A Neglected Topic: The Gender Revolution as a Decisive Transition in the Evolution of Western Civilization

Dieter Steiner

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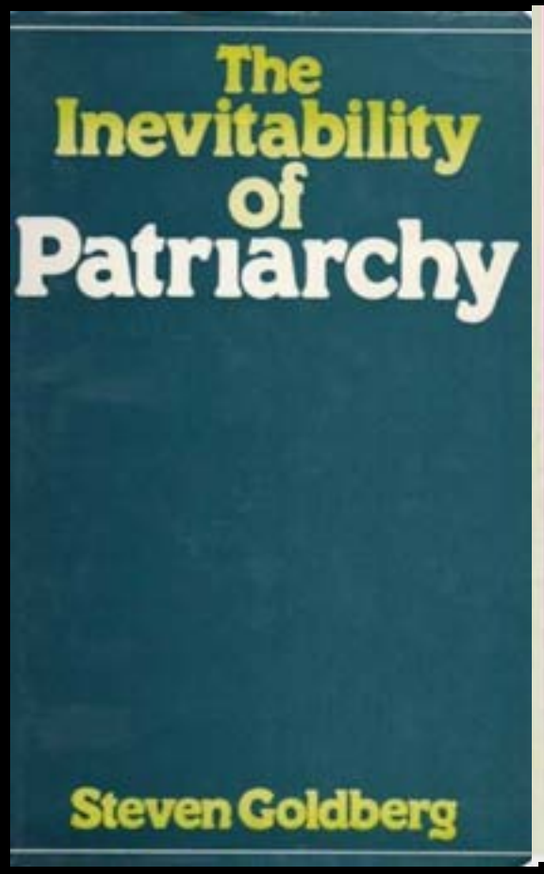
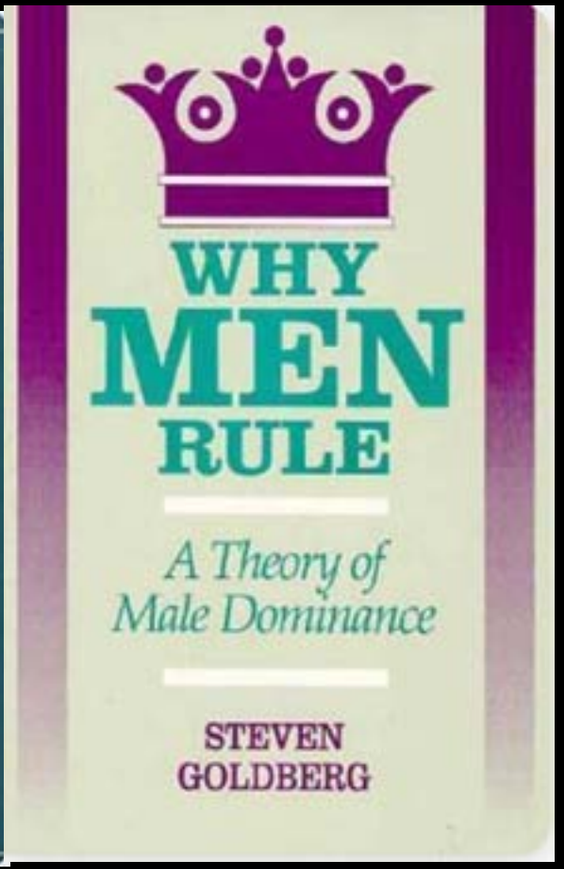
Steven Goldberg
(1941-2022)
American
sociologist

The Inevitability of Patriarchy
William Morrow, New York 1973

Why Men Rule. A Theory of Male Dominance
Open Court, Chicago 1993





"… an unpopular truth: men rule in all societies known to history or anthropology, for reasons arising from innate physiology, a brute fact that can never be conjured away by tinkering with social institutions."
(from the jacket flap of *Why Men Rule* by Goldberg 1993)

Jürg Helbling
(* 1954)
Swiss ethnologist

Theorie der Wildbeutergesellschaft
Eine ethnosoziologische Studie
[Theory of the Foraging Society
An Ethnosociological Study]

Campus, Frankfurt a.M. & New York 1987

The idea that male dominance has always prevailed everywhere has long shaped the study of hunter-gatherer societies in ethnology. This is an example of how prejudices can influence research results in the social sciences.

Helbling critically examined all available data and found that:

“There are no asymmetrical power relations between the sexes or between generations. ... Conflicts are resolved by consensus (public opinion, fission). ... Relations between local groups are predominantly peaceful in nature. Conflicts ... are resolved through avoidance and evasion” (1987, p. 292).

