Why Must Might Be Right? Observations on Sexual Herrschaft

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The politics of sexual herrschaft is about control. This is very complicated politics because it emerges from the interaction of the consequences of biological differences between males and females, the conceptualization of these differences including the myths and ideologies formed around the concepts, and from the constraints of social institutions, particularly those linked to domestic and political roles. Each of these frames effects the others, and it is within this multidimensional field that individual men and women live and contend for control. No one frame can "explain" the patterns of control which emerge, since these are a product of their interaction. This circumstance also makes analysis difficult; the selection of one element to discuss implies its greater importance when this is not intended. To comment on these issues is also difficult because of the large amount of unusually high quality work already published. It is neither possible to do justice to these studies in the space available, nor valid to ignore them. Of necessity major contributions and unresolved debates, proper subjects of essays in themselves, are here relegated to footnotes.

A basic learning mechanism for higher animals, including humans, is the reward/punishment complex studied by behavioural psychology.[1] Our behaviour is constantly shaped by this learning organized around seeking gratification and avoiding pain. While this has obvious implications for childrearing and education generally, it is in fact also fundamental to social institutions. It is through rewarding conformity and the threat of negative sanctions that norms are established and maintained. Such sanctions need not be formal such as those embodied in courts and police. Evans-Pritchard wrote of Nuer social order being maintained by the threat of the feud (Evans-Pritchard, 1940). Yanomamo villages retain their autonomy by being feared as fierce and ready to attack others (Chagnon, 1968). Relations between street gangs in modern cities follow much the same lines (Keiser, 1969). There is thus at a basic level an association between force and the normative order. The polemics of modern governments seeking to justify massive overkill capacity are always framed in terms of defending the good (democracy/socialism) against the evil (capitalist/socialist) dictatorship. But of course this very relativity of who and what is right throws into high relief the danger of accepting the simple equation Might = Right. In simple societies there is generally a straightforward pattern: My people/descent group/village are right and we will fight to defend ourselves against your people/descent group/village who are our enemies because you are fighting us. Because you are our enemies you are wrong (and we are right).

Individuals with ties to two hostile groups often act as go-betweens and mediators; or they may be caught between the two and seen as potential enemies by both. The moral element in such conflicts is sometimes expressed in the idea of a duel, tournament or battle as an ordeal, with the victory going to those who have the Lord (i.e., morality) on their side. State systems have evolved a wide variety of institutions for constraining open contests of strength within their boundaries, and for separating right (law) from whether one individual or his group is stronger than another. Significantly, at the level of relations between states (or in a civil war, between the opposing sides) Might is still used as a measure of who is Right. A successful coup or revolution is followed, eventually if not immediately, by the recognition by other nations of the new government. Winning a war results in the redrawing of boundaries, and the re-design of constitutions. The side which wins gets to make the new rules.

However this paper is not about legal systems or national polities, but about the interaction between power and morality in relations between men and women. That these are not totally separate problems can be seen in the way in which many simple societies describe their origins in terms of the overthrow of the rule of women (see below).

Paradoxes of Herrschaft at the Level of Social Structure

Women, Levi-Strauss has shown, are objects of transactions by men (Levi-Strauss, 1969). In small traditional systems marriages were often based on the exchange of sisters between men, since because of incest conventions, men cannot marry their own sisters. In other societies, such exchanges were transformed to bridewealth transactions, in which a conventionally determined valuable was exchanged for rights to marry a kinswoman; the kinsman who received bridewealth could then exchange it with another family

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for a bride for himself or his son. In more complex societies fathers sought prestigious suitors for their daughters with valuable dowries (Goody & Tambiah, 1973). In many places it was accepted that men could seize wives in raids, or as the prizes of war, or as the prerequisites of slave ownership. But always it was men who transacted the rights to marry women and not the women themselves (although they might have some influence behind the scenes). The obvious question would seem to be, why in these many, many independent systems didn't women use the fact that their sexual and reproductive capacities were a valued resource, to take control over their own bodies and transact on their own account? For according to exchange theory, the party to a transaction who holds the greater resources, commands the greater power (Blau, 1968; Homans, 1958). Yet women yield this resource to men, who use it to gain wives, establish alliances between kin groups -- and determine the domestic destiny of the women themselves. Societies vary in the extent to which marriages are arranged by one or another of these institutions, but in no society do women transact in the marriages of men.

The Marxist premise is that control over the means of production leads to economic power which is the ultimate basis for political power. Yet this equation does not seem to operate in the relationship between the sexual division of labour and economic and political power for women. In simple technology societies women tend to contribute heavily to subsistence: In most types of hunting and gathering systems it has been estimated that they provide well over 50% of subsistence consumption (Lee, 1968), while in the rudimentary agriculture of New Guinea, Amazonia, aboriginal North America, and much of Africa, women were cultivators, and often produced most or all of the staple food (Friedl, 1975). Yet it is rare for women to hold positions of either economic or political authority in these societies. In foraging systems it is men who are hunters, although the supply of meat they provide is irregular and often small. However, meat, unlike gathered foods, serves as the basis for gifts and exchange outside of the domestic group and may be built into claims for wives as among the Tiwi of Australia (Hart & Pilling, 1960), or into systems of prestige and even office (as in the potlatch system of the Indians of the northwest coast of North America). Even in those simple agricultural systems in which women do all the cultivating of staple foods (frequent in New Guinea, and in many societies in Africa and Amazonia) this gives them no claims on external economic roles or political office. It is always men who initially clear the land, and who construct and hold social ownership of land which gives them claims on the crops it bears (Friedl, 1975). It thus cannot be argued that women hold less power and prestige *because* their absorption in bearing and rearing children has prevented them from contributing to subsistence production. On the contrary, they seem to be subordinate in many societies *in spite of* being the major subsistence producers (Kaberry, 1952). What seems to happen in these societies is that men's contribution to the division of labour is based on superior strength, and possibly on the greater risk of injury or death. Both hunting and clearing of land are the basis of political and economic transactions between men in which women do not participate. These transactions create a superstructure of power and authority roles that feeds back into the definition of male and female domestic roles, and the overall pattern of male dominance. As Rosaldo argued in her seminal paper (1974), the pre-occupation of women with childrearing and the domestic domain produces societal systems in which men hold legitimate authority and manage relations *between* domestic groups.

