

A Genealogy of the Study of Gender in Prehistory: From the Latter Half of the Nineteenth Century to the Latter Half of the Twentieth Century

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A Genealogy of the Study of Gender in Prehistory: From the Latter Half of the Nineteenth Century to the Latter Half of the Twentieth Century

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to examine the evolution of the study of gender prehistory from the latter half of the nineteenth century to the latter half of the twentieth century. The first chapter discusses the development of the late nineteenth century myth of matriarchal prehistory. The matriarchal thesis was cradled comfortably within evolutionism, however wielded most strongly over time by socialists. The second chapter explores the internal theoretical shifts in academia and the external cultural and societal shifts which discredited the matriarchal myth and pushed the study of prehistory to the wayside during the first half of the twentieth century. The third chapter strives to explain the impact of the second-wave feminist movement on gender prehistory in relation to the androcentric scholarship from the past century and a half. Androcentrism permeated the scholarship on gender prehistory for much of its existence, however in the latter half of the twentieth century, feminist scholars emphasized the biological and cultural contributions of prehistoric women to human evolution. Gender prehistory remained a highly speculative study because it was limited by a lack of substantial evidence. In this regard, gender prehistory has been especially biased as some scholars have projected onto the relatively unknown remote past their desired human origin stories which reflect their desired futures. Hence, the leading interpretations of gender prehistory have changed drastically from their origins in the middle of the nineteenth century to the debate between androcentric and feminist scholars in the second half of the twentieth century because of internal academic shifts and external cultural and societal shifts, the discovery of new anthropological, archeological, ethnographic, and biological data, and projections onto prehistory which lead to the “discovery” of “findings” which affirmed the biases of some scholars.

Dedication

For my mother.

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1. Introduction

Gender prehistory is a subject matter concerned with studying the gendered patterns of human interaction in prehistoric times. Prehistory is conventionally bracketed on the one side by the first use of stone tools by early humans approximately three million years ago and on the other side by the development of written language approximately six thousand years ago. The study of gender prehistory first emerged in the mid to late nineteenth century and has since remained relevant within academia via anthropology, archeology, history, sociology, ethnography, and cultural and biological evolutionism. The subject has also remained a relevant cultural interest outside of academia among various political and social movements, most significantly, for socialists and feminists. Since its birth, gender prehistory has changed dramatically depending on the time and place of its study. In the late nineteenth century, the prehistoric past was imagined as matriarchal by Victorian anthropologists, socialists, and some feminists. By the fin de siècle, the matriarchal thesis was quashed by a new generation of anthropologists who imagined prehistory as contrarily patriarchal. Today, reigning theory dictates that prehistoric hunting and gathering societies most likely experienced a greater degree of sexual egalitarianism than succeeding periods. The evolution of gender prehistory was facilitated by the wider development of external cultural, social, and political movements, such as feminism, androcentrism, socialism, and imperialism which reconceptualized gender and sex relations, the development of internal academic movements which introduced different theoretical frameworks, and the discovery of new anthropological, archaeological, ethnographical, historical, sociological, and biological findings.

Gender prehistory, similar to all other academic disciplines, is steeped in the cultural, societal, and political sentiments and conventions of its time. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the majority of the scholarship on gender prehistory was shaped by the doctrine of Western supremacy and androcentrism. Gender prehistory has been notoriously influential in historicizing and actualizing female inferiority and male superiority. However, in the hands of first-wave and second-wave feminists, the opposite conclusions have also been realized. Gender prehistory, like all other inquiries into and expressions of human nature, possesses the capacity to act as propaganda for the “self”. Bias is inevitable in all speculative interpretations of the past, and given that prehistory is particularly limited by lack of evidence, this thesis seeks to reevaluate the various interpretations of gender prehistory and attempt to determine just how much of their speculation is a projection of the “self” onto the past.

An overwhelming portion of the mostly male scholars of gender prehistory throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century interpreted prehistoric, gendered patterns of interaction to the disadvantage of both the prehistoric and contemporary woman. Their androcentric views of prehistory either spelled out the perceived baseness of female dominance, as in the late nineteenth century myth of matriarchal prehistory, or reaffirmed contemporary gender norms, as in the case of the early to mid twentieth century scholarship on modern hunting and gathering societies. Whereas the nineteenth century variety of androcentrism imagined human cultural and biological evolutionism at the expense of contemporary women, the twentieth century variety significantly diminished the contributions of prehistoric women to the cultural and biological evolution of the human species. In both interpretations of gender prehistory, the prehistoric past was seen as forecasting a future in which female inferiority would remain an unwavering facet of humanity. However, with the rise of the

second-wave feminist movement in the late twentieth century in collaboration with the greater influx of women into academia, the scholarship on gender prehistory evolved once again as it began embracing feminist interpretations of the past. The introduction of feminist approaches into academia widened the scholarly scope beyond its traditional, androcentric lens to envision a more diverse framework of possibilities for prehistoric gendered patterns of interaction.

The primary sources discussed in this thesis help to illuminate gender prehistory's evolution from its genesis in the mid to late nineteenth century as characterized by the myth of matriarchal prehistory, to its curtailment in the first half of the twentieth century, and finally to its adoption of feminist approaches in the latter half of the twentieth century. Friedrich Engels' *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) encapsulates the late nineteenth century socialist adoption of gender prehistory's preeminent theory of matriarchal prehistory. Engel's adoption of the matriarchal thesis would cement themes of gender prehistory in Marxist ideology for decades to come. This book helps demonstrate how manipulating the prehistoric past furthered contemporary political interests. *Man the Hunter* (1968) by Richard B. Lee and Irven Devore encapsulates the androcentrism prominent in the scholarship on hunting-gathering societies in its portrayal of man the hunter as an unparalleled contributor to cultural and biological evolution. The work discredits the contribution of woman the gatherer to the evolutionary development of the human species by her portrayal as mostly passive, stationary, and relatively insignificant. In direct response to this book, Frances Dahlberg published *Woman the Gatherer* (1981) in order to elevate the devalued role of prehistoric women. It demonstrates the early second-wave feminist approach to gender prehistory as it places significant value on the evolutionary role of woman the gatherer. Margaret W. Conkey's and Janet D. Spector's, "Archaeology and the Study of Gender" (1984), is likewise demonstrative of the second-wave

feminist approach to gender prehistory in its criticism of the androcentrism pervasive in archeology. The authors argue against the undignified treatment of female subjects in archeology and anthropology that have dominated the disciplines since their beginnings. All of these primary sources were revolutionary for their times and capture the shifts in the overall evolution of gender prehistory.