Stanley Diamond

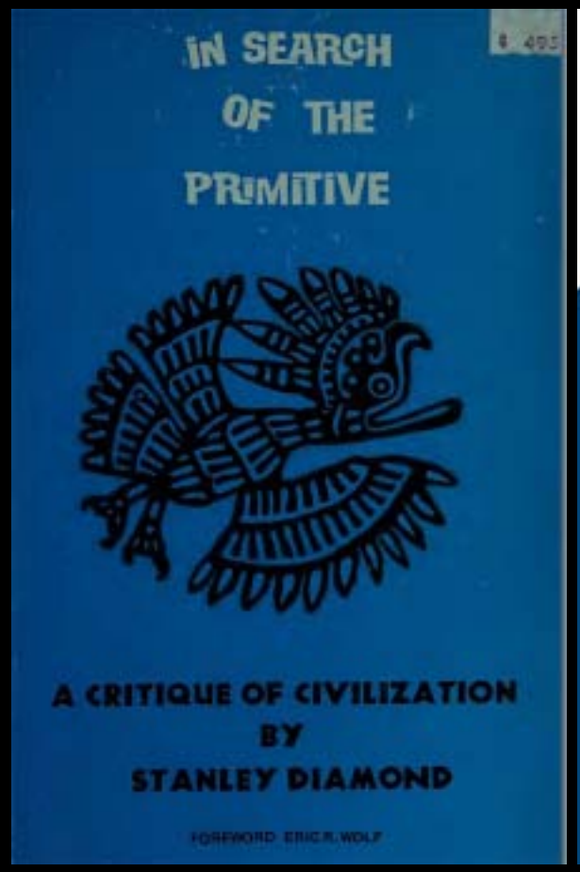
(1922-1991)

American

anthropologist

In Search of the Primitive: a Critique of Civilization

Transaction Books, New Brunswick, NJ & London, UK 1974



“The search for the primitive is the attempt to define a primary human potential, Without such a model … it becomes increasingly difficult to evaluate or understand our contemporary pathology and possibilities … healing presumes a knowledge of the primitive … a sense of what is essential to being human … in this age of abstract horror … In order to determine where we are, we must learn, syllable by syllable, where we have been” (Diamond 1974, p. 119)

Note: The term “primitive” is not meant in a derogatory sense!

The search for the primitive ⟶ an evolutionary perspective

SHE publications: Earlier conference proceedings and all *Human Ecology Review* issues

All articles	692	100 %
Evolutionary perspective in general	29	4.2 %
Evolutionary perspective: Gender issue	5	0.7 %

Gender issue in evolutionary perspective:
This is really a neglected topic !!!!!

V. Gordon Childe
(1892-1957)
Australian-british
archaeologist

Man Makes Himself

The New American Library (Mentor Book), New York 1951

Originally published in England 1936

Two terms were coined by Childe:

Neolithic Revolution (starting around 9500 BC)
It marks the transition from a nomadic lifestyle based on hunting and gathering to a sedentary lifestyle dedicated to arable and livestock farming.

Urban Revolution (starting around 3000 BC)
It describes the change of agricultural villages to cities and possibly city states in the wake of population growth and territorialization.

Connected to those two revolutions there was a radical socio-political transformation, a change from primitive egalitarian communities to autocratic societies.

It brought the men into dominant ruling positions, the women into a repressed state.

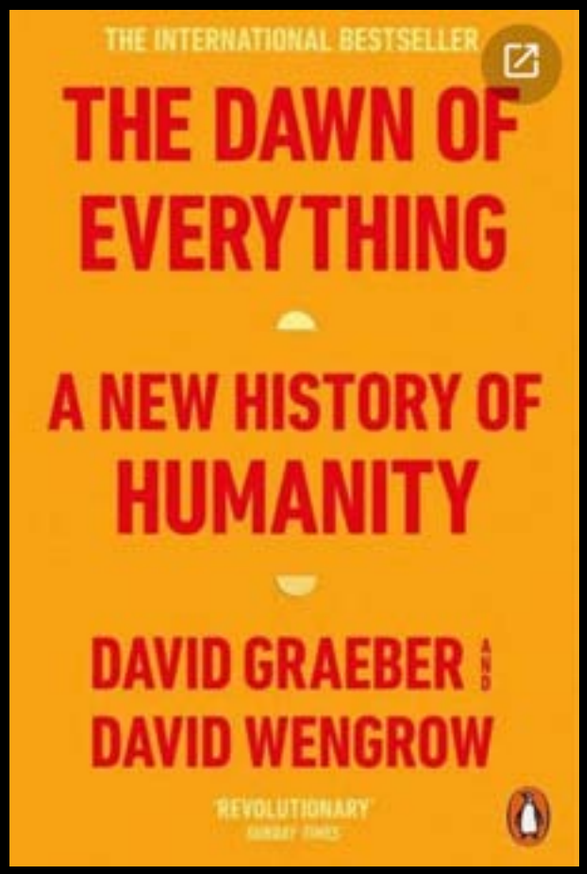
I call this transformation the *Gender Revolution.* Surprisingly we see in the result a civilization!

