

Meat's Patriarchy

Women's social standing is roughly equal to men's only when society itself is not formalized around roles for distributing meat.

R. Leakey and R. Lewin,
People of the Lake (1978)

Hunting was not about getting enough vitamin B 12.

D. Haraway,
Primate Visions (1989)

A male chimpanzee in a Tanzanian forest is chewing on the limb of a monkey carcass that he has caught. Other members of the hunting party cluster around him attempting to get a morsel. Juveniles sit on the forest floor below, hoping that fragments of bone or drops of blood will fall to them. The beggars in the tree ask for meat with outstretched, upturned palms, and place their fingertips at or even inside the hunter's lips in order to get his attention. He tries to ignore their presence, continually turning his body away from them. One exception to

this indifference is a female, who carries a sexual swelling and receives the male's attentions. He allows her to take pieces of the carcass, which she then shares with her infant. Occasionally she presents her swelling to him and they copulate. Meanwhile the possessor of the meat allows one other chimpanzee, a longtime ally, to take bits of meat also. This interplay of meat with sex, political networks, and status displays is typical of the strategic meat-sharing pattern seen among chimpanzees.

Man the Hunter argued in part that human brain size and cognitive skills were enhanced through a long evolutionary history pursuing prey, with all the communication and coordination skills that hunting may place at a premium. This is partly correct; social hunting does place a premium on intelligence. The premium is exacted, however, in the realm of the sharing, control, and distribution of meat after a kill rather than in the pursuit of the prey. In the doling out of the meat we see signs of strategizing and politicking that go far beyond those seen in predatory behavior. The evolutionary legacy of our hunting and scavenging past lies therefore not so much in the hunt but in the division of spoils. While there appears to be little continuity in the hunting tendencies of ancient and technologically simple modern people, there is a vital link in the use of meat as a currency, a valued good. This link is found in the behavior of apes and people

when the sharing of meat occurs, or when food is used to manipulate the behavior of others. In the distribution of meat in apes, as in other social arenas, we see control and power at the heart of both male and female patterns of behavior. In the attempts by either sex to tip the balance of power, we may be seeing the roots of human gender relations. When meat becomes a resource that is not only a food but also a social currency—a way to help you obtain what you want in the group—we are seeing the emergence of barter, currency-based human social systems.

In human and some other primate societies, meat eating is about politics as well as nutrition. The control of a valued resource is about power. When the two sexes are involved in the power struggle, the physically dominant sex often controls a resource and therefore controls female reproduction as well. Sexual politics plays a key role in chimpanzee meat eating just as it does in some traditional human societies. Relationships between the sexes are part and parcel of the capture and sharing of meat, since in nearly all human and nonhuman primate societies in which the meat of mammals is eaten frequently, males hunt for it more often than females. We see gendered carnivory in human, ape, and monkey societies. In chimpanzee society, both males and meat occupy a hierarchy: males dominate one another, and all males dominate all fe-

males. Meat is so highly desired that the whole community will devote hours to catching it, even though most female and immature community members end up with only tiny scraps. No other food commands such devotion. The hierarchy of meat appears to be closely linked to the hierarchy of males, in that it is almost always males that capture meat, putting them in the role of providers for other community members, including females.

In many traditional human societies, men hunt but women procure most of the protein and calories for their social groups through their gathering of roots, fruits, and small animals. This behavior has led some anthropologists to claim that the importance of hunting and meat eating was more mythical than real, since men's efforts, while it received much attention from a previous generation of researchers, did not account for much nutritionally. But this misses the key point about meat eating. The fact that meat is so highly valued even when it composes a small part of the diet is powerful testimony to its value as social currency. Men are able to use meat to enhance status, show beneficence, and even to obtain more sex by having caught meat. Nutrition is not irrelevant to meat's value at all; it is essential in that it makes the meat something worth bragging about, begging for, and manipulating with. But the use of meat has gone well beyond this; the !Kung do not sit and haggle for hours over the

ownership of a pile of berries, but they will do so over the carcass of an antelope. The value of meat is a matter of perception by group members. It is irrelevant that plant foods are as *valuable* a resource as meat. What matters is that animal carcasses are considered by both men and women as a more *valued* resource than plant foods.