The secondary sources employed in this thesis aid in providing historical and theoretical background to the development of gender prehistory. *Gentlemen and Amazons: The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory, 1861-1900* by Cynthia Eller traces the travels of the matriarchal myth of prehistory, as germane to this thesis, in its nineteenth century cradle of evolutionism, socialism, and first-wave feminism. The book is also useful in explaining the termination of the myth in anthropology by the twentieth century. Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Finn Sivert Nielsen's *A History of Anthropology* documents and explains the internal developments of anthropology from its beginnings in the Enlightenment to the present day. This book is informative in explaining the theoretical shifts in anthropology, most relevantly for this thesis, those from evolutionism to functionalism to structuralism. One other major secondary source pertinent to this thesis is *Telling the Truth about History* by Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret C. Jacob, which provides historical background on the overall intellectual developments in the West from the enlightenment onwards and explains how and the extent to which history may act as Western propaganda.

Gender prehistory, although a primarily academic pursuit, is of interest to all sectors of society. Since its discovery in the mid nineteenth century, prehistory has been turned to in order to unearth the mysterious origins of humanity. Due to the lack of substantive evidence, gender prehistory has been subject to the eye of its beholder; whether they be academic, feminist, or

misogynist, anyone can pick up the mirror of prehistory and imagine a human origin story which reflects the ideal future of the onlooker. It's a subject which broaches the doors of academia and entices anyone who asks themselves the question: what if? What if male dominance is not a facet of always? What if it is not natural and unchangeable? For this very reason gender prehistory has been and will continue to be a subject which demands attention. Its potential to disturb the status quo has positioned gender prehistory at the center of not just academic interests, but also cultural, societal, and political ones. For this reason, this thesis will employ social, cultural, political, and intellectual approaches to history in order to explain the dramatic evolution of the study of gender prehistory from the mid to late nineteenth century to the latter half of the twentieth century.

2. The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: The Latter Half of the Nineteenth Century

Gender prehistory first emerged in the late nineteenth century as a subject shrouded in mystery in which some thinkers believed that the dubious origins of everything could be uncovered from the murky, bottomless pit of human history. The discovery of prehistory in the middle of the century opened the doors for a mythical reconceptualization of the past and the very nature of the human species. Ideas of always were brought into question: male dominance and Western supremacy no longer had to be accepted as unwavering features of humanity. The origins of the human race had never seemed more uncertain. The discovery of prehistory provoked a dual effect in the intellectual consciousness of the West: both feelings of uncertainty and anxiety as well as excitement and hope about humanity's collective past and potential future.

The myth of matriarchal prehistory developed from the historical vacuum once plugged by the unquestionable state of nature put forth by the Christian tradition and was cradled comfortably within an atmosphere of competing pasts which could spell out a radically diverse variation of futures. The myth could both affirm contemporary gender norms and explore a time and place in which they could be completely turned on their heads; it could outline the evolutionary supremacy of the modern West and imagine a world where Western supremacy was but a passing stage in human evolution. Yet, when the past is punctured so deeply and the potential for human history torn so wide, the most significant question to be implored, is why did the Victorians choose to fill the remote past with gendered themes of human interaction, where did this obsession with sex and gender stem from? To answer this question, and more broadly to

explain the late nineteenth century development of the matriarchal myth of prehistory, this chapter will analyze the treatment of the myth in the hands of Victorian anthropologists and socialists who set their sights on prehistory as they pursued a reflection of their desired futures.

Historical Background and the Discovery of Prehistory

The Victorian era (1837-1901) is characterized by its rigid adherence to moral, social, and religious convention and the materialism brought into fruition by the rise to prominence of bourgeois life and modern science. In the wake of these defining elements of nineteenth century European society, the public mood shifted towards a “recapturing of the irrational”, in order to find an escape from the unbudging restrictions of society.¹ The myth of matriarchal prehistory enabled the exploration of themes of gendered patterns of interaction while simultaneously avoiding offending of Victorian sensitivities about gender and sex. Gender prehistory acted as a container for the “recapturing of the irrational” where ideas about sex and gender could be called into question without disrupting the status-quo. As explained best by Cynthia Eller in “Matriarchal Myth in the Late Nineteenth Century” from *Gentlemen and Amazons: The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory, 1861-1900*,

The Victorian era, often remembered as a time of social order and stolidity, was in reality a time of great cultural and political upheaval. Repressive sexual mores hid a world of sexual curiosity and dissent; restrictive gender roles, especially for the middle class, cloaked an enormous debate about women’s rights and women’s nature; the apparently stable political environment in Britain covered over a recent past of internal political

¹ George L. Mosse, *The Culture of Western Europe: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries; an Introduction* (London: John Murray, 1963), 214.

unrest and contested colonialism. Like the 1950s in the United States, the late nineteenth century in Britain appeared to be, and in one sense actually was, an unusually stable time, but it was a forced stability produced by the memory of recent disruption and the fear of future chaos.²

The overall historical context in which gender prehistory emerged attempted to reground the very questions which demanded exploration, pertinent to this discussion, questions of sex and gender. Since these questions could not be discussed in relation to their contemporary cultural, social, and religious structures for fear of societal turbulence, the remote past was used to contain them.

The myth of matriarchal prehistory is the belief that prehistoric humans belonged to societies ruled over by women and that descent and kinship were distinguished by the female line. Hence, the matriarchal thesis was substantiated by a matrilineal myth of prehistory. However, prior to the mid-nineteenth century the widespread accepted time frame of all of human history was relegated to a mere six-thousand years as outlined by the Bible. Not only did a biblically based account of history significantly limit the scale of human existence, it also significantly limited the potentiality for any conceptualization of the past as anything but patriarchal, as “until Lyell’s acceptance of the doctrine of human antiquity in 1859, the six-thousand year biblical timescale for “Man” was the reigning theory ...[and]... Prudence dictated acceptance of the dual scriptural claim that human history went back six thousand years and that it was a history of male domination”.³ Additionally, before the discovery of prehistory, the prominent contemporary explanation for cultural variance was the “degeneration theory of savagery”, a Christian approach which surmised that “primitive” peoples regressed from a

² Cynthia Eller, *Gentlemen and Amazons: The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory, 1861-1900* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 176, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pn53d>.

³ Eller, *Gentlemen and Amazons*, 171-72.

“civilized” state to a state of “savagery” in accordance with the Biblical “fall from grace”. Thus, by uncovering the lid of the remote past and in the rejection of the “degeneration theory of savagery”, the possibilities for humanity's origins became seemingly limitless. The discovery of prehistory itself allowed for contemporary gender norms to be challenged. If the Bible is not fount of all knowledge; if male dominance and Western supremacy is not ordained by god; the past, present, and future may contain the capacity for far more variance than ever before expected.

