thus the terms “kinship group,” “clan,” “tribe,” are simply anthropological designations for what can be more precisely defined as the labor collective. For the social bonds between women and men in primitive society were founded upon their collective labor – and that is why they were social kin.

The first division of labor between the sexes was not between fathers and mothers, as is commonly supposed, but between mothers and brothers (or sisters and brothers). The male hunters who went out together on the organized hunt brought back the products of their chase to their sisters and the children of these sisters. And conversely, these same sisters in their collective households provided for the needs of these brothers as well as of the whole community.

The same women and men who were classified as sisters and brothers in relationship to each other were classified as “elder sisters” (the equivalent of mother) and “elder brothers” in relationship to the young generation. And these, in turn, were classified socially as “younger sisters” and “younger brothers,” who were taught and disciplined by their elders.

Thus the same adult men who were social brothers to the adult women, were likewise elder brothers or “mothers’ brothers,” or social “uncles,” as some anthropologists call them – to the children. In many languages there is a special term, for these mothers’ brothers, a term which is close to or identical with the word for Elder, Elder Man or Chief. Regarding the role of these social uncles, Briffault writes:

“Those functions which in the patriarchal family are discharged by the husband and father, and which constitute him

the provider and protector of his family, are in the maternal group fulfilled by the woman's brothers." (Op. Cit.)

It was these social mothers and brothers who formed the basis and axis of the kinship group, the first labor collective, which we call the Matriarchal-Brotherhood.

3. Totem and Taboo

Now we must ask: If all men and women were brothers and sisters to each other in the labor collective, who were the sex-mates, or the "husbands and wives"? And what was their social role? These questions lead us directly to the basic feature of primitive society: Totemism, or the system of totem and taboo.

Totem and taboo are generally considered and analyzed together. And correctly so – for in reality they are two sides of the same social coin by which primitive humanity defined its communal relationships. On the one hand, the totem was the means whereby every man, woman and child was identified as a member of the kinship group (clan). On the other hand, the taboo regulated sexual relationships by banning all mating within the totemic group.

Under this totemic or kinship system, humanity was divided into two categories: kindred and strangers. All who were members of one totemic group were kin; all others were strangers. As Briffault writes:

"The tribe is with most people equivalent, to mankind, and its members call themselves simply 'men,' ignoring the rest of the human race..."

"The solidarity of the primitive group ... is applicable to the clan-brotherhood only; beyond the group it has no meaning..."

"To primitive man, members of his group are his people, all others are strangers, foes, individuals whom he looks upon with distrust, with actual hostility..." (Op. cit.)

But although the totem drew the sharpest line between kindred and strangers, nevertheless a relationship between the two existed: a sexual relationship. The taboo, as we have said, forbade mating between clan brothers and sisters; this was its intern aspect. But the obverse of the taboo – or its external aspect – was what is known as the "rule of exogamy" – that is, the rule directing brothers and sisters to find their sex-mates outside the totemic group. What this meant was that they were obliged to find their sex partners among the strangers.

As Briffault points out, however, the Stranger was virtually identical with the Enemy. Thus we find that the very strangers who were sex-mates of the women were at the same time enemies to the brothers of these women. That is, the brothers of Group A fought the sex-mates of their sisters in Group B.

War and Sex

War and sex were the only relationships between the two groups: war between the men, sex union between the men and women. In the relics of some primitive languages the words for "sex" and "fighting" are identical. Mating in the early period encountered formidable difficulties indeed. Briffault writes:

“By virtue of the Rule of Exogamy, sex association between members of the same group is almost everywhere strictly prohibited. A man or a woman must obtain his or her sexual partners from another group. But that is by no means an easy matter in primitive conditions ...

“The members of one’s own group are, in primitive society, ‘our people.’ All other individuals are ‘strangers,’ which is synonymous with ‘enemies...’ The Bakyiga, a warlike people ... are divided into a number of clans by whom the Rule of Exogamy is strictly observed. A man must procure a wife from one of the other clans. As all clans are in a state of perpetual war with one another, it is quite impossible for a man to visit or hold any intercourse with another clan without running almost certain risk of being murdered...” (Op. cit.)

For security reasons, mating could take place only in secret and in a “no man’s land” outside the limits of the compounds. Under these conditions, the relationship between sex-mates was confined exclusively to sexual union. Socially, they were strangers to each other.

These “husbands and wives” – as the anthropologists generally call them! – did not live under one roof; they did not live in even the same compound or area; they did not provide for each other; they had no social contact of any kind. Between them was a deep social gulf.

