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Women, Sex and Patriarchy

By Lise Fortier

Virtually every human society, including our own, has been patriarchal. Patriarchy defines a system of relationships in which the men 'own' the women and children and rule over them. Throughout history, patriarchy has enjoyed the solid support of religion, the political system and culture. Patriarchy was institutionalized so long ago that its origins are unknown. Only recently have any attempts been made to rationalize it on the basis of physical and psychosexual distinctions. Yet it is surely not the stronger musculature of males that explains the dominance of whites in the United States or of Brahmins in India.

Psychological distinctions between the sexes are not a better explanation. 'Masculinity' and 'femininity' are quite unrelated to sex glands or sex chromosomes. At birth, there are no psychosexual differences. When they do appear, they are likely to change, at least until the age of three, when they become fixed.

In every society the shaping of an individual masculine or feminine personality is based on what the dominant male group values in itself and finds useful in subordinates: intelligence, force, efficacy in the male; ignorance, docility, virtue in the female. The young boy is encouraged to become aggressive, the young girl to repress her aggressiveness. Forgetting the pressures it applied in this direction, society concludes that aggressiveness is due to the testes, passivity is exclusively female, and all other temperamental traits are also biological.

While many traditional birthrights

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Teenage beauty contest. Tagged and waiting, girls play out assigned roles.

have disappeared, automatic privileges still redound to children who are lucky enough to be born males. To justify these privileges, man has fostered contempt for woman, and especially for her sexual characteristics, as exemplified by the fearful superstitions attached to menstruation. Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* spends two pages enumerating the taboos attached to menstruating women. For example, if a menstruating woman walks between two men, one will die; if she gets near a herd of cows, they will stop giving milk; if she gets near the water supply, it will become contaminated. (Even in modern societies, girls are told not to take a bath or wash their hair when they are menstruating.) In many tribes, menstruating women are kept in huts away from the village; the orthodox Jewish re-

ligion and Islam forbid intercourse during menstruation and the postpartum period, considering women 'impure' at those times.

Nearly all patriarchies have taboos against women touching ritual objects. Until recently, the Catholic Church prohibited women from touching the holy vases and hosts. In ancient and primitive societies, women were not permitted to eat with men, only to prepare their food.

In more subdued forms, the feeling that woman's sexual function is impure and dirty is widespread. Women feel ashamed if they are menstruating when they are due to consult a physician; they fear the doctor will be disgusted. Indeed, many physicians tell their patients that they cannot examine them if they are menstruating, although such a proscription sel-

dom has any medical basis. Many women have been made to believe that menstruation is a function of excretion to get rid of waste, like defecation, and is, as such, disgusting. If menstruation stops, women fear they will be poisoned. From the belief that women are 'impure' stems the view that they can do only menial work. Not so long ago, an American gynecologist stated publicly that women, because of their emotional instability, especially during the premenstrual period, could not qualify for high offices in government. In a review of the literature on premenstrual tension, Marie-Anne Friederich and Anthony Labrun remark: "Culturally speaking, men and women are conditioned, from early childhood, to accept physical and psychological changes around the menstrual period. . . . The incidence of [symptoms] has been reported to be between five percent and 95 percent of all women."¹ Obviously, the more symptoms one lists, the greater the percentage of women who will report them. The authors provide a partial list of 27 symptoms.

I was once told by a man that a woman might possibly become president of the United States, but only after her menopause when she would not be subject to emotional upheavals. I agreed wholeheartedly and suggested that, for the same reason of security, in view of the well-known fact that men are often very indiscreet sexually and are prone to fall for women spies, no man should be elected president of the United States until he has first been castrated.

Religious myths have considered women, sex and sin synonymous. In ancient mythology, Pandora's box (it is notable that the word "box," in English, is colloquial for vagina) contained all the evils of the world, one of which was sex. The belief that sex is evil, dangerous and introduced by women is also part of the Judeo-Christian myth of Eve and Adam. Eve, a disguised goddess of fertility—for "she was the mother of all things"—was seduced by a snake (a very phallic symbol); and the whole story of Eve and Adam is about sex and its consequences, namely, death, the loss of happiness and simplicity, and the acquisition of knowledge (a word that in biblical Hebrew is synonymous with sexual intercourse). Sex is dirty and shameful, because it lowers man to the rank of woman.