This difference in the way that plant foods and meat are regarded in both ape and human societies may be related to the difficulty of obtaining meat, and that only one sex—typically males—controls meat. A fundamental premise of the origins of patriarchy is that when men gain control over resources that women need, they use it to control and coerce them. Male dominance is a near cultural universal; this is accepted by both feminists and sociobiologists, as well as by scholars who are both. This does not mean that all societies are in all ways patriarchal; women have spheres of influence that may simply differ from the arenas in which men rule. There are some societies, including those of the traditional foragers, which are more egalitarian than others. There are, however, no true matriarchies. Feminist scholars usually depict male domination of women as arising in historic times, due to the social contexts of our own recent prehistory. Few, however, acknowledge the possibility that male dominance may have far more ancient origins. Perhaps this is because if patriarchy has its roots in the

Miocene or Pliocene instead of the past few thousand years, it implies an evolved Darwinian basis of patriarchal systems. Among other primates, male dominance is usual, though not universal. Where it occurs, it is based on a combination of greater male size and strength, male coalitions, and a lack of strong female-female alliances.

In all primate species, including ourselves, there are sexual conflicts of interest over male desires for access to reproduction. Females become not the goal of patriarchal domination itself, but rather the means to its end, which is reproductive success. This evolutionary view of human gender relations is quite different from a feminist perspective, which more often considers the goal of male domination to be an end in itself.¹ It was once thought that women were subject to male control in most cultures because of limitations imposed by their reproductive biology. Women were thought to be intrinsically barred from ruling due to their physiology. This antiquated view still finds an audience with those who question whether women can serve as combat soldiers or governmental leaders due to their menstrual cycles. Modern feminist thinkers have seen the control of reproduction as the male goal in human societies.² Female reproductive biology may limit women from playing controlling roles in some societies, but this is due more to male oppression than to women's lack of ability or desire

to rule. This analysis has not often been properly grounded in the study of nonhuman primate societies. If we ask how patriarchies came into being in the first place, a feminist approach might be to suggest males' greater physical size and strength. Some psychological need to dominate might also be invoked. But any biologist knows that male size and strength are not an end, but a means to an end, namely the control of female bodies and their reproductive output. Competition among males, and female choice of male mates with particular physical features, led to the 10–15 percent size difference between ancestral human males and females.

Two biological anthropologists who are both feminists and sociobiologists, Sarah Hrdy and Barbara Smuts, have been exceptional in offering biological levels of explanation for human gender relations. In separate studies, both suggest that the same Darwinian principles that govern the conflicting interests of the sexes in all primate social systems may prescribe male coercive behavior toward females in humans. They point out the logical inconsistency of feminist analyses that posit the same rationales for male dominance in an attempt to explain how such systems came into being, without asking why they exist at all. The "why" of patriarchal systems can be addressed with the extension of feminist theory to evolutionary paradigms. This may seem an unlikely wedding. The social and historical explana-

tions for male domination offered by many feminist thinkers are simply a recent manifestation of the deeper biological process that has created patriarchal social systems in our close relatives. Some recent authors have recognized that sociobiological analyses of gender relations, far from offering sexist, simplistic views, reveal the complexities in human behavior. Females are not passive receptacles of male reproductive desires. They are active strategists in pursuit of their own interests and often are the driving forces behind the social system itself. Males may likewise be caregivers rather than warriors and headmen. However, each sex has reproductive interests at stake in social life, and these may clash. There is no direct genetic basis for patriarchy; they arise from the biological conflict of interests between males and females of all primates, including men and women.³

