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GERDA LERNER

The Urban Revolution: Origins of Patriarchy

Often called "the rise of civilization," the urban revolution ushered in many changes five thousand years ago. The city societies or city-states that developed in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus River Valley after 3000 B.C.E. gave rise to the first kings, temples, priests, and social classes, as well as to writing, laws, metallurgy, warfare, markets, and private property. With the city-state came patriarchy, the assertion of male power, and the subordination of women—the signs of which were clear in Sumer and Mesopotamia, both ruled by assemblies of men or kings. Mesopotamian law codes favored men: Women could be divorced, punished, or sold into slavery for adultery, while men could not. Laws also required that women wear veils, restricted women's freedom of movement, and treated women as the property of fathers or husbands.

People in ancient Egypt worshiped their kings as gods. Cities worshiped Sky Father Gods. One Egyptian creation myth describes the great god Ra emerging from the waters of Nun and creating the Egyptian universe from his own body. A Mesopotamian creation story, the *Enuma Elish*, recounts a primordial battle between the male god Marduk and the mother goddess Tiamat: Marduk splits Tiamat's heart with his arrow and then cracks her dead body in half like a shellfish, her hollowed-out form becoming heaven and earth.

In this selection, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, the author, modern historian Gerda Lerner, gives considerable attention to the way in which religious ideas changed as city-based states replaced the world of small Neolithic villages. At the beginning of the selection, Lerner notes the impact of urban social classes and patriarchy. Because cities legislated the rule of the rich and powerful classes above the poor and slaves, there were periods in which some women—the wives and daughters of wealthy and powerful men—benefited at the expense of other women. Eventually, though, city law curtailed the freedom of all women, rich and poor. Despite these restrictions, some women continued to play a role in popular religion. What was that role? How important do you think it was?

Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 141–45.

What do you think of the author's comparison of Ishtar and the Virgin Mary? Does this comparison suggest that Christianity was more patriarchal? Do we live in a patriarchy today? What would suggest the presence of patriarchy in modern society? What would suggest its absence?

Thinking Historically

Any stage theory of history depends on a series of broad generalizations. We might distinguish two here. First, Lerner suggests that cities, archaic states, kings, gods, militarism, and patriarchy are all related, that they appeared at about the same time as part of the same process of change. Notice how Lerner links some of these elements, one to the other. Which of these couplings is persuasive?

Second, notice the absence of specific dates in this selection. The kinds of evidence Lerner uses here cannot be dated very precisely. She uses phrases like "the first half of the third millennium B.C.," which would mean between 3000 and 2500 B.C.E. When would you date the origins of patriarchy? Notice the time lag between the imposition of patriarchal laws and the slower process of replacing goddesses with gods. How does Lerner account for this time lag?

Do you think religion would be slower to change than law or social custom? Could the worship of Ishtar have been representative of an earlier, more agricultural, religious tradition?

. . . In Mesopotamian societies the institutionalization of patriarchy created sharply defined boundaries between women of different classes, although the development of the new gender definitions and of the customs associated with them proceeded unevenly. The state, during the process of the establishment of written law codes, increased the property rights of upper-class women, while it circumscribed their sexual rights and finally totally eroded them. The lifelong dependency of women on fathers and husbands became so firmly established in law and custom as to be considered "natural" and god-given. In the case of lower-class women, their labor power served either their families or those who owned their families' services. Their sexual and reproductive capacities were commodified, traded, leased, or sold in the interest of male family members. Women of all classes had traditionally been excluded from military power and were, by the turn of the first millennium B.C., excluded from formal education, insofar as it had become institutionalized.

Yet, even then, powerful women in powerful roles lived on in cultic service, in religious representation, and in symbols. There was a considerable time lag between the subordination of women in patriarchal society

and the declassing of the goddesses. As we trace below changes in the position of male and female god figures in the pantheon of the gods in a period of over a thousand years, we should keep in mind that the power of the goddesses and their priestesses in daily life and in popular religion continued in force, even as the supreme goddesses were dethroned. It is remarkable that in societies which had subordinated women economically, educationally, and legally, the spiritual and metaphysical power of goddesses remained active and strong.