Unfit mentally and physically, women are also unfit sexually, according to Freud, the great god of psychiatry. Had

not the phallus existed, Freud would have invented it. For him, the world is divided between those who have it and those who don't, the developed and the underdeveloped world. He pitied those who are underdeveloped. In "Femininity," he writes about "the boy's far superior equipment," the girl's "inferior clitoris," her "genital deficiency," her "original sexual inferiority."² Having observed that women suffer from social discontent, he assumed "penis envy" to be the cause, instead of attributing it to an oppressive culture. He considered such discontent to be a normal female psychological trait, brought about by envy of the organ itself, rather than of all the rights it conferred on men. Freud even reduced the joy and pride of maternity, a biological achievement never equaled by men, to nothing but a search for a penis. "Her happiness is great," he says, "if this wish [for a penis] finds fulfillment [in giving birth] and, quite especially, if the baby is a little boy who brings the longed-for penis with him."³

Freud's vision of woman's sexuality is truly Victorian. She should submit to sex, never participate. She should not masturbate because it is a masculine activity; orgasm should be transferred from the clitoris to the vagina, an insensitive organ in which an object can be left and forgotten. To ask the male to perform the same kind of feat—for example, to change the seat of the orgasm from his penis to his scrotum—would not have crossed Freud's mind. He ignores the fact that the clitoris is the anatomical counterpart of the penis and, as such, *should* be the normal seat of the orgasm. Female sexuality, Freud believed, is inferior to the male's, and this inferiority explains the woman's alleged lower level of libido (an opinion finally invalidated by the studies of Masters and Johnson). Freud sees his great theory confirmed by biology: "The male sex cell is mobile, the female sex cell immobile and waiting passively. The behavior of elemental sexual organisms is indeed a model for the conduct of individuals during intercourse."⁴ As for civilization, it is the expression of sexual sublimation. Women, having no penis, have nothing to renounce and sublimate, and are therefore hostile to civilization. For Freud, when women complain about being denied the right to ownership, the right to vote, the right to the guardianship of their children, their "demand for justice is a modification of [penis] envy."⁵ As much as Freud deserves respect for having illuminated the importance of sex (in men's lives

at least), and for having created psychiatry and psychoanalysis, he has also done long-lasting harm, because the greatness of what he did made so many persons accept his most stupid utterances as infallible.

Freud's analysis of human sexuality may be seen as a justification for, if not a glorification of, the double standard of his time. Freudian male-inspired psychology went so far as to insist that incest between daughter and father is much less dangerous than incest between mother and son!

To Freud, every woman was nothing else but a mother. What is more, motherhood also meant child care, two functions that have no logical association except, sometimes, breast-feeding. Because of this link, generally believed to be inseparable, countries like Russia and Romania claim that they grant women complete equality by offering them six to 18 months' paid maternity leave to take care of their children. Real equality would involve making men eligible in the same way as women for child-care leaves, requiring them to share in this responsibility.

Although considered unfit mentally, physically and sexually, woman's sexual attractiveness gives her a dangerous power over man which must be harnessed. Religions were used to this end by males, who sought to maintain their dominance by excluding women except as servants dominated by old and, in some churches,* by celibate men. Religions have been instrumental in keeping wives obedient to their husbands and in convincing women that they are inferior beings, to whom God does not speak. God, it seems, speaks only to males—Moses, Mohammed, Buddha, the priests; and the interpretation of his words is left to a few chosen beings, equipped with testes. With the help of religion, woman is still denied freedom and the control of her body—through the cult of virginity (which is nothing but a seal of merchandise delivered firsthand), through the double standard, and through the proscription against contraception and abortion, which would not be a sin but a sacrament if men became pregnant.

Patriarchy enlisted the help of religions to maintain sexual taboos and inhibitions, especially those against adultery, premarital sex and, most particularly, illegitimacy. Maternity outside of marriage is condemned as infamous, in order to keep

*Judaism, Catholicism, Islam, Shintoism and, until recently and still predominantly, Protestantism.

the wife and daughters of the family chief from having extramarital sex and, thus, from escaping from the man's ownership.

Of all the biologic functions, sex is the only one that has been ruled with such attention to detail; restricted by age, sex, race, time, place; surrounded by shame, guilt, legal sanction, even capital punishment. In many countries, sex is an offense unless one has reached a certain age of 'majority'. Adultery by women is punishable (in the past, often by death); but men can escape scot-free. Certain countries forbid interracial marriages; certain religions will not permit sex at certain times of the year or during the woman's menstrual cycle. In most western civilizations, sex is considered shameful unless restricted to the privacy of the bedroom. In short, sex is dirty, sinful, dangerous.