David Graeber
(1961-2020)
American cultural anthropologist

David Wengrow
(*1972)
British archaeologist

The Dawn of Everything. A New History of Humanity

Allen Lane, London 2021



The book by Graeber and Wengrow refreshing and thought provoking. It is a new look at all that has been detected and reconstructed concerning the early cultural evolution of humankind. The result is an overthrow of old theories, “A New History of Humanity”, as they call it.

There were no revolutions, the say, there was no straightforward linear transition from nomadic to sedentary living, from foraging to farming. Over a long period of time it was a matter of experiments, trying out things, variable in place and time. Often farming and foraging was practized side by side, some farming communities went back to foraging, wheras in other places the first urban settlements developed. And not all prehistoric communities were egalitarian.

Overall and in the long run, however, there was a transition from a “primitive” to a “civilized” form of existence. What was the difference?

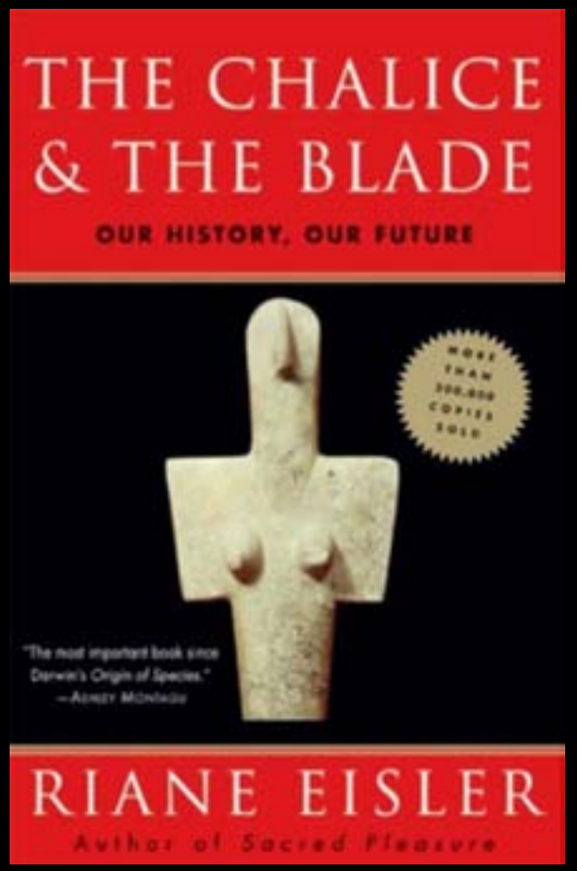
To the “primitive” type of living:
“No rich people and paupers, no people of great power, no people who are oppressed, no unemployed, no unmarried, no taxation, no confiscation of private property by chiefs, no military pursuits, no exertion of political power” (Diamond 1974, p.11, quoting Bronislaw Malinowski).
… one should less talk about equality, more about “fundamental, even primary, forms of freedom; the freedom to move; the freedom to disobey orders; the freedom to reorganize social relations” (Graeber & Wengrow 2021, p. 369).

To the “civilized” type of living:

Consider “Imperial Rome, ancient Greece, or other of a certain scale and monumentality. All these were deeply stratified societies, held together mostly by authoritarian government, violence and the radical subordination of women” (Graeber & Wengrow 2021, p. 434)

