The MYTH of WOMEN'S INFERIORITY

by Evelyn Reed

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The Myth of Women's Inferiority

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ONE of the conspicuous features of capitalism, and of class society in general, is the inequality of the sexes. Men are the masters in economic, cultural, political and intellectual life, while women play a subordinate and even submissive role. Only in recent years have women come out of the kitchens and nurseries to challenge men's monopoly. But the essential inequality still remains.

This inequality of the sexes has marked class society from its very inception several thousand years ago, and has persisted throughout its three main stages: chattel slavery, feudalism and capitalism. For this reason class society is aptly characterized as male-dominated. This domination has been upheld and perpetuated by the system of private property, the state, the church and the form of family that served men's interests.

On the basis of this historical situation, certain false claims regarding the social superiority of the male sex have been propagated. It is often set forth as an immutable axiom that men are *socially* superior because they are *naturally* superior. Male supremacy, according to this myth, is not a social phenomenon at a particular stage of history, but a natural law. Men, it is claimed, are endowed by nature with superior physical and mental attributes.

An equivalent myth about women has been propagated to support this claim. It is set forth as an equally immutable axiom that women are *socially* inferior because they are *naturally* inferior to men. And what is the proof? They are the mothers! Nature, it is claimed, has condemned the female sex to an inferior status.

This is a falsification of natural and social history. It is not nature but class society, which lowered women and elevated men. Men won their social supremacy in struggle against and conquest over the women. But this sexual struggle was part and parcel of a great social struggle — the overturn of primitive society and the institution of class society. Women's inferiority is the product of a social system which has produced and fostered innumerable other inequalities, inferiorities, discriminations and degradations. But this social history has been concealed behind the myth that women are naturally inferior to men.

It is not nature, but class society, which robbed women of their right to participate in the higher functions of society and placed the primary emphasis upon their animal functions of maternity. And this robbery was perpetrated through a two-fold myth. On the one side, motherhood is represented as a biological affliction arising out of the maternal organs of women. Alongside this vulgar materialism, motherhood is represented as being something almost mystical. To console women for their status as second-class citizens, mothers are sanctified, endowed with halos and blessed with special "instincts," feelings and knowledge forever beyond the comprehension of men. Sanctity and degradation are simply two sides of the same coin of the social robbery of women under class society.

But class society did not always exist; it is only a few thousand years old. Men were not always the superior sex, for they were not always the in-

dustrial, intellectual and cultural leaders. Quite the contrary. In primitive society, where women were neither sanctified nor degraded, it was the women who were the social and cultural leaders.

Primitive society was organized as a matriarchy which, as indicated by its very name, was a system where women, not men, were the leaders and organizers. But the distinction between the two social systems goes beyond this reversal of the leadership role of the two sexes. The leadership of women in primitive society was not founded upon the dispossession of the men. On the contrary, primitive society knew no social inequalities, inferiorities or discriminations of any kind. Primitive society was completely equalitarian. In fact, it was through the leadership of the women that the men were brought forward out of a more backward condition into a higher social and cultural role.

In this early society maternity, far from being an affliction or a badge of inferiority, was regarded as a great natural endowment. Motherhood invested women with power and prestige — and there were very good reasons for this.

Humanity arose out of the animal kingdom. Nature had endowed only one of the sexes — the female sex — with the organs and functions of maternity. This biological endowment provided the natural bridge to humanity, as Robert Briffault has amply demonstrated in his work *The Mothers*. It was the female of the species who had the care and responsibility of feeding, tending and protecting the young.

However, as Marx and Engels have demonstrated, all societies both past and present are founded upon labor. Thus, it was not simply the capacity of women to give birth that played the decisive role, for all female animals also give birth. What was decisive for the human species was the fact that maternity led to labor — and it was in the fusion of maternity and labor that the first human social system was founded.

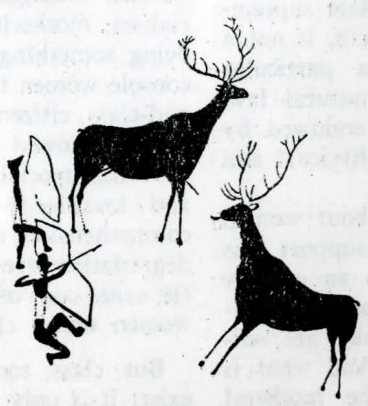
It was the mothers who first took the road of labor, and by the same token blazed the trail toward humanity. It was the mothers who became the chief producers; the workers and farmers; the leaders in scientific, intellectual and cultural life. And they became all this precisely because they were the mothers, and in the beginning maternity was fused with labor. This fusion still remains in the languages of primitive peoples, where the term for "mother" is identical with "producer-procreatrix."

We do not draw the conclusion from this that women are thereby naturally the superior sex. Each sex arose out of natural evolution, and each played its specific and indispensable role. However, if we use the same yardstick for women of the past as is used for men today — social leadership — then we must say that women were the leaders in society long before men, and for a far longer stretch of time.

Our aim in this presentation is to destroy once and for all the myth perpetuated by class society that women are naturally or innately inferior. The most effective way to demonstrate this is to first of all set down in detail the labor record of primitive women.

