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Patriarchy, family, feminism

Hunter-gatherers: gender equality, a key factor in human evolution?

- Features - Sexual politics -

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The social organization of humanity before the advent of agriculture tells us a lot about the context in which our species evolved over tens of thousands of years. It is in fact distinguished from that of primates by a more intense collaboration between individuals, which allows the development of a "cumulative culture." Researchers have just shown why gender equality may explain this propensity to associate a higher number of individuals coming from different groups (M. Dyble et al., "Sex equality can explain the unique social structure of hunter-gatherer bands ", *Science*, 15 May 2015).

Observation of hunter-gatherers shows that they work systematically with individuals who do not belong to their group: "the importance of these cooperative activities is expressed in many hunter-gatherer societies by an omnipresent egalitarian ethic."

Extra-familial relations

Primitive human societies, like those of primates, live in fact in small groups of several families, structured by links between long-lasting couples. But unlike chimpanzee, bonobo and gorilla societies, which are relatively closed and linked to a territory, human societies weave more fluid relations, each family having a certain autonomy to circulate between different groups, in particular those of the father and the mother. Above all, they seem more mobile and capable of associating a higher number of unrelated individuals.

For what reasons do human societies of hunter-gatherers associate a significantly higher number of unrelated members? Because, explain the authors of the study referred to above, men and women have a comparable influence over the formation of groups. Thus, simulations and empirical observations agree on one point: the more individuals of both sexes who establish a couple can decide on an equal footing to live in the group of the man or the woman, the greater the number of unrelated individuals belonging to these collectives.

By renouncing a strongly hierarchical social organization based on male domination and female dispersal, the first human beings thus seem to have opted for a more egalitarian system than their predecessors. It is this context which appears to have in its turn favoured "the selection of extended social networks, of a cumulative culture and of cooperation among unrelated individuals."

Equality and adaptation

Observations made of several contemporary societies of hunter-gatherers - the Aché of Paraguay, the Agta of the Philippines, the Ju /'hoansi of Botswana, Namibia and Angola, and the Mbendjele of the Republic of Congo – thus show that women there live in groups that include a number of their own relations that is equivalent to those of men. Clearly, this means that a comparable number of men are living in the group of their companion, as women in that of theirs.

Because of this high degree of intermingling, in each of these collectives, half of the couples have almost no family ties, or indeed none at all. In comparison, the primitive agricultural societies living in "villages" of comparable size –

e.g. the Paranan (in the Philippines) – have many more men than women with family relations, because women live much more often in the group of their male partner than the reverse. Consequently, these agricultural societies are characterized overall by a much higher proportion of related individuals.

Observation shows, however, that among hunter-gatherers, when a choice is possible, pairs are formed preferably between close relatives. The high number of unrelated couples is not therefore the result of "personal preference", but of an adaptive logic. The authors of the study postulate in effect that the size of the human brain, superior to that of primates, leads to a slower maturation of children, requiring for this a much greater and longer-lasting support on the part of both parents.

Cooperative couple

It is this particularity that had to impose on the father and the mother long-term cooperation. That is why in societies of hunter-gatherers monogamy is the rule, men stop reproducing relatively early, and the couple chooses to link up with the group of the man or the woman based on the support that these groups can provide for them, particularly because of the presence of grandmothers, who seem to have played an important role in providing food.

At the same time, gender equality and the high proportion of unrelated individuals within groups also had significant consequences for the whole of the species by determining "a favorable environment for the evolution of intensive cooperation and sociability. Gender equality", concludes the study "suggests a scenario where cooperation between unrelated individuals can develop in the absence of any accumulation of wealth, reproduction of inequalities and conflicts between groups. Couples moving freely between groups and sharing interests with their parents and relatives would be able to maintain cooperation without the need for a more complex system (...) Finally, this social system could have allowed the hunter-gatherers to expand their social networks, thus enabling them to better respond to environmental hazards and to favour the level of exchange of information necessary for a cumulative culture. "

Relaunch of a controversy

Let us remember that for Darwin, the couple was based on what Helen Fisher has called "the sexual contract": the man had to provide his companion with the resources and the protection necessary to raise their children for many years in exchange for her sexual services but also for her loyalty, which was also the ultimate guarantee of the paternity of her companion. However, a series of recent empirical researches refute this caricatural vision, highlighting many other forms of social gender relations among hunters-gatherers.

Will contemporary scientific research restore some vigour to the theses of Morgan (*Ancient Society*, 1877), taken up by Marx and Engels, on gender equality in the context of primitive societies, which were however strongly challenged by the anthropologists of the twentieth century? Here the study in fact situates itself in the line of a significant current of research, illustrated in particular by Richard Lee. He describes, for example the "fierce egalitarianism" of hunter-gatherers, which they maintained permanently by a system of "inverted domination" thanks to which the group works together to combat any individual tendency to domination.

Far from being definitively abandoned today, efforts to better understand the articulation between the origins of male domination and those of class inequalities, with the development of pastoralism and agriculture, seem therefore to have still a bright future before them.

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