Riane Eisler
(*1931)
Austrian-American
systems analyst

The Chalice and the Blade.
Our History, Our Future
Harper, San Francisco 1988

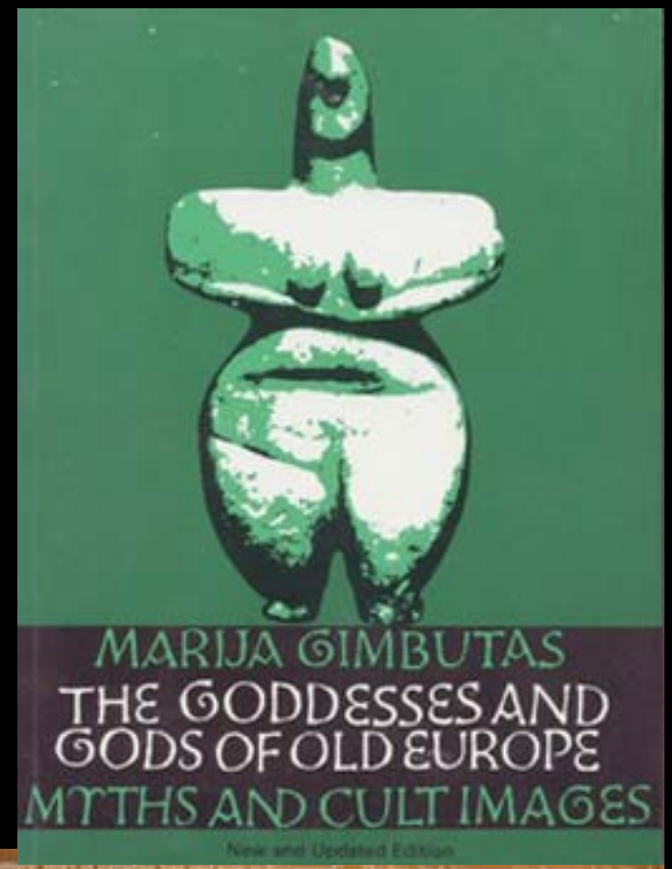


Riane Eisler (1988, p. xvii) proposes in this connection a *Cultural Transformation* theory which distinguishes two different models of society:

“The first, which I call the *dominator* model, is what is popularly termed either patriarchy or matriarchy – the *ranking* of one half of humanity over the other.”

“The second, in which social relations are primarily based on the principle of *linking* rather than ranking, may best be described as the *partnership* model.”

Marija Gimbutas
(1921-1994)
Lithuanian-American
archaeologist

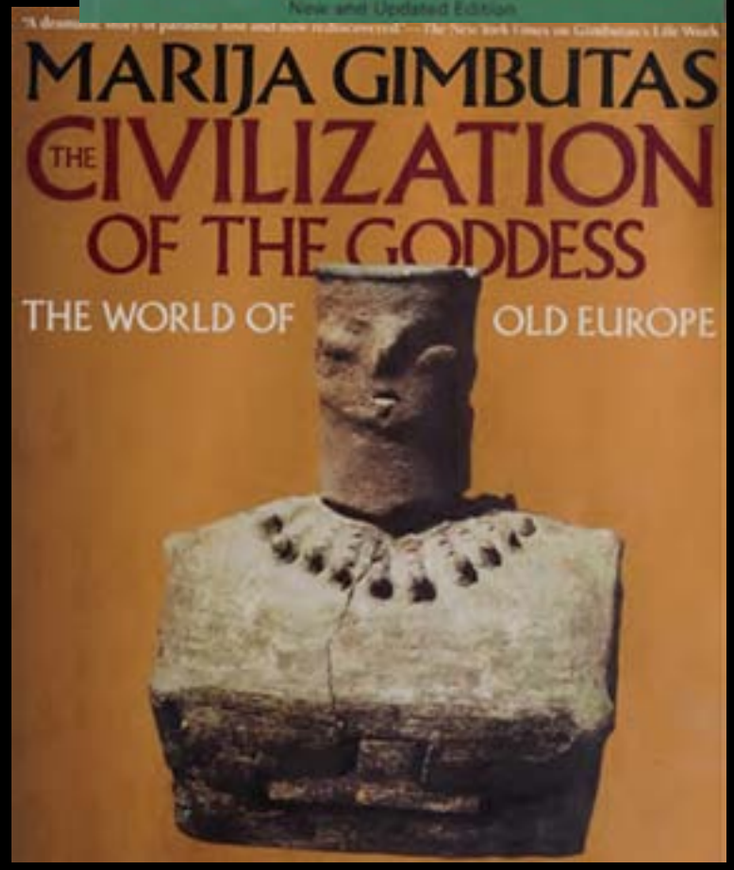


The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe. Myths and Cult Images

University of California Press, S.F. 1982

Civilization of the Goddess. The World of Old Europe

Harper, San Francisco 1991



Gimbutas studied in particular the Neolithic cultures of the Balkans. Here the Neolithic began around 7000 B.C. It was a largely peaceful time. The social structure was egalitarian, women having a kind of special status though because of the religious orientation of the communities which comprised the cult of a goddess. Gimbutas came to this conclusion because of the occurrence of a large number of female figurines. This kind of social order has been called *matristic* or *matricentric*.

This period came to an end when, starting towards the end of the 5th millennium B.C., pastoral nomadic groups from southern Russia began to invade the area. They were Indo-Europeans, already fully patriarchal and warlike, wreaking havoc among the Old Europeans.