Control of the Food Supply

The quest for food is the most compelling concern of any society, for no higher forms of labor are possible unless and until people are fed. Whereas animals live on a day-to-day basis of food-hunting, humanity had to win some measure of control over its food supply if it was to move forward and develop. Control means not only sufficient food for today but a surplus for tomorrow, and the ability to preserve stocks for future use.



HUNTING SCENE
Stone Age Painting

From this standpoint, human history can be divided into two main epochs: the food-*gathering* epoch, which extended over hundreds of thousands of years; and the food-*producing* epoch, which began with the invention of agriculture and stock-breeding, not much more than 8,000-10,000 years ago.

In the food-gathering epoch the first division of labor was very simple. It is generally described as a sexual division, or division of labor between the female and male sexes. (Children contributed their share as soon as they were old enough, the girls being trained in female occupations and the boys in male occupations.) The nature of this division of labor was a differentiation between the sexes in the methods and kinds of food-gathering. Men were the hunters of big game — a full-time occupation which took them away from home or camp for longer or shorter periods of time. Women were the collectors of vegetable products around the camp or dwelling places.

Now it must be understood that, with the exception of a few specialized areas in the world at certain historical stages, the most reliable sources for food supplies were not animal (supplied by the man) but vegetable (supplied by the women.) As Otis Tufton Mason writes:

"Wherever tribes of mankind have gone, women have found out that great staple productions were to be their chief reliance. In Polynesia it is taro, or breadfruit. In Africa it is the palm and tapioca, millet or yams. In Asia it is rice. In Europe cereals. In America corn and potatoes or acorns and pinions in some places." (Woman's Share in Primitive Culture.)

Alexander Goldenweiser makes the same point:

"Everywhere the sustenance of this part of the household is more regularly and reliably provided by the efforts of the home-bound woman than by those of her roving hunter husband or son.

It is, in fact, a familiar spectacle among all primitive peoples that the man, returning home from a more or less arduous chase, may yet reach home empty-handed and himself longing for food. Under such conditions, the vegetable supply of the family has to serve his needs as well as those of the rest of the household." **(Anthropology.)**

Thus the most reliable supplies of food were provided by the women collectors, not the men hunters.

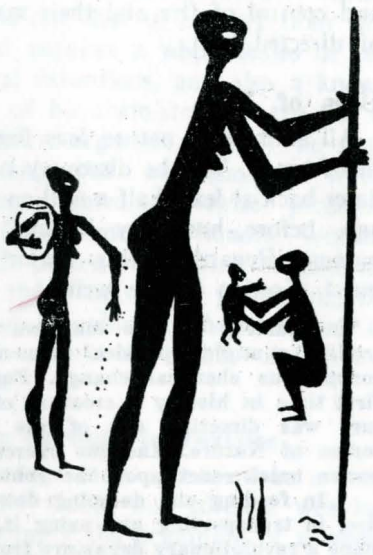
But women were also hunters — hunters of what is known as slow game and small game. In addition to digging up roots. tubers, plants, etc., they collected grubs, bugs, lizards, molluscs and small animals such as hares, marsupials, etc. This activity of the women was of decisive importance. For much of this small game was brought back to the camp alive, and these animals provided the basis for the first experience and experiments in animal taming and domestication.

Thus it was in the hands of women that the all-important techniques of animal domestication began, which were ultimately climaxed in stock-breeding. And this domestication had its roots in maternity. On this score, Mason writes:

"Now the first domestication is simply the adoption of helpless infancy. The young kid or lamb or calf is brought to the home of the hunter. It is fed and caressed by the mother and her children, and even nourished at her breast. Innumerable references might be given to her caging and taming of wild creatures . . . Women were always associated especially with the milk and fleece-giving species of domestic animals." (Ibid.)

While one aspect of women's food-gathering activity was thus leading to the discovery of animal domestication, another aspect was leading to the discovery of agriculture. This was women's labor in plying their digging-sticks — one of the earliest tools of humanity — to procure food from the ground. To this day, in some backward areas of the world, the digging-stick remains as inseparable a part of the woman as her baby. When the Shoshone Indians of Nevada and Wyoming, for example, were discovered, they were called "The Diggers" by the white men, because they still employed this technique in securing food supplies.

And it was through this digging-stick activity that women ultimately



THE DIGGING-STICK

discovered agriculture. Sir James Frazer gives a good description of this process in its earliest stages. Using the natives of Central Victoria, Australia, as an example, he writes:

"The implement which they used to dig roots with was a pole seven or eight feet long, hardened in the fire and pointed at the end, which also served them as a weapon of offense and defense. Here we may detect some of the steps by which they advanced from digging to systematic cultivation of the soil.

"The long stick is driven firmly into the ground, where it is shaken so as to loosen the earth, which is scooped up and thrown out with the fingers of the left hand and in this manner they dig with great rapidity. But the labor in proportion to the amount gained, is great. To get a yam about half an inch in circumference, they have to dig a hole about a foot square, and two feet in depth. A considerable portion of the time of the women and children is therefore passed in this employment.