The overall cultural setting from which the matriarchal myth derived encompassed a growing societal fear concerning women’s independence. The greatest impetus for this rising concern was the perceived deterioration of the patriarchal family as women began entering the industrial workforce and the beginnings of the feminist movement which sought greater political rights for women. A significant factor which provoked the perceived deterioration is rooted in the social contract theory which gained grounds two centuries prior. As the theory is predicated on the freedom of the individual it necessitates that one must give consent to any form of subjugation. Similarly, it strived to debase the precedent of the “divine right of kings” which had long been thought of as a representation of the patriarchal family, as the man rules over his wife and children, the king rules over his subjects. Eller explains, “One way around this conundrum [...] was to deny the analogy between political rule and household rule, naming the family home as a “separate sphere,” [...] If women did not have the same political rights as men, they did not need them, for within the domestic sphere, “women could finally be placed on the pedestal on which they belonged” [...] Women were able to avoid or at least minimize physical labor and assaults upon themselves stemming from male lust, and they continued to be cared for in old age. But it also reinforced an ever greater sense of difference between the sexes. As Elizabeth

FoxGenovese asserts, ‘The Victorians would produce the apotheosis of the female as so unequal as to be naturally of another human order’”.⁴ This solution triumphantly and thoroughly relegated men and women into two entirely separate “spheres” existence. In the late nineteenth century, the division was further exacerbated by social-Darwinism, and evolutionism more broadly, both of which emphasized the inferiority and “otherness” of the female sex. The reconceptualization of the sexes created an anthropological, and a general cultural, fixation on sex and gender relations. This fixation coupled with the early feminist movement, which was thought to lead to the undermining of the patriarchal family and its institutions, fed the Victorian obsession with themes of sex and gender.

Evolutionism

The greatest impetus for the birth of gender prehistory is evolutionism. Evolutionism was an approach to anthropology which assumes that there is a sequence of stages that a society must pass through even if the rate of progress greatly differs between societies. This anthropological school of thought drew much of its theory from Darwinism, a theory of biological evolution which came to the fore in the mid nineteenth century. Along these lines, “Just as species were thought to evolve into increasing complex forms, so too were cultures thought to progress from simple to complex states”.⁵ At the heart of evolutionism was a need to explain the apparently drastic differences between European culture and life and those of other people around the increasingly globalized world. Subsequently, anthropologists turned to so-called “primitive” peoples which were considered to represent the base of the evolutionary totem

⁴ Eller, *Gentlemen and Amazons*, 173.

⁵ Heather Long and Kelly Chakov, “Social Evolutionism,” Anthropology (The University of Alabama, April 21, 2017), <https://anthropology.ua.edu/theory/social-evolutionism/>.

pole. Ethnographic “findings” about these “simpler” peoples were contrasted with Western culture and lifestyle which, on the other hand, represented the height of evolutionary success. Evolutionism, premised on the unilinear development of all cultures, attempted to unearth evolutionary “survivals”, in other words, relics of past customs which survived into contemporary times and were seemingly meaningless.⁶ Thus, in studying “simpler” cultures, the origins of various cultural customs could be discovered, “The making of pottery is an example of a survival [...]. Earlier peoples made their cooking pots out of clay; today we generally make them out of metal because it is more durable, but we still prefer dishes made of clay”.⁷ Within the dominant anthropological theory of evolutionism, the matriarchal thesis flourished as evolutionary “survivals” supposedly found within the new ethnographic “findings” of the era, allowed for the detailed construction of a past dominated by women.

The leading nineteenth century advocates of the matriarchal myth of prehistory, including the anthropologists Lewis Henry Morgan, John Ferguson McLennan, and Edward Burnett Tylor, all looked to contemporary “primitive” peoples in order to unearth the familial and marital origins of Western patriarchy. In assuming the unilinear development of all cultures, they surmised, by means of their ethnographic “findings” on kinship, that women governed societies represented the infancy of human evolution, whereas contemporary Western patriarchy amounted to the highest tier of evolutionary success. However, the idea of unilinear development, when applied to womankind, proved especially problematic. This can be seen in the work of Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881), a prominent evolutionary anthropologist of the latter half of the nineteenth century, who divided all of human cultural evolution into three basic stages based on technological advancement: 1.) savagery, 2.) barbarism, and 3.) civilization. To

⁶ Long and Chakov, “Social Evolutionism”.

⁷ Long and Chakov.

each of these basic stages he also assigned sub-stages which in turn aligned with stages of advancement in familial organization. At the lowest evolutionary level, Morgan devised that familial relations consisted of “hordes of promiscuity”. In the next stage, humans were organized by incestuous groups of brothers and sisters. In the following, by groups of non-incestuous men and women. Later, by a loosely paired man and woman who lived among other pairs. In the next stage, familial relations took the form of male dominated polygamous marriage, and finally, in the form of monogamous marriage between one man and one woman.⁸ The evolutionary approach, as it applies to marriage, family, and the role of women, superposed male dominance as the height of evolutionary success and as a basic tenet of “civilization”. Thus, evolutionism, as germane to this discussion, provided a means of historicizing female inferiority and male superiority.

Socialism

The matriarchal myth of prehistory was developed and substantiated by early anthropologists; however, it was wielded most strongly by late nineteenth century socialists. The socialist adoption of the myth was rooted in Friedrich Engels’ *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) which built its argument from the aforementioned ethnographies and evolutionary stages of Lewis Henry Morgan. Engels argued that not only were these past matriarchal societies more just, but also that the transfer from polyandry to monogamy instituted the “first class-struggle”.⁹ Engels likened the subordination of women, which he thought developed from the institutionalization of male dominated monogamy, to the “first class-

⁸ Long and Chakov, “Social Evolutionism”.

⁹ Friedrich Engels, *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, ed. Mark Harris, trans. Alick West, 4th ed., vol. 3 (Hottingen-Zurich, 2010), https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/origin_family.pdf.

struggle”, or the first instance in which one group of people were forced to labor at their own expense for the gains of another. By adopting the myth of matriarchal prehistory, Engels was able to extend an essential doctrine of Marxism, that history can be defined by a continuous struggle between the proletarian and bourgeois classes, to as far back as the murky origins of humanity, millions of years ago. To further elaborate, “Once the family exists as a social relationship, however, reproduction becomes simply another nexus of production, not qualitatively different from any other [...] Engels is able to interpolate various forms of the family as part and parcel of a materialist history of humanity. He can take on the entire apparatus of the consanguine family, the punaluan family, and so on, as developed by Morgan, and impose this directly onto a Marxist timeline of economic development”.¹⁰ The matriarchal thesis was advantageously adopted by Engels and passed down to succeeding generations of socialists. The substantiation of the so-called “first class-struggle” by anthropological “findings” cemented the matriarchal myth of prehistory within socialist ideology. Although the myth was short lived within anthropology, it would find a home in socialism for much longer. Engel’s *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* would also become the primary springboard by which late twentieth century feminist scholars will bounce their critiques and theories off of.