We have some indication of what practical religion was like from archaeological artifacts and from temple hymns and prayers. In Mesopotamian societies the feeding of and service to the gods was considered essential to the survival of the community. This service was performed by male and female temple servants. For important decisions of state, in warfare, and for important personal decisions one would consult an oracle or a diviner, who might be either a man or a woman. In personal distress, sickness, or misfortune the afflicted person would seek the help of his or her household-god and, if this was of no avail, would appeal to any one of a number of gods or goddesses who had particular qualities needed to cure the affliction. If the appeal were to a goddess, the sick person also required the intercession and good services of a priestess of the particular goddess. There were, of course, also male gods who could benefit one in case of illness, and these would usually be served by a male priest.

For example, in Babylonia a sick man or woman would approach the Ishtar temple in a spirit of humility on the assumption that the sickness was a result of his or her transgression. The petitioner would bring appropriate offerings: food, a young animal for sacrifice, oil, and wine. For the goddess Ishtar such offerings quite frequently included images of a vulva, the symbol of her fertility, fashioned out of precious lapis lazuli stone. The afflicted person would prostrate himself before the priestess and recite some appropriate hymns and prayers. A typical prayer contained the following lines:

> Gracious Ishtar, who rules over the universe,
> Heroic Ishtar, who creates humankind,
> who walks before the cattle, who loves the shepherd . . .
> You give justice to the distressed, the suffering you give
> them justice.
> Without you the river will not open,
> the river which brings us life will not be closed,
> without you the canal will not open,
> the canal from which the scattered drink,
> will not be closed . . . Ishtar, merciful lady . . .
> hear me and grant me mercy.

Mesopotamian men or women, in distress or sickness, humbled themselves before a goddess-figure and her priestly servant. In words reflecting the attitude of slave toward master, they praised and worshiped the goddess's power. Thus, another hymn to Ishtar addresses her as "mistress of the battle field, who pulls down the mountains"; "Majestic one, lioness among the gods, who conquers the angry gods, strongest among rulers, who leads kings by the lead; you who open the wombs of women . . . mighty Ishtar, how great is your strength!" Heaping praise upon praise, the petitioner continued:

> Where you cast your glance, the dead awaken, the sick arise;
> The bewildered, beholding your face, find the right way.
> I appeal to you, miserable and distraught,
> tortured by pain, your servant,
> be merciful and hear my prayer! . . .
> I await you, my mistress; my soul turns toward you.
> I beseech you: Relieve my plight.
> Absolve me of my guilt, my wickedness, my sin,
> forget my misdeeds, accept my plea!

We should note that the petitioners regarded the goddess as all-powerful. In the symbol of the goddess's vulva, fashioned of precious stone and offered up in her praise, they celebrated the sacredness of female sexuality and its mysterious life-giving force, which included the power to heal. And in the very prayers appealing to the goddess's mercy, they praised her as mistress of the battlefield, more powerful than kings, more powerful than other gods. Their prayers to the gods similarly extolled the god's virtues and listed his powers in superlatives. My point here is that men and women offering such prayers when in distress must have thought of women, just as they thought of men, as capable of metaphysical power and as potential mediators between the gods and human beings. That is a mental image quite different from that of Christians, for example, who in a later time would pray to the Virgin Mary to intercede with God in their behalf. The power of the Virgin lies in her ability to appeal to God's mercy; it derives from her motherhood and the miracle of her immaculate conception. She has no power for herself, and the very sources of her power to intercede separate her irrevocably from other women. The goddess Ishtar and other goddesses like her had power in their own right. It was the kind of power men had, derived from military exploits and the ability to impose her will on the gods or to influence them. And yet Ishtar was female, endowed with a sexuality like that of ordinary women. One cannot help but wonder at the contradiction between the power of the goddesses and the increasing societal constraints upon the lives of most women in Ancient Mesopotamia.