"In fertile districts, where the yams grow abundantly, the ground may be riddled with holes; literally perforated with them. The effect of digging up the earth in the search for roots and yams has been to enrich and fertilize the soil, and so to increase the crop of roots and herbs. Winnowing of the seeds on the ground which has thus been turned up with the digging sticks would naturally contribute to the same result. It is certain that winnowing seeds, where the wind carried some of the seeds away, bore fruit." (The Golden Bough.)

In the course of time, the women learned how to aid nature by weeding out the garden patches and protecting the growing plants. And finally, they learned how to plant seeds and wait for them to grow. On this, A. S. Dimond writes:

"Some of the food-gatherers discovered, for example, that the crowns of yams, after removal of the tubers for eating, would grow again when put back into the earth. Once the technique was learned for one plant or root or grain, it could be extended to others. In the process of cultivation, not only was quantity assured, but the quality began to improve." (The Evolution of Law and Order.)

Not only were quantity and quality improved, but a whole series of new species of plants and vegetables were brought into existence. According to Chapple & Coon:

"Through cultivation, the selective process had produced many new species or profoundly altered the character of the old. In Melanesia people grow yams six feet long and a foot or more thick. The miserable roots which the Australian digs wild from the ground is no more voluminous than a cigar." (Principles of Anthropology.)

Mason sums up the steps taken in agriculture as follows:

"The evolution of primitive agriculture was first through seeking after vegetables, to moving near them, weeding them out, sowing the seed, cultivating them by hand, and finally the use of farm animals." (Op. cit.)

According to Gordon Childe, every single food plant of any importance, as well as other plants such as flax and cotton, was discovered by the women in the pre-civilized epoch. (*What Happened in History.*)

The discovery of agriculture and the domestication of animals made it possible for mankind to pass beyond the food-gathering epoch into the food-producing epoch, and this combination represented humanity's first conquest over its food supplies. This conquest was achieved by the women. The great Agricultural Revolution, which provided the food for beast

as well as man, was the crowning achievement of women's labor in plying their digging-sticks.

To gain control of the food supply, however, meant more than simply relying upon nature and its fertility. It required, above all, woman's reliance upon her own labor, her own learning and her own capacities for innovation and invention. Women had to find out all the particular methods of cultivation appropriate to each species of plant or grain. They had to acquire the techniques of threshing, winnowing, grinding, etc., and invent all the special tools and implements necessary for tilling the soil, reaping and storing the crop, and then converting it into food.

In other words, the struggle to win control over the food supply not only resulted in a development of agriculture, but also led to working out the first essentials in manufacturing and science. As Mason writes:

"The whole industrial life of woman was built up around the food supplies. From the first journey on foot to procure the raw materials until the food is served and eaten, there is a line of trades that are continuous and born of the enviroment." (Op. cit.)

Women in Industry, Science and Medicine

The first division of labor between the sexes is often described in a simplified and misleading formula. The men, it is said, were the hunters and warriors; while the women stayed in the camp or dwelling house, raised the children, cooked and did everything else. This description has given rise to the notion that the primitive household was simply a more primitive counterpart of the modern home. While the men were providing all the necessities of society, the women were merely puttering around in the kitchens and nurseries. Such a concept is a gross distortion of the facts.

Aside from the differentiation in food-getting, there was virtually no division of labor between the sexes in all the higher forms of production — for the simple reason that the whole industrial life of primitive society was lodged in the hands of the women. Cooking, for example, was not cooking as we know it in the modern individual home. Cooking was only one technique which women acquired as the result of the discovery and control of fire and their mastery of directed heat.

Uses of Fire

All animals in nature fear fire and flee from it. Yet the discovery of fire dates back at least half a million years ago, before humanity became fully human. Regarding this major conquest, Gordon Childe writes:

"In mastery of fire man was controlling a mighty physical force and a conspicuous chemical change. For the first time in history a creature of Nature was directing one of the great forces of Nature. And the exercise of power must react upon the controller. . . . In feeding and damping down the fire, in transporting and using it, man made a revolutionary departure from the behavior of other animals. He was asserting his humanity and making himself." (Man Makes Himself.)

All the basic cooking techniques which followed upon the discovery of fire — broiling, boiling, roasting, baking, steaming, etc. — were developed by the women. These techniques involved a continuous experimentation with the properties of fire and directed heat. It was in this experimentation that women developed the techniques of preserving and conserving food for future use. Through the application of fire and heat, women dried and preserved both animal and vegetable food for future needs.

But fire represented much more than this. Fire was the tool of tools in primitive society; it can be equated to the control and use of electricity or even atomic energy in modern society. And it was the women, who developed all the early industries, who likewise uncovered the uses of fire as a tool in their industries.

The first industrial life of women centered around the food supply. Preparing, conserving and preserving food required the invention of all the necessary collateral equipment: containers, utensils, ovens, storage houses, etc. The women were the builders of the first caches, granaries and storehouses for the provisions. Some of these granaries they dug in the ground and lined with straw. On wet, marshy ground they constructed storehouses on poles above the ground. The need to protect the food in granaries from vermin resulted in the domestication of another animal — the cat. Mason writes:

"In this role of inventing the granary and protecting food from vermin, the world has to thank women for the domestication of the cat . . . Woman tamed the wild cat for the protection of her granaries." (Op. cit.)

