The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory
by Cynthia Eller
Boston: Beacon Press, 2000
276 pp + illus. US$26.00

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This is a short book that will make tall waves. Coming from someone with Eller's feminist credentials, it constitutes an incisive and devastating critique of all facets of matriarchal feminism.This book is as much about factions within feminism and the best way to achieve ultimate feminist goals as it is about the myth of prehistoric matriarchies.

Eller's fundamental objection is with "difference feminism" which assumes that men and women are inherently different, and that men's dominant qualities result in bad decisions which exploit others, including women, while women's dominant characteristics result in generally beneficent decisions. She argues that this is ultimately limiting for men, but especially for women. Eller argues that individuals should be taken on their own merits, recognizing that good and bad cut across sexes, ages, classes, and most other social or biological divisions. In this respect, the matriarchal myth is shown to be ill-conceived, ill-founded, and counterproductive.

This is some of the best writing that I have read in a long time. The feminist arguments and the subsequent analysis of matriarchal claims are well researched and elegantly structured and presented. The summaries of the anthropological and ethnological literature are excellent and present the most plausible conclusions that can be advanced in the many areas covered by Eller. Treatments of the various pros and cons are nicely balanced, but the logic of her argument is inexorable, leading to what seem like inevitable conclusions. She sets out her definitions and methodology in very clear, common sense fashion, before proceeding to any analysis. She incorporates the great variability of the ethnographic and archaeological record (essential for any realistic model of human behavior, especially in the realm of gender relations) yet indicates underlying patterns.

From my familiarity with the literature and from my own field observations, Eller's conclusions about other cultures and the past are almost always right on the money, and she is careful not to overstate those conclusions to unwarranted extremes. She sketches the broad outline of a major alternative paradigm for gender relationships in pre-Industrial societies. Each one of her chapter subheadings and supporting arguments could easily constitute topics for much greater in-depth documentation and research, or graduate theses. I would certainly have liked a more extended treatment of tribal and chiefdom ethnographic societies. I feel confident that such detailed research would overwhelmingly support Eller's basic interpretations. Her final conclusions are that: "what we do know (or can judge to be probable) about gender in prehistory is not particularly encouraging regarding the status of women. Ethnographic analogies to contemporary groups with lifeways similar to those of prehistoric times ... show little sex egalitarianism and no matriarchy ... Indeed, these societies always discriminate in some way between women and men, usually to women's detriment. ... whatever religions prehistoric peoples practiced, we can be fairly sure that goddess worship did not automatically yield cultures of peace and plenty ..."

But, as she points out, our situation has dramatically changed with industrialization. Just because brute force or sexism may have been the norm in the past, is no reason to tolerate such behavior today. In this regard, and in her

emphasis on individual differences, I am in agreement with Eller. Where we would part, I think, is on her position that there are no patterns of differences between populations of men and women. In many branches of science, people empirically observe natural clusters of traits that characterized populations, sub-populations, or groups of individuals. Being able to identify these recurring clusters of traits and labelling them as distinct species, "types," classes, genders, sexes, or other categories assists us in conceptualizing the world around us and dealing with it. Without classifications of the world around us, we must deal with all variables varying all the time. While dividing up people and the world around us into categories may be unuseful and unwarrranted, I would argue that many of the categories that we use are not just convenient ways for our minds to deal with the universe or avoid information overload, but that many of our categories really do correspond to constellations of traits that are associated with each other because they work well together in nature and are adaptive as complexes.

The fundamental issue is whether gender or some aspects of behavior or attitude cluster together along a sexual dimension. I would argue that there is a constellation of attitudes, values, and behaviors that do distinguish many males from many females, as a wide range of neurophysiological and behavioral studies have now indicated. As just one example, one of our highly political and intelligent feminist graduate students has done considerable research on the unusually high incidence of high risk behavior (and consequent mortality) of young males which contrasts markedly with much lower incidences of such behavior in females. This appears to hold true in most cultures and analogs can even be found among many non-human primates.

Unfortunately, the downside of the tendency to categorize people and other aspects of our world is that conceptual categories can easily become closed cubicles in which all variation is stuffed into a few narrowly defined boxes (e.g., male or female chauvinism). In such cases, one shuts off inquiry and misses all of the dynamics that power evolution and change. Eller, in reacting to these commonplace shortcomings, has opted for the extreme solution of denying or trivializing all claims that clusters of behaviors and attitudes exist which differentiate many males from females. I think that she has thrown the baby out with the bathwater, although this is perhaps the easiest remedy for the problems that have arisen. A more realistic, but more difficult approach is to recognize that these tendencies exist, but at the same time to recognize the variability and dynamics involved and find some way to accommodate them. I would never advocate that such differences should be used as a justification for discrimination, but that each individual should be judged on their own personal qualities. I see Eller's relatively pro-active, politically correct remedies to traditional role models as being deleterious, and I would prefer a more laissez-faire approach. Even accepting Eller's basic premises, there is still a great deal to explore, negotiate, and resolve in the unending dialog between the sexes. This is a book that is long overdue in that dialog.

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