Not surprisingly Gimbutas' work has been heavily criticized, not only by male archaeologists. Her work is guilty of sweeping generalizations and of myth-making, they say. But then, as Graeber and Wengrow (2021, p. 224) point out, "when male scholars engage in similar myth-making … they not only go unchallenged but often win prestigous literary prizes …"

Carola Meier-Seethaler

(1927-2022)

German-Swiss
philosopher &
psychotherapist

Ursprünge und Befreiungen.
Eine dissidente Kulturtheorie
[Origins and Liberations.
A Dissident Cultural Theory]

Original: Arche, Zurich 1988; revised edition,

Opus Magnum, Stuttgart 2011

Some points made by Meier-Seethaler:

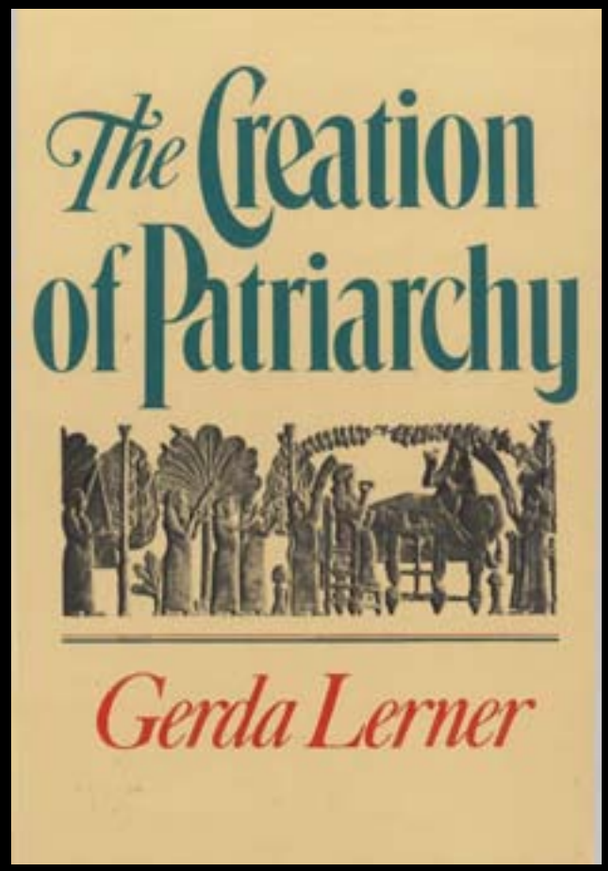
“Only half of humanity obviously gives birth to life, and that is why human culture began with the worship of the feminine as the numinous, which holds the secret of life” (1988, 41).

“The overview of all ... facts justifies speaking of a global matricentric early phase of culture ...” (1988, 42)

“While early agriculture was developed under female leadership, men’s social prestige increased through animal husbandry and herd ownership. Now they become fully aware of their procreative power, and at the same time they use their weapons ... to intimidate settled groups and ... for actual wars of conquest” (in an interview 2012)

Gerda Lerner
(1920-2013)
Austrian-American
historian

The Creation of Patriarchy
Oxford University Press, New York & Oxford 1986



In contrast to the violent overthrows mentioned by Gimbutas elsewhere a patriarchalization took place in the form of a drawn-out process lasting from around 3100 to 600 B.C. This happened in the archaic states of Mesopotamia when they established themselves as imperialistic kingdoms.

This process is described by Lerner. It starts with the sexual and economic subordination of women: A woman is only a respectful being when she is attached to a man.

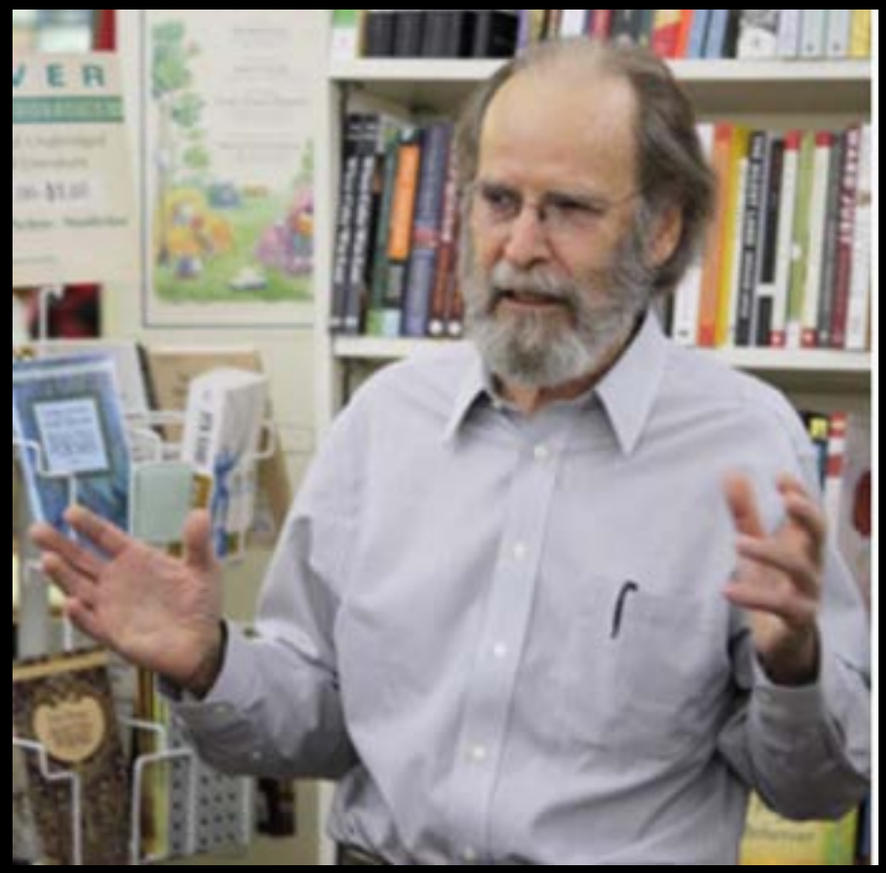
It continues with the progressive restriction of the freedom of women by law.