It was the women, too, who separated out poisonous and injurious substances in foods. In the process, they often used directed heat to turn what was inedible in the natural state into a new food supply. To quote Mason again:

"There are in many lands plants which in the natural state are poisonous or extremely acrid or pungent. The women of these lands have all discovered independently that boiling or heating drives off the poisonous or disagreeable element." (Ibid.)

Manioc, for example, is poisonous in its natural state. But the women converted this plant into a staple food supply through a complicated process of squeezing out its poisonous properties in a basketry press and driving out its residue by heating.

Many inedible plants and substances were put to use by the women in their industrial processes, or converted into medicines. Dr. Dan McKenzie lists hundreds of homeopathic remedies discovered by primitive women through their intimate knowledge of plant life. Some of these are still in use without alteration; others have been only slightly improved upon. Among these are important substances used for their narcotic properties. (*The Infancy of Medicine.*)

Women discovered, for example, the properties of pine tar and turpentine; and of chaulmoogra oil, which today is a remedy for leprosy. They invented homeopathic remedies from acacia, alcohol, almond, asafoetida, balsam, betel, caffeine, camphor, caraway, digitalis, gum, barley water, lavender, linseed, parsley, pep-

pers, pomegranate, poppy, rhubarb, senega, sugar, wormwood, and hundreds more. Depending upon where the natural substances were found, these inventions come from South America, Africa, North America, China. Europe, Egypt, etc.

The women converted animal substances as well as vegetable substances into remedies. For example, they converted snake venom into a serum to be used against snake bites (an equivalent preparation made today from snake venom is known as "antivene").

In the industries connected with the food supply, vessels and containers of all types were required for holding, carrying, cooking and storing food, as well as for serving food and drink. Depending upon the natural environment, these vessels were made of wood, bark, skin, pleated fibers, leather, etc. Ultimately women discovered the technique of making pots out of clay.

Fire was used as a tool in the making of wooden vessels. Mason gives a description of this technique; and it can be easily understood how the same technique was extended to the manufacture of the first canoes and other sailing craft:

"They burned out the hollow part, keeping the fire carefully checked and controlled. Then these marvelous Jills-at-all-trades removed the fire and brushed out the debris with improvised brooms of grass. By means of a scraper of flint which she had made, she dug away the charcoal until she had exposed a clean surface of wood. The firing and scraping were repeated until the dugout assumed the required form. The trough completed, it was ready to do the boiling for the family as soon as the meat could be prepared and the stones heated." (Op. cit.)

In this remarkable conversion, a substance, wood, which is ordinarily consumed by fire, was fashioned into a vessel for cooking food over fire.

The industries of women, which arose out of the struggle to control the food supply, soon passed beyond this limited range. As one need was satisfied, new needs arose, and these in turn were satisfied in a rising spiral of new needs and new products. And it was in this production of new needs as well as new products that women laid down the foundation for the highest culture to come.

Science arose side by side with the industry of women. Gordon Childe points out that to convert flour into bread requires a whole series of collateral inventions, and also a knowledge of bio-chemistry and the use of the micro-organism, yeast. The same knowledge of bio-chemistry which produced bread likewise produced the first fermented liquors. Women, Childe states, must also be credited with the chemistry of potmaking, the physics of spinning, the mechanics of the loom and the botany of flax and cotton.

From Cordage to Textiles

Cordage may appear to be a very humble trade, but cordage weaving was simply the beginning of a whole chain of industries which culminated in a great textile industry. Even the making of cordage requires not only manual skill, but a knowledge of selecting, treating and manipulating the materials used. Chapple & Coon write:

"All known peoples make some use of cordage, whether it is for binding haftings on implements, making rabbit nets and string bags, or tying ornaments around their necks. Where skins are used most, as among the Eskimo, this cordage may consist mostly of thongs cut from hides and animals sinews; people who use few skins and live in forests, use vegetable fibers, such as rattan, hibiscus, fiber and and spruce roots, where no secondary treatment is necessary to make them serviceable. Other fibers are short, and must be twisted together into a continuous cord or thread." (Op. cit.)

Out of the technique of weaving, there arose the basket industry. Depending upon the locality, these baskets were made of bark, grass, bast, skins, roots. Some were woven, other types were sewed. The variety of baskets and other woven articles is enormous. Robert H. Lowie lists some of these as follows: burden baskets, water bottles, shallow bowls, parching trays, shields (in the Congo), caps and cradles (in California), fans, knapsacks, mats, satchels, boxes, fish-creels, etc. Some of the baskets are so tightly woven that they are waterproof and used for cooking and storage. (*An Introduction to Social Anthropology.*) Some, writes Briffault, are so fine that they cannot be duplicated by modern machinery:

"The weaving of bark and grass fibers by primitive woman is often so marvelous that it could not be imitated by man at the present day, even with the resources of machinery. The so-called Panama hats, the best of which can be crushed and passed through a finger ring, are a familiar example." (The Mothers.)