Conclusion

The myth of matriarchal prehistory in the latter part of the nineteenth century was made possible by the recent discovery of prehistory itself which stood as an unknown and mysterious abyss in which anything could have occurred. Likewise, the newly accessible ethnographic accounts of non-European cultures where “deep” variances were found, in accompaniment of the

¹⁰ Eller, *Gentlemen and Amazons*, 111.

Victorian obsession with sex and gender relations stimulated a mythological reimagining of the past wherein ideas that human history could have been more than the male dominance previously accepted as the “always” flourished. The repressive moral, social, and religious conventions of the Victorian era popularized a form of escapism in which people could explore matters of sex and gender safely contained in the prehistoric past.

3. Gender Prehistory Falls to the Wayside: The First Half of the Twentieth Century

Beginning in the mid nineteenth century, history, sociology, and anthropology underwent a process of institutionalization as they emerged as important, focused, academic subjects. The idea of modernity, that history is progressive by nature and that contemporary times are overall more advanced than others, was passed down from the Enlightenment signaling the perceived triumph of science over tradition and the secular over the religious. The medieval world gave way to the the modern age which brought along with it “the notion of the freely acting, freely knowing individual whose experiments can penetrate the secrets of nature and whose work with other individuals can make a new and better world”.¹¹ Also passed down were Enlightenment ideals of scientific standardization and universalization which were incorporated into the above mentioned disciplines, giving birth to social science. In the spirit of scientific inquiry, the idea of a “total history” proceeded, enabling all the new research of the past two centuries to fit within a single cohesive model.¹²

Anthropology adopted a similar preoccupation with the standardization and universalization of the new ethnographic “findings” from the past half century. By the fin de siècle, anthropology developed beyond its evolutionist and diffusionist approach to develop new frameworks and theories for the study of culture. In place of evolutionism arose functionalism and structuralism, approaches unconcerned with explaining elements of culture on a temporal

¹¹ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret C. Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York, NY: Norton, 1994), 201.

¹² Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, 86.

level. They instead strived to focus on the “hidden” functions and structures of culture in terms of their contemporary functions to the whole of society. By the early twentieth century, the social studies succeeded with an incisive mission to universalize, modernize, and subsequently Westernize the study of all other places and times. In a matter of two decades, evolutionism, and its preeminent theory of matriarchal prehistory, were replaced by synchronic approaches to anthropology which could far better standardize the elements, functions, and structures of all cultures throughout the increasingly globalized world. Amidst anthropology’s new found aim, gender prehistory fell to the wayside and would not be picked back up again until the latter half of the twentieth century. The transition from evolutionism to functionalism and structuralism was the most significant cause for the discreditation of the myth of matriarchal prehistory and the loss of the study of gender prehistory throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Thus, this chapter will discuss the abandonment of the evolutionary approach and the development of functionalism and structuralism in order to explain the manner in which gender prehistory will re-emerge in the latter half of the twentieth century.

The Decline of Evolutionism

By the turn of the century the myth of matriarchal prehistory had been thoroughly quashed by the succeeding generation of anthropologists who criticized the evolutionary approach and particularly its search for “survivals” upon which the matriarchal thesis was constructed. The mission passed down from the Enlightenment to make the social studies more scientific curtailed the earlier historical, speculative approach to anthropology. In other words, evolutionism came under attack for not being “scientific” enough. Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Finn Sivert Nielsen note in “Victorians, Germans and a Frenchman” from *A History of*

Anthropology, that in the years following the turn of the twentieth century, there occurred a “unique move in Britain, away from evolutionism and towards the [...] German school of diffusionism”.¹³ This “unique move” refers to the anti-evolutionist transition in anthropology which began as early as the 1890s. However, others credit, “the passing of anthropology’s fascination with matriarchal prehistory not to any ‘theoretical dissatisfaction with evolutionism,’ but to ‘the material support’ its opponents received ‘from the Colonial Office.’”¹⁴ Evolutionism was concerned with studying the conditions for societal change whereas as its successor, functionalism, was concerned with studying the conditions for societal stability. While evolutionism had the potential to challenge the status quo, as demonstrated by the matriarchal thesis, functionalism strived to maintain the contemporary state of affairs. In this vein, functionalism aligned far better with the imperialist mission of the West. Overall, the passing of the evolutionist approach was most likely due to a combination of both internal academic and external imperialist factors.

Functionalism

Seeking to make their field more like science, anthropologists shifted their search away from evolutionary “survivals” to the so-called “hidden” rules, functions, and structures of culture. In place of evolutionism arose functionalism, an anthropological approach which strived to explain cultural elements and their relationships within the whole of society by means of organic analogy (i.e., it compares the different parts of a society to organs, and society itself to an organism). Whereas evolutionism and diffusionism were concerned with the study of cultural

¹³ Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Finn Sivert Nielsen, *A History of Anthropology* (London, UK: Pluto Press, 2013), 35, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt183gzx9>.

¹⁴ Eller, *Gentlemen and Amazons*, 191.

change over time, functionalism rejected a speculative, historical approach and opted for the “synchronic study of social institutions within society”.¹⁵ The two early leading figures of this approach were anthropologists Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski (1884-1942) and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955). Malinowski developed biological (or psychological) functionalism which argued that individuals have biological and psychological needs which institutions exist to serve.¹⁶ On the contrary, Radcliffe-Brown developed structural-functionalism which argued that society operates on a separate level of reality independent from the biological, therefore social phenomena must be studied within the “social level”. Radcliffe-Brown built on the work of nineteenth century sociologist Emile Durkheim who argued that social phenomena exist independently from psychological and biological fact. Durkheim set out to transform sociology, “as universally applicable and scientific in method and thus [...] helped foster a Western history that aimed to homogenize the study of all other places and times into general Western models of historical development”, and he believed that his sociological explanations could, “apply to the whole world, and they confidently set out to show that their models could work everywhere”.¹⁷ Functionalism thus operates to universalize and standardize elements of culture; anthropologists no longer set out to unearth “survivals” of an age gone by; they instead set out to uncover the “hidden laws” by which culture functioned. Furthermore, functionalism aligns well with the imperialist mission to “modernize” (or, rather Westernize) all other places. In its aim to “encompass everyone”, it has been criticized for being “ethnocentric because it used development in the West as a standard for judging non-Western societies and cultures”.¹⁸ In

¹⁵ Eric Porth, Kimberley Neutzling, and Jessica Edwards, “Functionalism” Anthropology (The University of Alabama, April 24, 2017), <https://anthropology.ua.edu/theory/functionalism/>.

¹⁶ Porth, Neutzling, and Edwards, “Functionalism”.

¹⁷ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, 79.

¹⁸ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, 87, 89.

summation, Functionalism replaced evolutionism because of the push to make anthropology more scientific and because it aligned better with the maintenance and building of empire.