Further characteristics of the process mentioned by Lerner:

- Patriarchal family system: The father is lord of life and death. If in debt, he can mortgage his family members as slaves.
- From the dominance over the women of their own group men learned the dominance over other people, i.e., their enslavement.
- For some time the old worshipping of goddesses was continued and women still played active roles as priestesses. But eventually the goddesses with their life-giving capabilities of creativity and fertility were downgraded to wifes or daughters of powerful male gods or replaced by them completely.

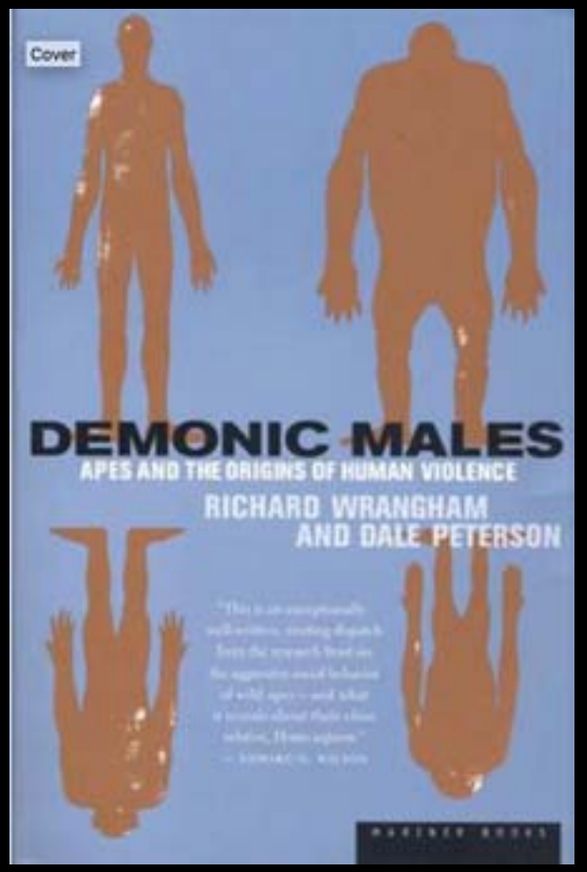
Richard Wrangham
(*1948)
British primatologist

Dale Peterson
(*1944)
American Science Writer



Demonic Males. Apes and the Origin of Human Violence

Houghton Mifflin, Boston 1996



Chimpanzees: The males build an patrilineal kinship group, and dominate the community, while the females leave it when they are adults and join another one. The males are aggressive against each other, fighting for position and access to females, and aggressive towards the other sex, which may result in rape and/ or infanticide. They control their territory and are also aggressive against the members of neighboring groups, they even kill them when the opportunity arises.

This is, however, a one-sided description. Within-group conflicts are usually followed by rituals of reconciliation involving embracing and grooming each other,

Bonobos: Here the females are in charge even though they are not related to each other. Like the chimpanzees they change group membership in adulthood. There is a ranking among the females, but they form also an overall alliance. Among the males there is not much fighting and they accept their second rang position behind the females. However there is no repression, and in a sense Bonobos form egalitarian communities. Peace within the group is very much kept by frequent sexual encounters . The men are also largely non-aggressive or even friendly towards members of neighboring groups.