In this industry, women utilized whatever resources nature placed at their disposal. In areas where the coconut is found, a superior cordage is made from the fibers of the husk. In the Philippines, an inedible species of banana furnished the famous manila hemp for cordage and weaving. In Polynesia, the paper mulberry tree was cultivated for its bark; after the bark was beaten out by the women, it was made into cloth, and from this cloth they made shirts for men and women, bags, straps, etc.

The textile industry emerged with the great Agricultural Revolution. In this complex industry there is a fusion of the techniques learned by the women in both agriculture and industry. As Gordon Childe writes:

"A textile industry not only requires the knowledge of special substances like flax, cotton and wool, but also the breeding of special animals and the cultivation of particular plants." (Man Makes Himself.)

A textile industry, moreover, requires a high degree of mechanical and technical skill, and a whole series of collateral inventions. For such an industry to develop, Childe continues,

". . . another complex of discoveries and inventions is requisite, a further body of scientific knowledge must be practically applied . . . Among the prerequisite inventions, a device for spinning is important . . . most essential is a loom.

"Now a loom is quite an elaborate piece of machinery — much too complicated to be described here. Its use is no less complicated. The invention of the loom was one of the great triumphs of human ingenuity. Its inventors are nameless, but they made an essential contribution to the capital stock of human knowledge." (Ibid.)

Hunting, apart from its value in augmenting the food supply, was an extremely important factor in human development. In the organized hunt, men had to collaborate with other men, a feature unknown in the animal world where competitive struggle is the rule. On this point, Chapple & Coon state:

"Hunting is fine exercise for body and brain. It stimulates and may have 'selected for' the qualities of self-control, cooperation, tempered aggressiveness, ingenuity and inventiveness, and a high degree of manual dexterity. Mankind could have gone through no better school in its formative period." (Op. cit.)

Leather Makers

However, because hunting was man's work, historians are prone to glorify it beyond its specific limits. While the men, to be sure, contributed to the food supply by their hunting, it was women's hands that prepared and conserved the food, and utilized the by-products of the animals in their industries. It was the women who developed the techniques of tanning and preserving skins, and who founded the great leather-making industries.

Leather-making is a long, difficult and complicated process. Lowie describes the earliest form of this type of labor as it is still practiced by the Ona women of Tierra del Fuego. When the hunters have brought back a guanaco hide, the woman, he tells us,

". . . kneels on the stiff rawhide and laboriously scrapes off the fatty tissue and the transparent layer below it with her quartz blade. After a while she kneads the skin piecemeal with her fists, going over the whole surface repeatedly and often bringing her teeth into play until it is softened. If the hair is to be taken off, that is done with the same scraper." (Op. cit.)

The scraper that Lowie speaks about is, along with the digging-stick, one of the two most ancient tools of humanity. Side by side with the wooden digging-stick that was used in vegetable collecting and later in agriculture, there evolved the chipped stone, scraper, or "fist-axe" used in manufacturing. On this subject Briffault writes:

"The 'scrapers' which form so large a proportion of prehistoric tools were used and made by women . . . Much controversy took place as to the possible use of these scrapers. The fact that went farthest toward silencing skepticism was that the Eskimo women at the present day use instruments identical with those their European sisters left in such abundance in the drift gravels of the Ice Age.

"The scrapers and knives of the Eskimo women are often elaborately and even artistically mounted on handles of bone. In South Africa the country is strewn with scrapers identical with those of Paleolithic Europe . . . From the testimony of persons intimately acquainted with the Bushmen, these implements were manufactured by the women." (Op. cit.)

Mason corroborates this:

"Scrapers are the oldest implements of any craft in the world. The Indian women of Montana still receive their trade from their mothers, and they in turn were taught by theirs — an unbroken succession since the birth of the human species." (Op. cit.)

Tanning

But leather-making, like most other trades, required more than manual labor. Women had to learn the secrets of chemistry in this trade too, and in the process of their labor they learned how to use one substance to effect a transformation in another substance.

Tanning is essentially a chemical alteration in the raw hide. Among the Eskimos, writes Lowie, this chemical change is achieved by steeping the skins in a basin of urine. In North America, the Indian women used the brains of animals in a special preparation, in which the skin was soaked and the chemical alteration thus achieved. True tanning, however, requires the use of oak bark or some other vegetable substance containing tannic acid. As part of the process of leather-making, the women smoked the leather over a smouldering fire. The shields of the North American Indians were so tough that they were not only arrow-proof, but sometimes even bullet-proof.

Leather products cover as vast a range as basketry. Lowie lists some of the uses of leather: Asiatic nomads used it for bottles; East Africans for shields and clothing; among the North American Indians, it was used for robes, shirts, dresses, leggings, mocassins. The latter also used leather for their tents, cradles and shields. They stored smoking outfits and sundries in buckskin pouches, and preserved meat in rawhide cases. The elaborate assortment of leather products made by the North American Indian women never ceases to excite the admiration of visitors to the museums in which they are collected.