Although functionalism almost completely excluded considerations of prehistory, it maintained an emphasis on themes of gender. Both Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski placed particular importance on the function of kinship, marriage, and descent, arguing that these cultural elements “determined the character of family organization, politics, economy, and inter-group relations”.¹⁹ As Eriksen and Nielsen explain in “Four Founding Fathers”, “A kinship system was easily understood as an unwritten constitution for social interaction, a set of rules for the distribution of rights and duties. Kinship, in other words, was once again becoming a key institution, this time as the engine (or heart, to use the biological analogies favored by Durkheim) of a self-sustaining, organically integrated yet abstract entity called ‘social structure’”.²⁰ Thus, gendered patterns of interaction remained just as central to anthropology as they had in the late nineteenth century. Although ethnographic “findings” on kinship, family, and marriage weren’t used for speculation about prehistory, they remained just as relevant to anthropology and would inform the revival of gender prehistory that came in the latter decades of the twentieth century.

Structuralism

Structuralism succeeded from functionalism and maintained the ideals of universalization and standardization. It is an approach which assumes the “universality of human thought”. The theoretical framework of this approach was first developed by linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) who argued that language consists of “hidden rules” that the practitioner of any given language knows but cannot articulate. This approach also draws its roots back to Gestalt

¹⁹ Porth, Neutzling, and Edwards, “Functionalism”.

²⁰ Eriksen and Nielsen, *A History of Anthropology*, 56.

Psychology which argued that the human mind functions by means of recognizing and/or imposing structure.²¹ The father of structuralist anthropology is anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-2009). Like Saussure with language, Levi-Strauss argued that culture is likewise composed of hidden rules that dictate the behavior of the practitioner; what makes different cultures unique are these “hidden rules”. Therefore, it is the job of the anthropologist to discover what these rules are. He also argued that the “proper focus” of anthropology was the “underlying patterns of human thought” that distinguish the “cultural categories” which determine cultural worldviews. Structuralism is premised on the “psychic unity” of man; it views the structure of human thought processes as the same regardless of culture. For instance, Levi-Strauss argues that the processes take the shape of “binary oppositions” (i.e. culture and nature, dark and light, good and evil, male and female, etc.) which can be best identified by studying kinship, folktales, fairy tales, and religious stories.²² However, just as anthropology’s universalizing mission was problematic for non-Europeans, it was also problematic for women. Simone de Beauvoir, in the introduction to *The Second Sex*, writes,

After studying the diverse forms of primitive society in depth, Lévi-Strauss could conclude: ‘The passage from the state of Nature to the state of Culture is defined by man’s ability to think biological relations as systems of oppositions; duality, alternation, opposition, and symmetry, whether occurring in defined or less clear form, are not so much phenomena to explain as fundamental and immediate givens of social reality’.

These phenomena could not be understood if human reality were solely a *Mitsein* [“psychic unity”] based on solidarity and friendship. On the contrary, they become clear

²¹ Rachel Briggs and Janelle Meyer, “Structuralism,” Anthropology (The University of Alabama, April 21, 2017), <https://anthropology.ua.edu/theory/structuralism/>.

²² Briggs and Meyer, “Structuralism”.

if, following Hegel, a fundamental hostility to any other consciousness is found in consciousness itself; the subject posits itself only in opposition; it asserts itself as the essential and sets up the other as an inessential, as the object.²³

Structuralism, in assuming the “binary oppositions” as inherent to the “psychic unity” of man, and in likewise assuming the opposition of man and woman, posits that this opposition is unchanging and is natural. This logical fallacy of assuming that the “binary opposition” of man and woman, rears its head in all of the aforementioned approaches and would become perhaps the most contentious area of anthropological discussion in the second half of the twentieth century.²⁴ Structuralism and functionalism are both attempts at making anthropology more “scientific”; they both presume a set of universal “hidden” laws which they seek to uncover; they also both aim to create one universal, European, and androcentric model which can encompass everyone everywhere. The latter part of the twentieth century saw anthropology abandon both of these synchronic approaches for criticisms of their inherent Western and androcentric bias.

Conclusion

The turn of the twentieth century experienced the overarching institutionalization of anthropology as the discipline grew in focus, approaches, and followers. The anti-evolutionist and ahistorical approaches which came to dominate the first half of the twentieth century made little room for the study of gender prehistory as the attention shifted in order to be able to understand elements of culture in terms of their contemporary functions to the whole of society. Despite this, the emphasis on kinship, marriage, family, and gender still remained essential keys

²³ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London, Uk: Vintage Classic, 2015), 6-7.

²⁴ Margaret W, Conkey and Janet D. Spector, “Archaeology and the Study of Gender,” in *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory*, vol. 7 (New York, NY: Springer, 1984), 1-38, 4.

for unlocking the hidden rules, structures, and functions of culture. While evolutionism, and to a lesser extent diffusionism, fell to the wayside, functionalism and structuralism rose providing a non-temporal approach to anthropology. Nonetheless, the contents of this chapter are important in order to be able to explain how and in what manner gender prehistory would resurface in the latter part of the century.

4. Battling Androcentrism: The Latter Half of the Twentieth Century

The latter part of the twentieth century experienced a revival of gender prehistory after the rise of synchronic approaches in anthropology which pushed prehistory to the wayside. This being noted, scholarship on the biological, social, and cultural role and meaning of gender continued to expand even if it did not focus on prehistory. Thus, when prehistory was later picked back up again, there was a wealth of new anthropological, ethnographical, archaeological, and biological findings which informed the re-found interest in gender prehistory. By far the greatest impetus for gender prehistory's revival was the second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Amidst the movement for greater sexual liberation themes of sex and gender were brought to the forefront of political and cultural interest. Within this sex and gender seeped atmosphere gender prehistory re-emerged as a decidedly feminist pursuit set on reevaluating the findings of the past century and a half. This is not to say that androcentric interpretations of anthropological, ethnographical, archaeological, and biological data did not continue to flourish, but for the first time a uniquely female academic interpretation of gender prehistory emerged with the pointed focus of elevating the devalued role of the prehistoric woman and discovering the so-called "missing peoples" who had been excluded from the androcentric definitions of man and woman.²⁵ The greater influx of women into academia during the latter part of the twentieth

²⁵ Hannah Cobb and Rachel J. Crellin, "Affirmation and Action: A Posthumanist Feminist Agenda for Archaeology: Cambridge Archaeological Journal," Cambridge Core (Cambridge University Press, February 21, 2022), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/cambridge-archaeological-journal/article/affirmation-and-action-a-posthumanist-feminist-agenda-for-archaeology/B790BC2993D0955579548C2C7EF90B85>, 270.

century led to new feminist reinterpretations of gender prehistory within mainstream scholarly discourse. Never before had female interpretations of gender prehistory been more widespread. The reactionary nature of the relationship between the androcentric and feminist scholarship of the latter part of the twentieth century provoked a push and pull debate on gender prehistory regarding why the relationship between the sexes is the way that it is; why gender roles are the way that they are; and why the status of women is secondary to men. On the one side feminists pushed for a cultural and social interpretation of gender norms and on the other side androcentric scholars pulled back claiming that the relationship between the sexes, binary gender roles, and the secondary status of women are biologically determined; they are natural; they are not only the past and present; they are the future. Once again, the discussion of gender prehistory was far more concerned with the future than it was about the remote past. Taking all of this into account, this chapter will discuss the development of this debate in terms of the arguments made by both second-wave feminists and androcentric, male scholars to demonstrate how the results of this debate signified two opposing futures: one in which diversity of gendered patterns of interaction become possible and one in which women remain inherently inferior.