Unlike the changes in the social and economic status of women, which have received only tangential and scattered attention in Ancient Mesopotamian studies, the transition from polytheism to monotheism and its attendant shift in emphasis from powerful goddesses to a single male god have been the subject of a vast literature. The topic has been approached from the vantage point of theology, archaeology, anthropology, and literature. Historical and artistic artifacts have been interpreted with the tools of their respective disciplines; linguistic and philosophical studies have added to the richness of interpretation. With Freud and Jung and Erich Fromm, psychiatry and psychology have been added as analytic tools, focusing our attention on myth, symbols, and archetypes. And recently a number of feminist scholars from various disciplines have discussed the period and the subject from yet another vantage point, one which is critical of patriarchal assumptions.

Such a richness and diversity of sources and interpretations makes it impossible to discuss and critique them all within the confines of this volume. I will therefore focus, as I have done throughout, on a few analytic questions and discuss in detail a few models which, I believe, illustrate larger patterns.

Methodologically, the most problematic question is the relation between changes in society and changes in religious beliefs and myths. The archaeologist, art historian, and historian can record, document, and observe such changes, but their causes and their meaning cannot be given with any kind of certainty. Different systems of interpretation offer varying answers, none of which is totally satisfying. In the present case it seems to me most important to record and survey the historical evidence and to offer a coherent explanation, which I admit is somewhat speculative. So are all the other explanations including, above all, the patriarchal tradition.

I am assuming that Mesopotamian religion responded to and reflected social conditions in the various societies. Mental constructs cannot be created from a void; they always reflect events and concepts of historic human beings in society. Thus, the existence of an assembly of the gods in "The Epic of Gilgamesh" has been interpreted as indicating the existence of village assemblies in pre-state Mesopotamian society. Similarly, the explanation in the Sumerian Atrahasis myth that the gods created men in order that men might serve them and relieve them of hard work can be regarded as a reflection of social conditions in the Sumerian city-states of the first half of the third millennium B.C.E., in which large numbers of people worked on irrigation projects and in agricultural labor centered on the temples. The relation between myth and reality is not usually that direct, but we can assume that no people could invent the concept of an assembly of the gods if they had not at some time experienced and known a like institution on earth. While we cannot say with certainty that certain political and economic changes

"caused" changes in religious beliefs and myths, we cannot help but notice a pattern in the changes of religious beliefs in a number of societies, following upon or concurrent with certain societal changes.

My thesis is that, just as the development of plow agriculture, coinciding with increasing militarism, brought major changes in kinship and in gender relations, so did the development of strong kingships and of archaic states bring changes in religious beliefs and symbols. The observable pattern is: first, the demotion of the Mother-Goddess figure and the ascendance and later dominance of her male consort/son; then his merging with a storm-god into a male Creator-God, who heads the pantheon of gods and goddesses. Wherever such changes occur, the power of creation and of fertility is transferred from the Goddess to the God.

REFLECTIONS

A historical stage is a specific example of a larger process that historians call *periodization*. Dividing history into periods is one way historians make the past comprehensible. Without periodization, history would be a vast, unwieldy continuum, lacking points of reference, form, intelligibility, and meaning.

One of the earliest forms of historical periodization—years of reign—was a natural system of record keeping in the ancient cities dominated by kings. Each kingdom had its own list of kings, and each marked the current date by numbering the years of the king's reign. Some ancient societies periodized their history according to the years of rule of local officials or priesthoods. In the ancient Roman Republic, time was figured according to the terms of the elected consuls. The ancient Greeks used four-year periods called Olympiads, beginning with the first Olympic games in 776 B.C.E.

The ancient Greeks did not use "B.C." or "B.C.E.," of course. The periodization of world history into B.C. ("before Christ") and A.D. (*anno Domini*, "the Year of Our Lord" or "after Christ") did not come until the sixth century A.D., when a Christian monk named Dionysius Exiguus hit upon a way to center Christ as the major turning point in history. We use a variant of this system in this text, when designating events "B.C.E." for "before the common era" or "C.E." for "of the common era." This translation of "B.C." and "A.D." avoids the Christian bias of the older system but preserves its simplicity. A common dating system can be used worldwide to delineate time and coordinate different dynastic calendars.