If patriarchies are about male dominance and the control of female reproduction, then we should consider how males acquire power. This may point to the role that meat eating and meat sharing plays in patriarchal systems. One way this occurs in nonhuman primate groups, human social groups, and probably in our ancestors' social groups, is through sheer size and strength. Sexual dimorphism is the product of sexual selection favoring male attributes; in species where being large helps in the mating game, we see outsized males with impressive ca-

nines and musculature. The level of dimorphism in modern human populations is about 10 percent in stature and somewhat more in weight. This difference is very similar to the magnitude of size difference between males and females in both chimpanzees and bonobos, but vastly less than that seen between the sexes among gorillas and orangutans. The degree of size dimorphism suggests the intensity of male competition for mates, but the fit is not always clearly tied to the social system. The largely solitary orangutan, for instance, shows the greatest degree of male-female size dimorphism, exceeding 50 percent. Males may sexually coerce and brutalize females.⁴ Females are not passive, and may refuse to mate with a male no matter how imposing he is, though she may subject herself to violent attack by doing so.

A second way that males obtain power is through strategic alliances. This is true for both human and nonhuman primate societies. Male coalitions may form to control access to females, or to prevent other males from having access to them, or to defend territories that contain desired females. Anthropologists Joseph Manson and Richard Wrangham have theorized that primate societies featuring tight male bonds form when the crucial resources are both portable and defensible—such as females—rather than immovable, such as fruit trees.⁵ Chimpanzees, bonobos, and many tribal human

societies fit this dichotomy. When it is highly beneficial for males to form alliances, there is often a kin-selected benefit that heightens the potential rewards for cooperating with kin.

The converse effect of male alliance formation is that in many female primate species, females do not form strong alliances. This is especially true among the great apes, in which female alliances are weak in three of the four great apes. Because female apes usually disperse from their natal groups at sexual maturity, they end up living as breeding adults in a new group lacking relatives and close allies. Some degree of bonding among females may develop over time, but females that disperse to new groups usually do not have a support system akin to that of males remaining in their natal groups. Barbara Smuts has pointed out that this lack of alliance formation contributes to the formation and maintenance of patriarchies by preventing females from bonding for purposes of protecting themselves from male ambitions.⁶ Females may, however, choose not to form alliances with other females because to do so would be against their own reproductive interests. Smuts suggests that a female's reluctance to form coalitions to the degree that males do may be based on their own selfish reproductive interests.

The history of gender relations has not been entirely Nature red in tooth and claw. Men and

women have long worked toward common goals as reproductive partners, group members, and as parents. However, both biological and social/historical perspectives lead us to believe that each sex is also carrying out a more selfish individual agenda. And in both the evolutionary and social interpretations of patriarchal systems, meat eating has played an important role.

The way in which meat is distributed among the members of a social group, and the way in which gender roles may be related to meat-sharing patterns, was a preoccupation of our discussion of chimpanzee behavior. The same gender-biased acquisition and distribution pattern that characterizes these apes also characterizes many human groups. Meat is a difficult-to-obtain resource in both human and many other primate societies, valued out of proportion to its nutritional worth. And as a resource much in demand by both sexes but typically brought home by males only, it becomes an important factor in the efforts of males to influence the behavior of females, and vice versa.

In her book *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, feminist writer Carol Adams considers the role of meat eating in human societies in shaping perceptions of women. She observes that women in many societies eat a diet that is mainly plant foods while men in the same societies eat more meat. The delegation of a second-class diet to women is one aspect of a pa-

triarchal society.⁷ Peggy Sanday surveyed a range of traditional societies and concluded that those that eat a diet in which meat plays an important part are more likely to be strongly patriarchal.⁸ In some traditional societies, the rules of meat division preclude women from getting as much as men, particularly nutrient-rich portions such as the fat in a carcass.⁹ Meat thus has a gendering influence. Adams, in analyzing the distribution of meat and power in human societies, makes essentially the same argument that any ape or human sociobiologist would make regarding meat and patriarchy, but couches her argument entirely in historical and social terms. Adams points out that when males control a resource as highly valued as meat, its worth as a nutrient is largely mythical. Tubers and beans make an equally protein-rich diet. But men eat meat in many cultures in the belief that it gives them the strength that they need for their work. Women are not deemed to require it. Meat is also a nearly universal symbol of masculinity, from Western industrial to forager societies, and the eating of meat is thought to enhance masculinity. The image of a vegetarian weightlifter or football linebacker is paradoxical to most of us—evidence that these values are deeply entrenched in Western culture. Perhaps this is because meat eating is associated with meat getting and the other masculine attributes traditionally connected to hunting.¹⁰