Historical Background and First-Wave vs. Second-Wave Feminism

It's worth mentioning that the androcentric approach had been the exclusive approach to gender prehistory until second-wave feminists made it a matter of their concern. Even in the case of the nineteenth century myth of matriarchal prehistory, which had been concocted, romanticized, and fetishized by Victorian men at the expense of indigenous peoples, it had more often than not acted as an anti-women thesis. As touched on in a previous chapter, the matriarchal myth most commonly served the effect of showcasing Western patriarchy's

supposed evolutionary superiority and matriarchy's supposed baseness. Even in the hands of nineteenth century socialists, the myth primarily served to substantiate and stretch socialist ideology as far back as humanity itself, giving a face to the so-called “first class struggle”. Thus, any feminist motives within the socialist movement were entirely secondary. Although a few first-wave feminists took up the matriarchal myth as well, it never gained in popularity within the movement. At the highest point of popularity for the myth, the late nineteenth century, any derived feminist conclusions were extra ordinary and short lived.

So why then, when prehistory was picked back up again nearly a century later, and indeed the matriarchal myth along with it, was the overwhelming impetus the rise of second-wave feminism? Perhaps the answer lies within the difference between first and second-wave feminist thinking. First-wave feminist supporters of the myth adamantly rejected the lowest level of familial evolution put forth by Lewis Henry Morgan, which claimed that early humans lived within “hordes of promiscuity”. Victorian feminists instead argued that early societies were ruled over by “naturally chaste women” who invented monogamy as being in accordance with the “natural impulses of women” and that “primitive” promiscuity was the mere fantasy of male anthropologists.²⁶ First-wave feminists went out of their way to ensure that their version of the myth wouldn't give the impression that they were advocating for sexual liberation. On an adjacent note, “Gender, in the minds of virtually all proponents of the myth of matriarchal prehistory, is a dualistic proposition: people are either female or male, and that is believed to make all the difference. Once society is characterized foremost by its choices regarding the relationship between females and males, there are really only three options available: male dominance, female dominance, and sexual egalitarianism”.²⁷ Victorian feminists were limited by

²⁶ Eller, *Gentlemen and Amazons*, 129.

²⁷ Eller, *Gentlemen and Amazons*, 124.

their extreme binary gender norms and the taboo of female sexual liberation. Second-wave feminists on the other hand made no such effort to evade coming across as pro-sexual liberation nor did they necessarily view gender as binary. In fact, contrary to first-wave feminists, second-wave feminists criticized the idea that the role of women was to marry and bear children. The very belief they were fighting for was women's sexual liberation. This being said, both first and second-wave feminists were stuck between the same rock and hard place: the rock being Western male supremacy and the hard place being the androcentric gender ideologies which root patriarchy in place. A defining element of much nineteenth and twentieth century gender ideology was the widespread belief that male dominance is biologically determined. This is what both first and second-wave feminists were up against. Yet, whereas Victorian feminists, socialists, and anthropologists could only conceive prehistory as either patriarchal, matriarchal, or egalitarian, second-wave feminists broke down the barriers of the binary system of gender and challenged the androcentric criterion of gender itself allowing for an unprecedented interpretation of gender prehistory beyond the lens of androcentrism.

Androcentrism and Feminism

Second-wave feminism acted as the cradle for the revival of gender prehistory as women strived to obtain greater independence against the backdrop of the movement for sexual liberation. A long standing societal fear was that if women gain "too much" independence they would no longer want to marry and they would no longer want to reproduce. R. Marie Griffith, in an interview by NPR, "How Battles Over Sex, Gender, and Sexual Orientation 'Fractured American Politics'", explains, "what we really ought to be doing is looking back to the early 20th century and the conflicts that really began - or certainly were exacerbated by - women's

suffrage and the right to vote [...] There was a lot of reluctance, a lot of fear of women's sexuality and a fear that if women got the right to vote, they would no longer want to marry, they would no longer want to reproduce [...] So those themes have really carried across our history over the last century, in many ways”.²⁸ There appears to be a correlation between the reluctance and fear of female independence, as noted by Griffith, and the androcentric scholarship which double-downed on the evolutionary importance of male dominance. As Adrienne Zihlman in “Engendering Human Evolution” of *A Companion to Gender Prehistory* explains,

Prior to the 1960s there was little discussion about social life in prehistoric times, much less an examination of women’s roles. Up to this point the cultural ideals of the 1950s prevailed in the wider society and were unquestioned within anthropology: women as stay-at-home moms with men bringing home the bacon, a sexual division of labor, and the nuclear family were all regarded as “natural” and part of an ancient pattern. During the 1960s advances in several areas of research revolutionized our understanding of human origins. This evidence and a growing social awareness of women’s roles influenced anthropologists to reconsider the evolution of human behavior and where women fit into the picture.²⁹

Despite the newfound “evidence” that Zihlman writes of, some androcentric scholars continued to insist upon the superiority of male dominance in the cultural and biological evolution of the human species. This phenomenon is best embodied by the debate between *Man the Hunter* by Richard B. Lee and Irven Devore and *Woman the Gatherer* by Frances Dahlberg. In 1966, leading anthropologists convened in order to compose a comprehensive account of

²⁸ NPR, *NPR* (NPR, December 19, 2017), <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/19/571911565/how-battles-over-sex-gender-and-sexual-orientation-fractured-american-politics>.

²⁹ Diane Bolger and Adrienne Zihlman, “Engendering Human Evolution,” in *A Companion to Gender Prehistory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publ., 2012), 23-44, 23.

modern ethnographic findings concerning hunting and gathering societies. As the title of the conference, turned book, suggests, particular emphasis was given to the role of man the hunter in human evolutionary development. Their ethnographic findings of modern hunting and gathering societies were utilized for speculation regarding prehistoric hunters and gatherers. Ultimately, they decided that prehistoric gendered patterns of human interaction mostly resembled the contemporary “nuclear family” in which the woman stayed near to home to care for the offspring and the man travels far distances, hunting, and providing the majority of the family’s sustenance.