Briffault points out that women had to know in advance the nature of the particular hide they were preparing, and to decide in advance the type of product for which it was best suited:

"It varies infinitely according to the use for which the leather is intended; pliable skins smoothed out to a uniform thickness and retaining the layer to which the hair is attached; hard hides for tents, shields, canoes, boots; thin, soft washable leather for clothing. All these require special technical processes which primitive woman has elaborated." (Op. cit.)

Mason writes:

"On the American continent alone, women skin dressers knew how to cure and manufacture hides of cats, wolves, foxes, all the numerous skunk family, bears, coons, seals, walrus, buffalo, musk ox, goats, sheep, antelopes, moose, deer, elk, beaver, hares, opossum, muskrat, crocodile, tortoise, birds, and innumerable fishes and reptiles.

"If aught in the heavens above, or on earth beneath, or in the waters wore a skin, savage women were found on examination, to have a name for it and to have succeeded in turning it into its primitive use for human clothing, and to have invented new uses for it undreamed of by its original owner." (Op. cit.)

Pot-Makers and Artists

Pot-making, unlike many of the other industries of women, entailed the creation of entirely new substances which do not exist ready-made in nature. On this point Gordon Childe writes:

"Pot-making is perhaps the earliest conscious utilization by man of a chemical change . . . The essence of the potter's craft is that she can mold a piece of clay into any shape she de-

sires and then give that shape permanence by 'firing' (i.e., heating to over 600 degres C.) To early man this change in the quality of the material must have seemed a sort of magic transubstantiation — the conversion of mud or dust into stone . . .

"The discovery of pottery consisted essentially in finding out how to control and utilize the chemical change just mentioned. But, like all other discoveries, its practical application involves others. To be able to mold your clay you must wet it; but if you put your damp plastic pot straight into the fire, it will crack. The water, added to the clay to make it plastic, must be dried out gently in the sun or near the fire, before the vessel can be baked. Again, the clay has to be selected and prepared . . . some process of washing must be devised to eliminate coarse material . . .

"In the process of firing the clay changes not only its physical consistency, but also its color. Man had to learn to control such changes as these and to utilize them to enhance the beauty of the vessel . . .

"Thus the potter's craft, even in its crudest and most generalized form, was already complex. It involved an appreciation of a number of distinct processes, the application of a whole constellation of discoveries . . . Building up a pot was a supreme instance of creation by man." **(Man Makes Himself.)**

Indeed, primitive woman, as the first potter, took the dust of the earth

INDIAN POTTERY

and fashioned a new world of industrial products out of clay.

Decorative art developed side by side with all of these industries in the hands of the women. Art grew out of labor. As Lowie writes:

"A basket-maker unintentionally becomes a decorator, but as soon as the patterns strike the eye, they may be sought deliberately. The coiling of a basket may suggest a spiral, twining the guilloche, etc. What is more, when these geometrical figures have once been grasped as decorative, they need not remain riveted to the craft in which they arose. A potter may paint a twilled design on his vase, a carver may imitate it on his wooden goblet." **(Op. cit.)**

The leather products of women are remarkable not only for their efficiency but also for the beauty of their decorations. And when women reached the stage of cloth-making, they wove fine designs into the cloth, and invented dyes and the techniques of dyeing.

Architect and Engineer

Perhaps the least known activity of primitive women is their work in construction, architecture and engineering. Briffault writes:

"We are no more accustomed to think of the building art and of architecture than of boot-making or the manufacture of earthenware as feminine occupations. Yet the huts of the Australian, of the Andaman Islanders, of the Patagonians, of the Botocudos; the rough shelters of the Seri, the skin lodges and wigwams of the American Indian, the black camel-hair tent of the Bedouin, the 'yurta' of the nomads of Central Asia all are the exclusive work and special care of the women.

"Sometimes these more or less movable dwellings are extremely elaborate. The 'yurta' for example is sometimes a capacious house, built on a framework of poles, pitched in a circle and strengthened by a trellis-work of wooden patterns, the whole being covered with a thick felt, forming a dome-like structure. The interior is divided into several compartments. With the exception of the wood, all its component parts are the product of the Turkoman woman, who busies herself with the construction and the putting together of the various parts.

"The 'pueblos' of New Mexico and Arizona recall the picturesque sky-line of an oriental town; clusters of many-storied houses rise in terraced tiers, the flat roof of one serving as a terrace for that above. The upper stories are reached by ladders or by outside stairs, and the walls are ornamental crenellated battlements . . . courtyards and piazzas, streets, and curious public buildings that serve as clubs and temples . . . as their innumerable ruins testify." **(Op. cit.)**

The Spanish priests who settled among the Pueblo Indians were astonished at the beauty of the churches and convents that these women built for them. They wrote back to their European countrymen:

"No man has ever set his hand to the erection of a house . . . These buildings have been erected solely by the women, the girls, and the young men of the mission; for among these people it is the custom that the women build the houses." **(Quoted by Briffault, op. cit.)**

Under the influence of the missionaries, men began to share in this labor, but their first efforts were greeted with hilarity by their own people. As one Spanish priest wrote:

"The poor embarrassed wretch was surrounded by a jeering crowd of women and children, who mocked and laughed, and thought it the most ludicrous thing they had seen — that a man should be engaged in building a house!" **(Ibid.)**

Today, just the opposite is laughed at — that women should engage in the building and engineering trades!