This chain of logic allows Adams to characterize the value given to meat in mythical terms. She considers meat to be a sinister symbol of a male-dominated world, rooted in patriarchal myths rather than reality. The idea that patriarchy's foundations are to be found only in mythically ascribed traits combined with male dominance does not, however, fit well with biological realities. Instead of a sinister symbol of the cultural influences on patriarchy, meat eating is more likely a behavioral focus around which patriarchies have evolved. Meat has long been a symbol of masculinity only because it served males well throughout human evolution as a political currency that is used to enhance male alliances, snub rivals, and control females. Ironically, Adams and other feminist scholars who write about patriarchy may be factually correct about the recent history of male behavior toward women. By choosing to ignore the evolutionary level of analysis in the prehistory of male behavior toward females, their analyses are ultimately shortsighted. Only a biological interpretation of the relationship of meat to male dominance can fully address the roots of patriarchal societies. This is not to say that meat eating is the central feature of all male-dominated societies. It can, however, be a defining trait of gender relations in some societies, such as those in which men hunt for a living while women gather.

This brings us back to Man the Hunter. The idea

that meat eating may have been a catalyst in human behavioral evolution fell into disfavor due to the backlash against Man the Hunter. The model was pilloried to the extent that it became a forbidden term, one that labeled its adherents as male-biased chauvinists, consciously or unconsciously ignorant of the role of women in human evolution.¹¹ This backlash was fueled by key field data about the role of women and also fit emerging social values that sought to place women in an equable role in society relative to men. Whether the actual role of females in early human prehistory fits our modern Western gender-balanced sensibilities is an entirely different question. While women may collect most hunter-gatherer protein, we should not ignore the fact that men are able to use meat for their own selfish and manipulative political ends.

When a male chimpanzee withholds a scrap of meat from a female until she mates with him, we see the use of meat as a manipulative social tool. The value of the resource to the female may be entirely nutritional, but its value to the male is clearly both social and nutritional, in that he may be able to use it as a means to a political and reproductive end. In the same way, the value of a carcass to a lactating woman may be entirely different than its worth to a man. Both ape and human scenarios involve the control of a resource, valued perhaps beyond its amino acids or calories.

If females usually live in male-dominated, male resource-controlled groups, how do they obtain what they want in those groups? Female primates, including humans, may need alliances and strategic support to survive and reproduce. One female goal in any species is the successful birthing, rearing, and nurturing of offspring. The successful maturation of offspring is a goal in which males are equally interested but in which they tend to invest far less energy and time. Males thwart female ambitions, and they often do so in ways that involve the control of reproduction. Female primates can navigate the complex social web of relationships, male power struggles, and their own power struggles only by being politically clever. The premium placed on social intelligence in females extends to obtaining food, allies, and mates. Gagneux and colleagues' recent study of furtive mating outside the community by female Taï chimpanzees is a vivid example of strategic reproductive behavior.¹² Obtaining valued food is also strongly influenced by a female's ability to network within her group. Being fertile, high-ranking, and clever are three important ways that females can obtain meat. Since no female is fertile for more than a small portion of her life, and only a few females can be high ranking, most must rely on their ability to manipulate their social milieu, including the males themselves, at the same time that males are trying hard to manipulate them.

Life in a primate society is thus about power and control, not of females by males, but of each sex by the other. Each side has a valued resource to gain and also has much to lose.