In the years following the publication of *Man the Hunter* (1968), feminist anthropologists and archeologists criticized Lee and Devore’s assumptions that presumed male activities, such as hunting, were of special evolutionary importance in terms of both human biological and cultural development, whereas so-called “women’s work” was awarded close to none. In direct reaction to the deficiencies of *Man the Hunter*, in 1981, Dahlberg published a collection of essays under the title *Woman the Gatherer* in order to elevate the role of the prehistoric woman to at least the same level as the prehistoric man. Whereas *Man the Hunter* lists hunting as the first “food-getting” activity to distinguish humans from other apes, *Woman the Gatherer* lists gathering. Furthermore, while the former claims men invented the first tools for hunting, the latter claims women invented the first tools for gathering. And, whereas Lee and Devore cite comparisons of baboon gendered patterns of interaction to human gendered patterns of interaction, Dahlberg cites comparisons with chimpanzees, our closest living relatives, and a species which exhibits far less male aggression and dominance than baboons. As put best by Jean Treloggen Peterson, *Woman the Gatherer* “represents an important move toward a reassessment of anthropological theory in the light of recent work on nonhuman primates, Pleistocene archaeology, and contemporary foraging societies. It provides compelling theoretical arguments based on the

female role of gatherer as opposed to the male role of hunter, and on mother-child bonds and nurturance, as opposed to male dominance. It examines a sexual division of labor as a medium for assuring group cohesion and survival, rather than as a primarily biologically based phenomenon”.³⁰ Whereas feminist scholars break down contemporary gender ideology to be able to view the remote past within a diverse framework of possibilities, androcentric approaches to gender prehistory limit the behaviors, roles, concepts of gender and sexuality of prehistoric humans in order for them to align with contemporary patriarchy and its institutions, such as the “nuclear family”. An exemplary case of some androcentric scholars’ preoccupation with justifying modern gender norms through prehistoric findings is Owen Lovejoy’s leading article (1981) in *Science* which

proposed a new hypothesis for the origin of bipedal locomotion: it allowed males to range widely to collect food to provision their mates and biological offspring. According to this model, females became tied to a home base, exercised less mobility, and had more closely spaced offspring, thereby reproducing more frequently. To ensure that a male did not spend effort caring for someone else’s offspring, a pair bond developed to guarantee paternity [...] Lovejoy’s hypothesis reinforced the traditional pair bond as an ancient pattern [...] Lovejoy presented no evidence that mobility equates with infant mortality in primates or humans and ignored the evidence for compatibility of locomotor mobility and reproduction obvious in female monkeys, apes, and hunter-gatherers.³¹

Lovejoy’s scholarship on gender prehistory is conspiratorial and deeply biased. He goes out of his way to see contemporary gender norms, most especially the “nuclear family”, reflected in the

³⁰ Jean Tregloggen Peterson, “Review,” *American Ethnologists* 10, no. 1 (February 1983): pp. 185-186, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/644721>, 185.

³¹ Bolger and Zihlman, *A Companion to Gender Prehistory*, 33-34.

remote past while ignoring evidence and providing none of his own. Within the context of the second-wave feminist movement's fight for sexual liberation, the fear and reluctance regarding female independence may be one possible explanation for why androcentric scholars, such as Lee, Devore, and Lovejoy, attempted to cement contemporary gender norms as biological determinants.

Prehistory and the Future

Now that the main arguments put forward by second-wave feminists and androcentric scholars have been explained, it's time to explore what the outcomes of this debate signified to each of the parties involved. As aforementioned, the study of gender prehistory has always been far more concerned with the future than with the past. This is telling, it means that the past is looked to in order to justify or refute the present and to learn just how limited or unlimited human potential may be. However, prehistory has always been unique in these regards, it is the unknown, mysterious origins from which civilization arose. In this way, prehistory has acted as a mirror from the time of its discovery to the present day. Whether held in the hands of Victorian anthropologists, socialists, or feminists, or in the hands of twentieth century male scholars or second-wave feminists, the shape of gender prehistory reflects the hopes and the fears of its beholder. Since the primary scholars of gender prehistory since its discovery has been almost exclusively men, the reflections have been exclusively androcentric. In a revolutionary article by Margaret W. Conkey and Janet D. Spector, "Archaeology and the Study of Gender" (1984), the disparities of what this gendered monopoly over the past have created in academia are put on blast,

The descriptions of male activities are more detailed, and are portrayed more actively and more frequently than female-associated activities. There is asymmetry in the visibility, energy levels, accomplishments, and contributions of the sexes. The very language used to describe or refer to males and females differs to the disadvantage of women. For example, there is a striking absence of the word activity used with reference to women, though the phrase male activity or some version of that phrase is common. Finally, passive verb forms are typically used for females in contrast to the use of active forms for males. Sex bias then is both reflected and realized by the language of archaeology.³²

Men's earlier monopoly over gender prehistory historicizes the role of women as passive, weak, and evolutionarily insignificant. History is indeed propaganda for the self, but when the self is divided between men and women, only one history will be reflected. The feminist approach is the reflection of women as the beholders of gender prehistory. It's a perspective which widens the exclusionary androcentric lens to encompass a past which is not defined by contemporary standards of gender ideology. If female inferiority is not determined biologically, and not always evident, a biological determinant, the future does not have to spell out the continued subjugation of one half of the human species. At the end of the day, it is not merely the gendered lives of people from thousands to millions of years ago being debated, but also what the gendered lives of the future can and ought to look like. Cynthia Eller writes on the topic of the myth of matriarchal prehistory, but equally relevant to the study of gender prehistory itself, is the question of sex inequality, "Even people highly socialized to believe that sex inequality is natural, unavoidable, and morally right can find it troubling. An explanation for this inequality is required. Matriarchal myth, I suggest, is an effort to provide this explanation, to make sense out of the painful ambiguities of sex inequality. It does this, intriguingly, whether the

³² Conkey and Spector, "Archaeology and the Study of Gender", 10.

narrator is in favor of sex inequality or against it, whether sex inequality is seen as a reality to be accepted in good grace or as a hideous abomination of the natural order”.³³ If the phrase “matriarchal myth” was simply replaced with the phrase “gender prehistory”, the same argument made above would ring true. While the second-wave feminist movement began challenging and dismantling contemporary gender norms, androcentric scholars turned back to prehistory in order to reground the contemporary doctrine of male dominance, outlining a symbiotic, reactionary relationship in the debate between androcentrism and feminism.

Conclusion

The study of gender prehistory has changed drastically since its first proposal in the mid nineteenth century. The androcentric approach to gender prehistory which has dominated academia until the rise of the second-wave feminist movement in the late twentieth century spells out a past, present, and future wherein male dominance is an unchangeable facet of the human species. The feminist approach emerged to widen the girth of the exclusionary, androcentric lens of gender prehistory and provide a diverse framework of possibilities for what the past and future could and ought to be. Whereas androcentric scholars place nearly sole emphasis on the role of man the hunter in terms of biological and cultural evolution, second-wave feminist scholars dignify the devalued role of woman the gatherer as a likewise important contributor to the overall development of the human species. Within the overall debate between androcentrism and feminism, the one thing both parties can agree on is that if male dominance is not natural and unchangeable than the possibilities for the past and the future are far more diverse than ever before expected.

