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## “FEMINISING” PREHISTORY

by

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In a recent paper Oldroyd (2003) explored the idea, first gaining ground in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that a time once existed in prehistory when society was universally matriarchal, and counting and calculation were the exclusive preserves of women. Despite the extreme antiquity of the subject, making proof difficult, there is some supporting evidence. The topic is noteworthy for a number of reasons, not least because it suggests an earlier place for women in the history of accounting than is usually acknowledged. In speculating that the first “reckoning/accounting devices” – a series of notched bone awls dating from the Upper Paleolithic (c.30000-10000 BC) – were connected to the “exchange of women and goods,” Schmandt-Besserat (1988, p. 1), for example, accepted the patriarchal basis of the earliest accounting systems without question. The topic is also remarkable because it provides a rare opportunity to explore the dichotomy proposed by some feminist accounting authors between the ways in which women and men see the world, in relation to an historical issue that has actually been pursued along such bipartite lines. It is the historiographical implications that are the focus of the present paper.

Historical studies have been rendered problematical by feminists in two main ways. First there is the widespread denial of the possibility of “value-free” or “impartial” research (Gilchrist, 1991, pp. 496-497; Moore, 1992, pp. 94-95). Reality is seen as a construction of human attitudes and values, unlike scientific positivism, which regards it as fixed and observable (Welsh, 1992, p. 122). It follows that that the objects and results of research are inherently biased because of its male domination (Oakes and Hammond, 1995, p. 50). As far as the interpretation of gender roles in prehistory is concerned, this is very relevant, as the archaeological and ethnographic

records are based very heavily on earlier studies carried out by male researchers. For instance, Scmandt-Besserat’s (1992) seminal work on tokens relied on the extant findings of earlier digs, and was therefore colored by what her forbears had considered worthy of preserving and recording.

A more fundamental challenge still to the efficacy of historical investigations comes from an idea in accounting literature that a difference exists, whether biologically or culturally constructed – psychological research tends to favor social and cultural factors (Welsh, 1992, pp. 120, 122) – between the ways in which women and men seek and process knowledge. Language is seen as especially important in this, as this is the medium through which meaning is created (Gal, 1991, pp. 189-190; Gilchrist, 1991, p. 497; Cooper, 1992, pp. 19, 24; Hammond and Oakes, 1992, p. 57). In terms of language, Oakes and Hammond (1995, p. 55) cited a body of research which found that men in North America and Europe “use language to position themselves in the social hierarchy” – thus they “tend to collect information which they use to determine and defend the correctness of a single position” – in contrast to the women, who “tend to use language to develop and maintain relationships, and are more likely to use information to form a consensus.” Consequently, for women, “context, feeling and subjectivity” are more likely to be valued than the “formal rules or abstract logic” which govern men (ibid., p. 57). It is therefore possible to characterize positivist research as “masculine” because of its belief that the “knower” can be separated from the “known” and its emphasis on objectification (Hammond and Oakes, 1992, p. 61). This would include historical studies which seek proof through the ob-

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jective verification of evidence.

It is further possible to posit a connection between masculine and feminine science and human sexual potential. Economic and accounting discourse becomes essentially “phallogentric,” stemming from the sexual capacity of the male focused on the penis. It is argued that for women there are more sexual pleasure zones and more possibilities, bringing with them a liberating or disrupting potential for the masculine institution of accounting (Shearer and Arrington, 1993, pp. 254-5, 266-9). The openness of the feminine is stressed compared to the enclosure of the masculine. Women “must remain multiple and diffuse” in order to disrupt the masculine drive “to unify, stabilize and rationalize”, that has produced adverse consequences both for society and the environment (Cooper, 1992, pp. 16, 24, 34-6; Shearer and Arrington, 1993, p. 260).

Such views are by no means shared by all feminist researchers (Gilchrist, 1991, p. 497), and have been criticized on the grounds of elitism – they privilege the experience of women from white, middle class, western backgrounds – essentialism – the emphasis on bodily experience excludes the other elements in our makeup – and ambiguity – the emphasis on openness closes off valid criticism (Gallhofer, 1992; Hoskin, 1992). However, they are important because they reflect dissatisfaction with the norms of “what counts and what does not count as academic discourse,” and a realization that “alternative ways of discovering, understanding and dealing with the world” may exist (Shearer and Arrington, 1993, p. 271; Oakes and Hammond, 1995, pp. 50, 64-67). Conventional historical methodology may not have all the answers.