Split Between Sex and Society

Thus we find a peculiar two-fold cleavage in primitive society. Under the totemic system, a sexual gulf separated those who, as kinfolk, lived and worked together in the same totemic group, or labor collective. Conversely, a social gulf separated those who, as strangers, were united sexually. In effect, there was a split between sex and Society.

What was the meaning of this cleavage between sexual and social relations? What was the social purpose of the system of totem and taboo?

When the taboo in primitive society was first discovered, it seemed to the investigators to be understandable enough. Since in modern society sexual intercourse between close blood relatives is prohibited as “incest” and regarded as a crime, the taboo (prohibiting sexual intercourse between the totemic brothers and sisters) and the rule of exogamy (directing these brothers and sisters to mate outside the group) seemed altogether “natural.”

But as investigators began to probe the matter, they found that modern conceptions did not at all explain or fit the needs and conceptions of primitive peoples. Moreover, taboo penetrated into every nook and cranny of primitive life – in the same way that money has penetrated ours. The subject could not be dodged or ignored, because it clearly occupied a central place in the social system. Every aspect of primitive society, every avenue of investigation, ultimately led every investigator back to this central feature: Taboo.

Why the Taboo?

What had appeared at first to have such a simple, “natural” explanation, turned out to be the major roadblock in the path of scientific understanding of primitive social evolution. Great scholars spent years studying kinship categories, totemic distinctions, sexual customs and sexual taboos. They worked out, for instance, enormous and complicated charts identifying the different degrees of kinship and the different areas of taboo under the “classificatory” system. But in the end they proved no more than what they had already known: that kindred could not mate with kindred: for between them stood the taboo. Though many words were written and many theories advanced, the basic question remained unanswered: Why the taboo?

The Matriarchal-Brotherhood

The early argument – that the taboo was designed to prevent “incest” between relatives – came to be recognized by some scientists as misleading and even absurd. Savage peoples, they realized, knew nothing about the most elementary biological facts of life, including the facts of blood relationship. Moreover, as the data accumulated, it became clear that numerous totemic brothers and sisters were not blood relatives at all.

But on one point, at least, there has been general agreement among the anthropologists – that is, on the power of the taboo. Hutton Webster gives a vivid description of how tremendous was this power and authority:

“Fear is systematized in taboo ... It runs the whole gamut from ‘awful’ to ‘awesome.’ The authority of the taboo is unmatched by that of any other prohibition. There is no reflection on it, no reasoning about it, no discussion of it ... It is an imperative THOU SHALT NOT! in the presence of danger apprehended ...

“Death, certain, sudden and in terrible form is not seldom the fate which is announced to the taboo breaker ... As a matter of fact, the taboo breaker does often die, so acute is the fear aroused by even an involuntary transgression.” (Taboo: A Sociological Study.)

Whence, then, this power and authority? To what end? How to explain such a fearsome prohibition against the mating of men and women within the clan?

The answer to this mystery of the taboo lies within the context of our entire explanation of how, in the process of labor, the first human collective was forged out of the animal world. It is necessary to remember two things: first, that the imperative task of emergent humankind was to build the labor collective; and second, that sex competition, as it exists in the animal world, stood in the way of this task and therefore had to be eliminated.

On the latter point Dr. Ralph Piddington writes:

“Sex ... lets loose the most disruptive of human passions. Nowhere is this so true as in domestic and economic cooperation. Filial respect cannot be maintained if ... brothers were always quarreling for access to the women. By calling all the female members of his clan ‘sisters’ a man establishes a relationship of fictional kinship with them which precludes marriage or sexual intercourse.” (Introduction to Social Anthropology.)

The taboo, it becomes clear, was not directed against sex as such. It was not directed against “incestuous” sex relationships. It was directed against the sex competition, rivalry and warfare of the animal world. Above all, it was directed against sex as sex impeded or threatened the building and consolidation of the labor collective. By outlawing sex struggles from the totemic group, the taboo created the arena for building the cells of the matriarchal-brotherhood. Brothers were taught to collaborate with brothers in the organized hunt, and in assuring the welfare and protection of the whole group. Thus at the beginning of human time, social unification was achieved through sexual separation. In this way humanity could move to higher levels of production and culture.

Only in this context and for these reasons can the extraordinary power of the taboo and its central place in primitive society be understood. What was involved was nothing less than the life-and-death question of the survival and development of the human species. It was this which gave the taboo its fearful and awesome power.