“… data suggest that female power is the secret to male gentleness among bonobos” (p. 207)

Gerhard Bott
(1927-2022)
German historian

Die Erfindung der Götter. Essays zur Politischen Theologie
[The Invention of the Gods. Essays on Political Theology]
Books on Demand 2009

"For the sociobiological argumentation within palaeoanthropology" it is necessary "to use the *Pan paniscus* as a reference for *Homo sapiens*" (p. 13 / 597)

"Whoever provides three quarters of the food, i.e. has the vital economy in his hands and, in addition, through the archaic sanctity of birth and the keeping of the fire, the cult, has a correspondingly strong position in the cooperative" (p. 22 / 597).

"Today there are … good reasons for assuming that the Palaeolithic *homo sapiens* foragers lived in communities … in which a blood family of women was joined by a group of exogamous men" (p. 23 / 597).

Frans de Waal

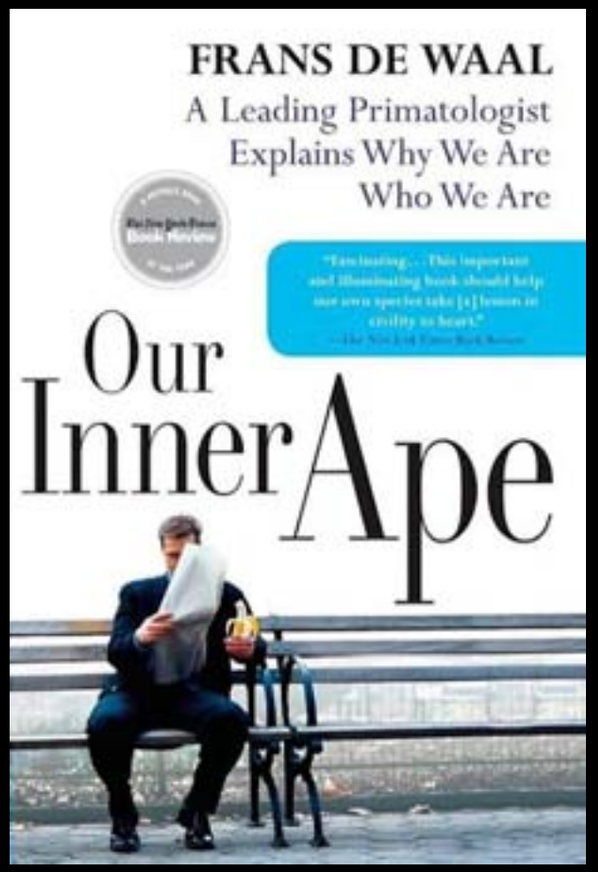
(1948-2024)

Dutch-American

primatologist & ethologist

Our Inner Ape: A Leading Primatologist Explains Why We Are Who We Are

Riverhead Books (Penguin), New York 2005



Frans de Waal (2005):

„Are we best characterized by hate or by love? What is most critical for survival: competition or cooperation? Are we more like chimpanzees or bonobos?“ (p. 215).

„Being both more systematically brutal than chimps and more empathic than bonobos, we are by far the most bipolar ape. Our societies are never completely peaceful, never completely competitive, never ruled by sheer selfishness, and never perfectly moral. Pure states are not nature’s way“ (p. 221).

Frans de Waal continued:

„… to consider only one pole at the expense of the other: … this is what the West has been doing for centuries by depicting our competitive side as somehow more authentic than our social one“ (p. 215).

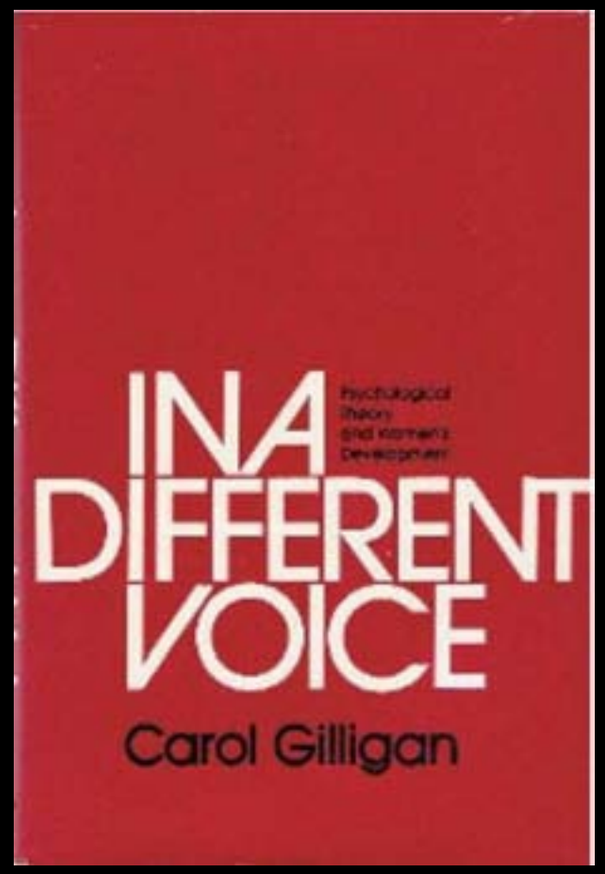
„Even if we customarily overestimate our rationality, there is no denying that human behavior is a combination of drive and intelligence. We exert little control over ancient urges for power, sex, safety, and food, but we habitually weigh the pros and cons of our actions before we engage in them. Human behavior is seriously modified by experience“ (p. 221),