³³ Cynthia Eller, *Gentlemen and Amazons*, 14.

5. Conclusions

Throughout this analysis of the history of the development of gender prehistory it has become clear that the dramatic shifts in interpretation of prehistoric gendered patterns of interaction are due to the wider development of external cultural, social, and political movements which have contributed to the reconceptualization of gender and sex relations, the development of internal academic shifts which introduced different theoretical frameworks and movements, and the discovery of new anthropological, archaeological, ethnographical, historical, sociological, and biological findings. The discovery of prehistory by the mid nineteenth century opened the doors to a reconceptualization of the past which moved beyond the biblical six thousand year time period of human history, the “degeneration theory of savagery”, and the male dominance previously accepted as having always existed. With prehistory uncapped, mythological envisionings of the human origin story were conjured in which contemporary gender relations were completely flipped on their head. The myth of matriarchal prehistory was developed by Victorian anthropologists and wielded for political motives by socialists and first-wave feminists alike. By the turn of the century, evolutionism and its preeminent theory of matriarchal prehistory had been thrown out by the next generation of anthropologists who focused on the synchronic approaches to anthropology: functionalism and structuralism. These synchronic approaches were ushered in by the Enlightenment ideals to standardize, universalize, and thus also Westernize the social sciences. Notably, in doing so, these fields of study coupled more effectively with the building and maintenance of empire. These non-temporal approaches saved no room for the study of gender prehistory as it relied heavily upon historical speculation

and remained a dubious, unknown abyss. Gender prehistory's potential to upset the status quo was contrary to the Western imperialist, universalizing mission which aligned far better with functionalism and structuralism. The emergence of the second-wave feminist movement in the latter half of the twentieth century and the greater influx of women into academia sparked a debate between traditional androcentric approaches to anthropology, archeology, sociology, history, and cultural and biological evolutionism and new feminist approaches which criticized the androcentric assumptions of the past century and a half.

For the Victorians, early twentieth century androcentric anthropologists, and second-wave feminist scholars, prehistory represented the possibility that the "truths" accepted as natural and unchanging may perhaps one day find themselves completely reversed. For this reason gender prehistory may be perceived as alluring and provocative, as in the case of the late nineteenth century, or may be ignored altogether as in the case of the early twentieth century.

Due to its largely speculative nature, gender prehistory has been envisioned in drastically different and often opposing manners. At the end of the day, gender prehistory has been used as a means of historicizing and actualizing female inferiority and male superiority, but the opposite effect has been derived as well. To this extent, gender prehistory has acted as a mirror between the remote past and an idyllic future. The androcentric scholarship of the past two centuries predicts a future in which female oppression will remain in perpetuity. However, the second-wave feminist scholarship views prehistory in terms of a diverse framework of possibilities which foretells an equally diverse future.

Gender prehistory is influential because it mirrors the future. It has the extra ordinary capacity to challenge contemporary norms, standards, and conventions that are too often taken for granted. The mysterious and unknown nature of prehistory allows for the imagination to fill

in the gaps where evidence is missing. Thus, the nature of the study of prehistory is also a deeply biased one. It is a relatively empty canvas upon which radically different origin stories of the human species may be painted. For this reason, gender prehistory calls out from beyond the muddy waters of human history to implore its beholder, “‘What if?’ [...] What if women rather than men ran the world? What if the very things that have been seen as women’s social disabilities— pregnancy, childbirth, lactation— were once regarded as the chief characteristics of the divine? What if the battle of the sexes were laid to rest and women and men cooperated to create a benevolent, harmonious social world? What if God were Goddess?”³⁴ Questioning notions of “always” has been an essential element of the study of gender prehistory and will most likely remain so. The questions which arrive such as these are lined with both despair and hope regarding past and present sex inequalities. Today, much of the scholarship on gender prehistory continues to be produced by the hands of men. As Hannah Cobb and Rachel J. Crellin explain in “Affirmation and Action: A Posthumanist Feminist Agenda for Archaeology”, “From the age of 45 onwards, most archaeologists are men (Aitchison et al. 2021, fig. 2.4.2). Further, the picture painted in these figures is one which frames gender as binary, which is in itself problematic and unrepresentative [...] gender imbalances, particularly in senior and professorial roles, predominate in archaeology, as does a binary view of gender and a marked lack of ethnic diversity and disability across the archaeological profession”.³⁵ If much of the scholarship on gender prehistory continues to reflect the images put forth by men then it will continue to be shaped by androcentrism. This would indeed present a future of despair where sex inequality is concerned. The most influential source for combatting androcentrism in scholarship is the participation of a greater number of female academics. Hope for the future lies not in the remote

³⁴ Eller, *Gentlemen and Amazons*, 8.

³⁵ Cobb and Crellin, “Affirmation and Action”, 266.

past, but in the actions of the present day, “Rethinking our pedagogy is one way to make space for more diverse voices to flourish in our discipline; but posthumanist feminism also asks us to move away not just from teaching majoritarian histories, but also writing majoritarian histories, and instead to write about the minoritarian: the forgotten stories and pasts from the ‘missing peoples’ and the missing non-humans”.³⁶ “Missing peoples”, as germane to this discussion, refers to certain groups of people who throughout history have been unable to meet the “traditional” standards of the binary gender categories: man and woman. These categories stem from the Western tradition which has long been shaped by male dominance, “Humanism upholds a very specific version of the ideal human: the white, heterosexual, western, educated, able-bodied and property-owning man—captured in the image of Vitruvian Man (Braidotti 2013, 14, fig 1.1). This idealized man is seen as the seat of agency and rationality: he stands alone, the captain of his own fate. All other humans have, historically, been compared to this ‘ideal human’ and in that comparison they have been found lacking”.³⁷ Androcentrism undermines the contributions of one half of the entire human species where biological and cultural evolution is concerned. Thus, to be able to study the gendered lives of humans from tens of thousands of years ago in a dignified light, the standards by which historical subjects are examined must be revamped. To unravel the androcentric narrative of gender prehistory the narrator himself must be replaced.

The future of gender prehistory will reflect the desires, fears, and biases of its scholars. However, in the hands of a more diverse number of scholars the interpretations of anthropological, archeological, ethnographic, and biological data can surpass the bounds of androcentrism and embrace a wider range of possibilities for the gendered lives of prehistoric

³⁶ Cobb and Crellin, “Affirmation and Action”, 272.

³⁷ Cobb and Crellin, 269.

humans. Hence, the possibilities created for gendered lives today subsequently generate possibilities for the future and the past.

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