But the final paradox is that men, holding the dominant roles in the public sphere in virtually every society[2], should find it necessary to label women's power, when it does emerge, as illegitimate and wrong. For in cosmologies, myths of origin, and beliefs about causes of misfortune, one repeatedly finds that the subordination of women is their own fault; either women committed some original sin which doomed them to eternal inferiority, or it is in their nature as women to be in some way to blame, to be guilty, or evil, or simply stupid. This being so, men are "naturally" and "inevitably" dominant. Such a coincidence between *de facto* distribution of power and beliefs about the nature of the world both serves to reinforce the position of the dominant and argues to the subordinated that they cannot change their situation. But of course it is not a coincidence. Why does Might claim to be Right? And why is this claim accepted by those whom it blames for their own subordination?

In discussing the nature of social stratification, Beteille has argued (1983) that complex societies in which there is an ethic of equality are in fact faced with the reality of marked inequalities. They tend to respond by producing various rationalizations as to why some are better off and others disadvantaged, and these rationalizations tend to be based on some sort of supposed "natural order."[3] This displaces the

responsibility for the reality of inequality from human beings to nature, which, since there is a very strong committment to the ideal of equality, is more comfortable than having to accept that the contradiction has a human social basis. Beteille is concerned with social divisions, class and caste. But there are striking parallels in the ideological rationalizations of very diverse societies for the domination of men over women. The parallel occurs at two levels: First, in the elaborate ideologies which explain the origin and necessity for this dominance; and second, in the tracing of the cause to the "natural" attributes of women. There is also a third element which I suspect may appear in ideologies justifying socio-economic stratification. This is based on morality. Women are inferior because they have sinned, or are in essence sinful. This twist to the argument allows men to feel not only superior, but righteous. The women brought it on themselves, and deserve to be punished. So one is forced to ask why should these ideologies legitimating dominance make the weaker also be guilty of some form of immorality? Why must Might also be Right?

One could draw illustrative material for this pattern of the social construction of reality from a very wide range of historical and ethnographic examples. I shall consider just a few cases in sufficient detail to make clear the culturally specific patterns and then return to the question of the underlying dynamic.

South American Indians: Origin Myths and Control of Women

There are two strikingly similar complexes of South American Indian origin myths, both linked to male adolescent initiation, one from the extreme southeast of the continent, and the other from the tropical forest area of the northwest Amazon and central Brazil. Bamberger has described these as "myths of matriarchy" and "myths about the Rule of Women" for they focus on an account of how women in the beginning controlled scared knowledge, and made men raise manioc, do the domestic work and take their orders (Bamberger, 1974). In other versions men originally were dominant, but women seized the sacred objects and took control. In both variants, the men attacked the women and gained (regained) control of the sacred objects, thus ensuring their control over women's labour and their subservience and establishing the natural order of dominance which continues today. The Ona myth (Tierra del Fuego) described by Bridges on the basis of his own initiation (early 20th century) contains the main features of the set:

> In the days when all the forest was evergreen, ... in the days when the Sun and Moon walked the earth as man and wife ... in those far off days witchcraft was known only by the women of Ona-land. They kept their own particular lodge, which no man dared approach. The girls, as they neared womanhood, were instructed in the magic arts, learning how to bring sickness and even death to all those who displeased them.
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> The men lived in abject fear and subjection. Certainly they had bows and arrows with which to supply the camp with meat, yet, they asked, what use were such weapons against witchcraft and sickness? As this tyranny of the women became worse, the men decided to kill off all the women; 'and there ensued a great massacre, from which not one woman escaped in human form.' After this debacle the men were forced to wait to replace their wives until young girl children matured. Meanwhile the question arose: how could men keep the upper hand now they had got it? One day, when these girl children reached maturity, they might band together and regain their old ascendancy. To forestall this, the men inaugurated a secret society of their own and banished forever the women's Lodge in which so many wicked plots had been hatched against them. No woman was allowed to come near the Hain (men's Lodge) on penalty of death ... (Quoted from Bridges, 1948, pp. 412-413 in Bamberger, 1974, p. 270)

From the Amazon Barasana Indians of a quite distinct culture area, Stephen Hugh-Jones recorded the following myth:

> 1. Romi Kumu's father, Poison Anaconda, told his sons to get up early and go down to the river to bathe, vomit water and play the *He* (sacred flutes).
> 2. In the morning the sons stayed in bed but Romi Kumu got up early and went down to the river where she found the *He*.
> 3. (Variant: the women/woman did not know what to do with the Yurupary (flutes). They put them over all the orifices of their bodies but not in their mouths. Finally a fish, jacunda (*Crenicichla sp.*) showed them what to do by signalling with its big mouth.)
> 4. The father was at first pleased when he heard the noise of *He* but when he saw his sons still asleep he realized what had happened and was very angry.
> 5. The men ran down to the port but Romi Kumu had already gone, taking the *He* and all other sacred equipment of the men with her.