Carol Gilligan
(*1936)
American
psychologist

In a Different Voice.
Psychological Theory and Women's Development

Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA,

& London 1982



Carol Gilligan worked for some time with American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg (1927–1987), who studied the development of moral thinking in humans growing up from childhood to early adulthood. He concentrated mainly on men, when he investigated women as well he diagnosed a deviation or retardation in development!

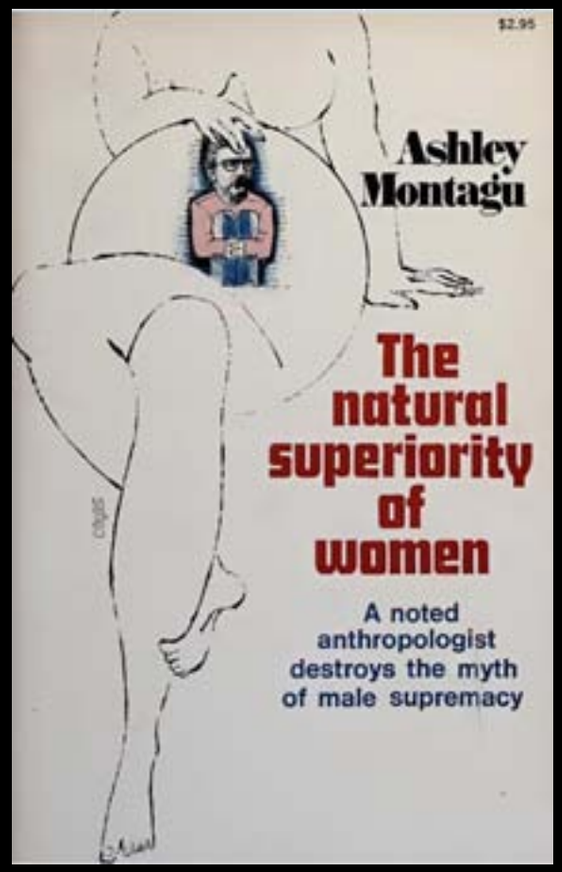
Gilligan then started her own independent research and found the following: Asked about adequate solutions to ficticious moral problems boys tend to think more in rule-oriented terms free of any particular context. Girls, on the other hand, think more in a relation-based way, i.e., they seek solutions to such problems more often within the particular context of concrete people with concrete relationships.

Ashley Montagu
(1905-1999)
British-American
anthropologist

The Natural Superiority of Women.
A noted anthropologist destroys the myth of male supremacy

Collier, New York & Collier Macmillan, London

1970



Montagu defines “superiority in terms of the conferring of survival benefits upon the possessors of the particular traits under discussion.” (p. 56)

Women

They are “the superiors of men … in their ability to bear and bring up children (p. 16)

“Women tend to make their emotions perform the functions they exist to serve, and hence remain mentally much healthier than men.” (p. 85)

Men

“Men are the specialists in repression of their feelings and what is unpleasant to them —they call it ‘control.’” (p. 85)

“Vendettas and internecine conflicts are essentially masculine activities, and … war is exclusively a masculine invention and ghastliness.” (p. 34)

Conclusion

Graeber & Wengrow (2021, p. 87):
“There is no doubt that something has gone terribly wrong with the world. A very small percentage of its population do control the fates of almost everyone else, and they are doing it in an increasingly disastrous fashion.”

Stanley Diamond (1974, p. 17):
“We must conclude that the development of the early civilizations as instruments of oppression was the result, …, of the new possibilities of power which *men* in certain positions found it necessary to cultivate and legitimate.”

Conclusion continued:

Ashley Montagu (1970, p.157):
In summary: “Woman is the creator and fosterer of life; man has been the mechanizer and destroyer of life.”

Afterthought

Schmid, Birgit: Die Frau als Friedensbringerin ist ein Mythos [The Woman as Peace-Bringer is a Myth]. *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, October 30, 2024: p. 17.

“Many people are convinced that the world would be a better place if there were more female heads of government. This belief is not only wrong – it harms women.”

The societal structures (determining the rules of conduct in economy and politics) have developed over centuries of male dominance. They are therefore imbued with masculinity. As long as it stays that way women won’t have a chance to change much.