And if the women of those primeval days could have understood what they were driven to do in the new and human mode of struggle for survival, they would indeed have said: “THOU SHALT NOT undermine or destroy the labor collective, for to do so is to destroy humanity.” Thus did the first labor collective take the fate of humanity into its own hands and conquer nature’s jungle.

Conclusion: The Great Labor Collective

The conquest of the matriarchal brotherhood over jungle law was so total that, as Briffault writes, “the nature and extent of that solidarity are almost inconceivable and unintelligible” to us in modern society:

“A savage ... will say ... that his son or his brother is ‘himself.’ ... He does not think in terms of his ego and its interests, but in terms of group-feelings and group-interests ...

“The feeling with which the savage regards his clan goes almost to the length of obliterating his sense of individuality. He experiences an injury suffered by any other member as if he were himself the victim of that injury, and any benefit accruing to the clan is felt as a piece of personal good luck, even though he himself derives no advantage from it ...” (Op. cit.)

Briffault cites innumerable examples of this social solidarity among primitive tribes in every part of the world, as reported by missionaries, traders and travelers:

“Every man is interested in his neighbor’s property and cares for it because it is part of the wealth of the family collectively ... Every one of the clan feels interest in that which is used by his neighbor, because he has a share in it ... His personal feelings are sunk for the common good.”

“What is extremely surprising ... is to see them treat one another with a gentleness and consideration which one does not find among common people in the most civilized nations ... This, doubtless, arises in part from the fact that the words ‘mine’ and ‘thine’ ... are unknown to these savages.”

“I have seen them divide game, venison, bear’s meat, fish, etc., among themselves, when they sometimes had many shares to make; and cannot recollect a single instance of their falling into a dispute or finding fault with the distribution as being unequal ... They would rather lie down themselves on an empty stomach than have it laid to their charge that they neglected to satisfy the needy; only dogs and beasts, they say, fight amongst themselves.” (Quoted by Briffault, op. cit. My emphasis.)

But history moves forward one step at a time. The matriarchal-brotherhood, once it had achieved its mission, gave way to a new social system which released new forces and relations of production. In this new class society which came into existence there arose a new kind of competitive struggle – the struggle for private ownership of wealth and property.

And now, in recent centuries, as civilized explorers and traders began to penetrate all the remote regions of the globe in the lust for wealth, two kind of human beings came face to face for a short time in history. Men who were building the modern social jungle met the men and women who had conquered nature’s jungle. And of course they did not speak the same language, nor understand each other’s modes and mores.

Most anthropologists write about how these “backward savages” appear to us. But a few tell us how we look to them. W.H.R. Rivers, for example, reports a personal experience with a Polynesian group; with whom he went on a fishing trip. He began by asking them about their social organization:

“At the end of the sitting they said they would like to examine me about my customs, and using my own concrete methods, one of the first questions directed was to discover what I should do with a sovereign if I earned one. In response to my somewhat lame answers, they asked me pointblank whether I should share it with my parents and

brothers and sisters. When I replied that I would not usually, and certainly not necessarily so, that it was not our general custom, they found my reply so amusing that it was long before they left off laughing. Their attitude toward my individualism was of exactly the same order which we adopt toward their primitive communistic sentiments.” (Social Organization.)

And Briffault tells us of a trader who was asked what made his “chiefs” superior to other men – for in primitive society “chiefs” are nothing more than the most respected among their equals in rank. When the trader explained that this was due to the greater wealth of the “chiefs,” he became so dismayed at the reaction that he wrote back home:

“The more I said in their praise, the more contempt I brought upon myself, and if I regretted anything in my life, it was to have said so much.” (Op. cit.)

The contrast between “their morals and ours” – to use Trotsky’s phrase – is set forth in the following observation, also quoted by Briffault:

“It is only those who are Christians and dwell at the gates of our towns who make use of money. The others will not touch it. They call it the ‘Snake of the French.’ They say that amongst us, folks will rob, slander, betray, sell one another for money; that husbands sell their wives, and mothers their daughters for this metal. They think it strange that someone should have more goods than others, and that those who have more should be more esteemed than those who have less.” (Ibid.)

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Behind these and similar pictures of primitive society in recent centuries, we can perhaps catch a few glimpses of the great working men and women who built the first labor collective. Their colossal achievement belongs to, and is in fact the beginning of, the history of the labor movement of today. For if the past is any guide to the future, as it always is, then we must say that the labor fraternity that conquered nature’s jungle will once again take the fate of humanity into its own hands, and conquer the modern social jungle.