On Women's Backs

Women were not only the skilled workers of primitive society. They were also the haulers and drayers of goods and equipment. Before domesticated animals released women from part of their loads, it was on their backs that primitive transportation was effected. They conveyed not only the raw materials used in their industries, but entire households of goods being moved from one place to another.

On every migration — and these were frequent before settled village life developed — it was the women who took down the tents, wigwams or huts, and put them up again. It was the women who transported the loads, along with their babies, from one settlement or camp to another. And in everyday life, it was the women who carried the heavy loads of firewood, water, food and other necessities.

Even today, the women among the Ona tribes of Tierra del Fuego, as Chapple & Coon point out, carry loads of well over 100 pounds when they change camp sites. Of the Akikuyus of East Africa, the Routledges write that men were unable to lift loads of more than 40 to 60 pounds,

while the women carried 100 pounds or more:

"When a man states: 'This is a very heavy load, it is fit to be carried by a woman, not a man,' he is only stating a fact." (W. Scoresby and Katherine Routledge, **With a Prehistoric People.**)

Regarding this aspect of women's work, Mason writes:

"From woman's back to the car and stately ship is the history of that greatest of all arts which first sent our race exploring and processing the whole earth . . . I do not wonder that the ship-carpenter carves the head of a woman on the prow of his vessel, nor that locomotives should be addressed as she." (Op. cit.)

Does all this extensive labor activity mean that women were oppressed, exploited and ground down, according to our modern notions? Not at all. Quite the reverse was true. On this score, Briffault writes:

"The fanciful opinion that women are oppressed in savage societies was partly due to the complacency of civilized man, and partly to the fact that the women are seen to work hard. Wherever women were seen engaged in laborious toil, their status was judged to be one of slavery and oppression. No misunderstanding could be more profound . . .

"The primitive woman is independent because, not in spite of her labor. Generally speaking, it is in those societies where women toil most that their status is most independent and their influence greatest; where they are idle, and the work is done by slaves, the women are, as a rule, little more than sexual slaves . . .

"No labor of any kind is, in primitive society, other than voluntary, and no toil is ever undertaken by the women in obedience to an arbitrary order . . .

"Referring to the Zulu women, a missionary writes: 'Whoever has observed the happy appearance of the women at their work and toil, their gaiety and chatter, their laughter and song . . . let him compare with them the bearing of our own working women.' " (Op. cit.)

It is not labor, but exploited and forced labor, that is galling to the human being.

When women began their labor, they had no one to teach them. They had to learn everything the hard way — through their own courage and persistent efforts. Some of the first hints they probably took from nature itself. Mason writes:

"Women were instructed by the spiders, the nest-builders, the storers of food and the workers in clay like the mud-wasps and termites. It is not meant that these creatures set up schools to teach dull women how to work; but that their quick minds were on the alert for hints coming from these sources . . . It is in the apotheosis of industrialism that woman has borne her part so persistently and well. At the very beginning of human time she laid down the lines of her duties, and she has kept to them unremittingly." (Op. cit.)

The First Collective

But because women began their labor in so humble a fashion, many historians have presented women's industries as merely "household crafts" or "handicrafts." The fact is that before machines were developed there *was* no other kind of craft than hand craft. Before specialized factories were developed in the towns and cities, there was no other factory but the "household." Without these households and their handicrafts, the great guilds of the Middle Ages could not have come into existence. Nor, indeed, could the whole modern world of mechanized farms and streamlined industries have come into existence.

When women began their labor they pulled mankind out of the animal kingdom. They were the initiators of labor and the originators of industry — the prime mover that lifted humanity out of the ape-like state. And side by side with their labor there arose speech. As Engels points out:

"The development of labor necessarily helped to bring the members of society closer together by multiplying cases of mutual support and joint activity . . . the origin of language from and in the process of labor is the only correct one . . . First comes labor, after it and then side by side with it, articulate speech." (**The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man.**)

While men undoubtedly developed some speech in connection with the organized hunt, the decisive development of language arose out of the labor activity of the women. As Mason writes:

"Woman, having the whole round of industrial arts on their minds all day and every day, must be held to have invented and fixed the language of the same. Dr. Brinton, in a private letter, says that in most early languages not only is there a series of expressions belonging to the women, but in various places we find a language belonging to the women quite apart from that of the men.

"Savage men in hunting and fishing are kept alone, and have to be quiet, hence their taciturnity. But women are together and chatter all day long. Apart from the centers of culture, women are still the best dictionaries, talkers and letter writers." (Op. cit.)

What labor and speech represented, first of all and above everything else, was the birth of the human collective. Animals are obliged, by nature's laws, to remain in individualistic competition with one another. But the women, through labor, displaced nature's relationships and instituted the new, human relationships of the labor collective.