In such a scheme, which “emphasizes the connectedness and empathy of women, and the ways in which they see the world differently from men” (Hammond and Oakes, 1992, p. 61), the legitimacy of seeking historical proof becomes questionable. Thus, there is a shift in emphasis from the object of research to the researchers themselves, which is not unnatural given the rejection of positivism. Proof is downgraded in favor of feeling, context, subjectivity, empathy

and connectedness; and the historical process of gathering and evaluating evidence becomes less important than the interactions with self that *her-story* engenders. One can see these influences in action in relation to the subject of the ancient matriarchy where a fairly clear demarcation line has developed between academics (including most feminist prehistorians) who, applying the formal rules and abstract logic of their own disciplines, remain skeptical, and women’s study groups outside who, through focusing on shared experience and collective memory, “know” that it is right.

The matriarchal view of women’s history, in a nut-shell, is that the past is useful because it can teach women how much they are repressed, that this was not always the case, and that a better way is therefore possible (Walker, 1983, pp. viii-x; Grindell, 1993, p. 120). A golden age once existed when feminine images and values predominated and women were not subjected by men. The quest for ancient knowledge is given extra purpose through the attempt by masculine institutions such as the Church to hide the truth. Therefore, the crusade to liberate womankind from patriarchy will be assisted if secret knowledge or “hidden history” is liberated also (Stone, 1976, p. xxvii; Walker, 1983, p. xi). Academic history becomes doubly untrustworthy. Not only is the process phallogentric, but its results are imbued with male bias.

The alternative way of discovering the ancient past is to connect with the collective memory of previous generations embedded in folklore and mythology, traditions that have been passed down orally over thousands of years. Thompson (1981, p. 82) described mythology as “the memory of our greater Being.” It defines “what is natural and what is unnatural among the people who hold the myths as meaningful” (Stone, 1976, p. 5). Furthermore, it enables present-day matriarchal study groups to empathize with the experience of their female ancestors in a direct way, not requiring the intervention of an academic elite who would tend to dismiss the existence of a matriarchy as unsubstantiated. Thus Stone (1976, pp. xxv, 4-5) urged women to explore the past for themselves through mythology,

“rather than remaining dependent upon the interests, interpretations, translations, opinions and pronouncements that have so far been produced” by academics.

From an academic standpoint, myths are an unreliable source of historical evidence as their chronology and true meaning are unclear. However, the “truth” behind the stories is irrelevant to the extent that the ancient matriarchy is an allegory that helps some modern women discover a deeper sense of feminine identity that is “wise, valiant, powerful and just” (Stone, 1976, p. 5). Proof is less important than connectedness, as is evident from the course literature of matriarchal studies programs which emphasizes myth, folklore, legend, festivals and customs as the means of connecting with the lives of “women past and present” (e.g. Newcastle University, 2000, pp. 43-44). The feeling of empathy with the past is reinforced by visiting ancient sites with matriarchal connotations, the feeling of community by the intimate nature of the groups which are usually exclusively female. It is unjust to dismiss this as “pure fiction” or “enough to make any careful prehistorian shudder” (Russell, 1993, pp. 95-96), as the bounds of truth and fiction are redefined (Moore, 1992, p. 95). Discovering the past equates with discovery of self, and the past ceases to hold any objective identity. This may be “ahistorical” (Black and MacRaild, 2000, p.148), therefore, but in this respect academic history is missing the point.

However, the matriarchal debate also shows that there is a limit to the level of openness that is feasible in most disciplines, unless one wishes to disengage from the discipline altogether. Archaeology is the study of material remains. It has become permissible to place social, including feminist, theories at its centre, but this becomes pointless unless material evidence is available to substantiate them. Similarly, there has been a trend towards more theoretical history in recent years, but theoretical historians still require evidence to validate their predictions. Taking the notion of so called “feminine” science to its extreme involves disengagement from the historical process, which explains why most feminist historians reject it.

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