The relationship between hunting and sex is nowhere clearer than among the Sharanahua, a people of the Peruvian Amazon basin. According to anthropologist Janet Siskind, "Put at its crudest, the special hunt symbolizes an economic structure in which meat is exchanged for sex." (p. 103). Since women produce as much food as men do, this is not likely to be just an economic exchange in which women exchange what they produce for what men produce. It is a culturally mediated system, with an obvious biological effect, in which sex is the incentive for men to hunt, and men who are better hunters have a better chance to have wives or mistresses. Siskind considers women to be a scarce commodity to be competed over in the Sharanahua, because sex is not free for men and must be won, and because some men have more than one wife, enhancing the impetus to "win" women with profers of meat. This form of barter may be a common occurrence among tropical forest people.¹³

This control game is played out in many nonhuman primate societies as well as in our own human cultures. Machiavellian intelligence applies to both males and females, but it does not necessarily apply to them in the same ways. Males and females have

often been likened to separate species, with separate reproductive strategies and different means of meeting the same end of reproducing themselves.¹⁴ They may also have evolved somewhat different sorts of cognition as a result of needing to cope differently with complex social environments. Certainly males and females live in separate social worlds even in the same social group in many species. The same claim has been made about men and women.

How does the social intelligence of females play itself out in the real world? Men control access to scraps of a carcass. Meat is a resource that females want, though perhaps not for the same reasons it is desired by males. There is no reason to think that for several individuals sitting around a fire, meat holds the same promise. For a woman it may mean essential amino acids to nourish her fetus or infant, but to a man it may signify an ability to demonstrate his beneficence or his hunting ability by sharing it with her. He may seek an alliance with her that is either politically strategic or reproductively beneficial, or both. She, meanwhile, has her own set of self-interests about control, reproduction, and political power. She may not, however, have unconstrained access to a resource as valued as meat. So she must wheel and deal to get it, just as the male is wheeling and dealing to secure her as a mate, partner, or link in his political support chain. Far from

the passive secondary role in which some early models of human behavioral evolution portrayed her, these females actively pursue their own ends, and also achieve their own spheres of power and influence, that affect both male control strategies and the social dynamics of the entire group.

We receive conflicting messages in our society about the value of sharing. While a deep cultural value is given to altruistic sharing, we are also socialized to be individualistic. We learn that there are both powerful incentives and disincentives to share and to be selfish. Either can be advantageous depending on the context; altruists can be strategically self-serving in myriad ways, and individuals who are otherwise selfish may seem utterly altruistic at times. If these are qualities that served us in our distant ancestry, then perhaps that is why there is so much ambivalence about altruism and selfishness in society today.

I have portrayed the roots of human behavior as manipulation and social cunning that arise from the use of meat in our ancestors. This is very different than saying that, because of a meat-eating past, we have an innately aggressive nature. It should be remembered that predators, while possessing many adaptations that can be used in aggression within their own species, do not necessarily use them. In fact, many scholars doubt whether the predatory aggression that allows a lion to bring down a zebra

or a chimpanzee to savagely rip apart a monkey is even closely related to intraspecific aggression. Aggressive behavior within a species may resemble predation, but the resemblance is often superficial. Humans are not demons by nature; in spite of the attention that we focus on human violence, there are thousands of acts of compassion for every act of physical aggression.

The hunting, scavenging, and sharing of meat were fundamental features of the lives of our ancestors. This does not mean that we are biologically driven to do any of these. The way that we deal with one another in society is rooted in social strategies that were molded during a time in our history when getting and using meat was vital. If meat were a currency with a 10,000-generation history in the human family, then the traditions that have developed related to the use of meat are likely to have some evolved basis. By sharing meat we are both altruistic and selfish, as we are in most other arenas of our endeavors. We are not simply compassionate by training and Machiavellian by nature. Nor are we constrained by our past to repeat Machiavellian patterns in the future. A fuller understanding of our ancestral nature is, however, the first step to liberation.

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