"Household" the Community

The primitive "household" was the whole community. In place of individualism, social collectivity was the mode of existence. In this respect, Gordon Childe writes:

"The neolithic crafts have been presented as household industries. Yet the craft traditions are not individual, but collective traditions. The experience and wisdom of all the community's members are constantly being pooled . . . It is handed on from parent to child by example and precept. The daughter helps her mother at making pots, watches her closely, imitates her, and receives from her lips oral directions, warnings and advice. The applied sciences of neolithic times were handed on by what today we should call a system of apprenticeship . . .

"In a modern African village, the housewife does not retire into seclusion in order to build up and fire her pots. All the women of the village work together, chatting and comparing notes; they even help one another. The occupation is public, its rules are the result of communal experience . . . And the neolithic economy as a whole cannot exist without cooperative effort." (**Man Makes Himself.**)

Thus the crowning achievement of women's labor was the building and consolidation of the first great human collective. In displacing animal individualism with collective life and labor, they placed an unbridgeable

gulf between human society and the animal kingdom. They won the first great conquest of mankind — the humanizing and socializing of the animal.

It was in and through this great work that women became the first workers and farmers; the first scientists, doctors, architects, engineers; the first teachers and educators, nurses, artists, historians and transmitters of social and cultural heritage. The households they managed were not simply the collective kitchens and sewing rooms; they were also the first factories, scientific laboratories, medical centers, schools and social centers. The power and prestige of women, which arose out of their maternal functions, were climaxed in the glorious record of their socially useful labor activity.

Emancipation of the Men

So long as hunting was an indispensable full-time occupation, it relegated men to a backward existence. Hunting trips removed men for extended periods of time from the community centers and from participation in the higher forms of labor.

The discovery of agriculture by the women, and their domestication of cattle and other large animals, brought about the emancipation of the men from their hunting life. Hunting was then reduced to a sport, and men were freed for education and training in the industrial and cultural life of the communities. Through the increase in food supplies, populations grew. Nomadic camp sites were transformed into settled village centers, later evolving into towns and cities.

In the first period of their emancipation, the work of the men, compared with that of the women, was, quite naturally, unskilled labor. They cleared away the brush and prepared the ground for cultivation by the women. They felled trees, and furnished the timber for construction work. Only later did they begin to take over the work of construction — just as they also took over the care and breeding of livestock.

But, unlike the women, the men did not have to start from first beginnings. In a short time, they began not only to learn all the skilled crafts of the women but to make vast improvements in tools, equipment and technology. They initiated a whole series of new inventions and innovations. Agriculture took a great step forward with the invention of the plough and the use of domesticated animals.

For a fragment of time, historically speaking, and flowing out of the emancipation of the men from hunting, the division of labor between the sexes became a reality. Together, men and women furthered the abundance of food and products, and consolidated the first settled villages.

But the Agricultural Revolution, brought about by the women, marks the dividing line between the food-gathering and food-producing epochs. By the same token, it marks the dividing line between Savagery and Civilization. Still further, it marks the emergence of a new social system and a reversal in the economic and social leadership role of the sexes.

The new conditions, which began with food abundance for mounting populations, released a new productive force, and with it, new productive relations. The old division of labor between the sexes was displaced by a new series of social divisions of labor. Agricultural labor became separated from urban industrial labor; skilled labor from unskilled. And women's labor was gradually taken over by the men.

With the potter's wheel, for example, men specialists took over pot-making from the women. As Childe writes:

"Ethnography shows that potters who use the wheel are normally male specialists, no longer women, for whom potting is just a household task like cooking and spinning." (What Happened in History.)

Men took over the ovens and kilns — that had been invented by the women — and developed them into smithies and forges, where they converted the earth's metals: copper, gold and iron. The Metal Age was the dawn of Man's Epoch. And the most common name today, "Mr. Smith," has its origin in that dawn.

The very conditions that brought about the emancipation of the men brought about the overthrow of the matriarchy and the enslavement of the women. As social production came into the hands of the men, women were dispossessed from productive life and driven back to their biological function of maternity. Men took over the reins of society and founded a new social system which served their needs. Upon the ruins of the matriarchy, class society was born.

From this labor record of the women in the earlier social system, it can be seen that both sexes have played their parts in building society and advancing humanity to its present point. But they did not play them simultaneously or uniformly. There has actually been an uneven development of the sexes. This, in turn, is only an expression of the uneven development of society as a whole.

During the first great epoch of social development, it was the women who pulled humanity forward and out of the animal kingdom. Since the first steps are hardest to take, we can only regard the labor and social contribution of the women as decisive. It was their achievements in the fields of production, cultural and intellectual life which made civilization possible. Although it required hundreds of thousands of years for the women to lay down these social foundations, it is precisely because they laid them down so firmly and so well that it has taken less than 4,000 years to bring civilization to its present estate.

It is therefore unscientific to discuss the superiority of men or women outside the framework of the actual processes of history. In the course of history, a great reversal took place in the social superiority of the sexes. First came the women, biologically endowed by nature. Then came the men, socially endowed by the women. To understand these historical facts is to avoid the pitfalls of arbitrary judgment made through emotion or prejudice. And to understand these facts is to explode the myth that women are naturally inferior to men.