All systems of periodization implicitly claim to designate important transitions in the past. The periodization of Dionysius inscribed the Christian belief that Christ's life, death, and resurrection fundamentally changed world history: Because Christ died to atone for the sins of humankind, only those who lived after Christ's sacrifice could be saved when they died. Few other systems of periodization made such a sweeping claim, though, of course, most people today—even many non-Christians—use it because of its convenience. Muslims count the years from a year one A.H. (*anno Hegire*, designating the year of the prophet Muhammad's escape from Mecca to Medina) in 622 A.D. of the Christian calendar, and Jews date the years from a Biblical year one.

Millennia, centuries, and decades are useful periods for societies that count in tens and (after the spread of Indian numerals) use the zero. While such multiples are only mathematical, some historians use them for rough periodization, to distinguish between the 1950s and the 1960s or between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for example, as if there were a genuine and important transition between one period and the other. Sometimes historians "stretch" the boundaries of centuries or decades in order to account for earlier or later changes. For example, some historians speak of "the long nineteenth century," embracing the period from the French Revolution in 1789 to the First World War in 1914, on the grounds that peoples' lives were transformed in 1789 rather than in 1800 and in 1914 rather than in 1900. Similarly, the "sixties," as a term for American society and culture during the Vietnam War era, often means the period from about 1963 to about 1975, since civil rights and antiwar activity became significant a few years after the beginning of the decade and the war continued until 1975.

Characterizing and defining a decade or century in chronological terms is only one method of periodization, however. Processes can also be periodized. In this chapter we have periodized world history by process. All of world history can be divided into three periods—hunting-gathering, agricultural/pastoral, and urban. These are overlapping and continuing periods, and we can date only the beginning of the agricultural/pastoral and the urban periods, at about ten thousand and five thousand years ago, respectively. None of these periods has ended, as there are still hunters and gatherers as Nisa's story shows, and many farmers and pastoralists in the world. Still, the periodization is useful, because both the agricultural/pastoral revolution and the urban revolution brought about widespread and permanent changes.

We have also tried to locate patriarchy in a historical period, suggesting that it was a product of the urban revolution. We have not attempted to periodize changes in patriarchy over the course of the last five thousand years, but we could investigate this as well. Many people would say that patriarchy has been declining in recent decades. Is this a valid view, or is it a view specific to North America? If patriarchy is a product of cities and if the world is becoming more urban, can patriarchy be declining globally? What forces do you see bringing a decline or end to patriarchy?

To periodize something like the history of patriarchy would require a good deal of knowledge about the history of male and female relations over the course of the last five thousand years. That is a tall order for anyone. But you can get a sense of how the historian goes about periodizing and a feeling for its value if you periodize something you know a lot about. You might start, for instance, with your own life. Think of the most important change or changes in your life. How have these changes divided your life into certain periods? Outline your autobiography by marking these periods as parts or chapters of the story of your life so far. As you review these periods of your life, recognize how periodization must be grounded in reality. Defining these periods may help you understand yourself better.

To gain a sense of how periodization is imposed on reality, imagine how a parent or good friend would periodize your life. How would you periodize your life ten or twenty years from now? How would you have done it five years ago?

2

The Urban Revolution and "Civilization"

Mesopotamia and Egypt, 3500–1000 B.C.E.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The urban revolution that began approximately five thousand years ago produced a vast complex of new inventions, institutions, and ideas in cities that dominated surrounding farms and pastures. The first selection in this chapter surveys the wide range of innovations in these earliest civilizations.

The term *civilization* has to be used cautiously. Especially when the idea of civilization is used as a part of a stage theory of human history, we tend to assume that technological advancement means moral advancement. For instance, one hundred years ago scholars described ancient history as the progression from "savagery" to "barbarism" to "civilization."

It would be a shame to throw out the word *civilization* because it has been written more often with an axe than with a pen. The fact remains that the ancient cities created new ways of life for better or worse that were radically different from the world of agricultural villages. If we discard the word *civilization* as too overburdened with prejudice, we will have to find another one to describe that complex of changes. The term *civilization* comes from the Latin root word for city, *civitas,* from which we also get *civic, civilian,* and *citizen.* But, as the first reading argues, cities also created social classes, institutionalized inequalities, and calls to arms; most civilizations created soldiers as well as civilians.

Note: Pronunciations of difficult-to-pronounce terms will be given throughout the book. The emphasis goes on the syllables appearing in all capitals. [Ed.]