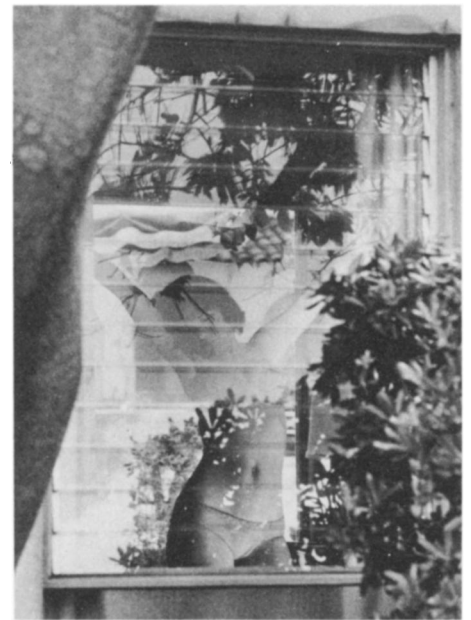
The consequences of sexual activity, pregnancy and venereal disease, must have had a great power to restrain people. Caught between unwanted pregnancy, for which there was no prevention or remedy, and venereal diseases for which there were no valuable treatments, most of our parents—no wonder—were paragons of virtue. Fear of these consequences need not exist anymore. Most of us, nowadays, would rather catch syphilis than tuberculosis. The ways of catching it are more enjoyable and we are assured of a cure. As for pregnancy, we have efficient methods to avoid it, and if they fail, abortion can settle the problem. Why, then, is not sex considered as harmless as eating, listening to music or running in the woods? Why can we not do it with whomever and whenever it pleases us to do so? Is it because God spoke in very precise terms on this subject? Some people claim that sex creates emotional involvements which cannot be dealt with à la légère. But these are fears bred from our patriarchal society. In cultures like Samoa and Tahiti, sex is a game, no more, until people decide to have children. In reality, we are still undergoing the terrors of Pandora's box and Eve's punishment.

It is quite revealing that in every occidental language, there is no worse insult than to be called a whore or a whore's son. There is no occupation so despised as prostitution, although patriarchal societies have done everything to encourage it by denying women freedom to become educated and to acquire economic independence. Such societies even encourage men to consort with whores by making it understood that this is the way young men should acquire sexual experience, and

that men need to have sex without responsibility more often than can be accommodated by a virtuous wife. It is generally acknowledged that to be a whore is disgusting. But there is no real shame attached to being the customer of a whore. In most countries, prostitution is a crime in which the customer is not guilty.

Reactions to adolescent sexuality express, in another way, the possessiveness of patriarchy. The custom of trading a girl's virginity for social and monetary advantage is still current. Society does not much care about adolescent male sexuality, so long as it is not shared by the adolescent female. It has not been considered objectionable, really, for adolescent boys to have sex with older women, even prostitutes, but fathers are jealous of their daughters' virginity and impress mothers with the need to guard it. Nor does opposition to female adolescent sexuality stem from the fear of pregnancy; or else parents would hasten to protect their girls with contraceptives and forget about it. Rather, parents are afraid that their daughters may become knowledgeable about contraception and thus be encouraged to experiment with sex. Many parents aver that sex education encourages immorality and perversion—as if sexual activity among adolescents who are at the peak of their sexual responsiveness were a form of perversion. Yet, lack of knowledge does not deter adolescents from having sex. Sex is not a gadget that you have to learn to operate before you can use it. But if not used properly, sex may have serious consequences for the girl and her partner. Many parents act as if they would prefer that their teenagers kill themselves while driving cars, rather than enjoy sex.

The patriarchal society's repressive reaction to female sexuality illuminates its ambivalence toward rape. On the one hand, man wants to protect his ownership of woman; thus, in written law, rape is severely punished. On the other hand, man seems to relish the idea of forceful sex, just as he relishes many other types of violent domination. So, when a woman accuses a man of rape, she is herself put on trial and must prove her previous virginity and her lack of sexual interest in her attacker or, indeed, in any other man. If she has shown any sign of such interest, it means she intended to go all the way (in the eyes of judges, lawyers and policemen), and should not complain that she was held to her initial intent—forcefully, if necessary. I believe that even after she



has undressed and gone to bed with a man, a woman still has the right, and maybe good reason, to change her mind about having intercourse with him. The fact she went that far is no excuse to force her to have intercourse.

While man's sexuality has always been considered a function of his personal enjoyment and well-being, woman's sexuality has been considered as society's property to be used to further its aims, whatever the cost to her own welfare. Empires have been built on our round bellies, and this explains the resistance of many governments to contraception, sterilization and abortion. They have been forbidden, often because of pronatalist policies inspired by the need to produce cannon fodder—as it was in France and Russia, as it is in Romania. Men, not women (although they are the ones most concerned), have the predominant voice in setting policies and making laws governing abortion. An unexpressed and powerful objection to women's worldwide request for liberalized abortion legislation may be that it would give them final control over reproduction, and no patriarchy has ever been willing to give women final control over anything.

Patriarchy, with all its might, has encouraged men to have children, male children, because patriarchy values them more than females. As a consequence, many families have more children than they need to get that longed-for son. Otherwise, few women would not be satisfied with two children; few would long for the discomfort and pain of pregnancy and childbirth more than twice, if it were

not that the patriarchal society leaves them no choice. This preference for males is well illustrated by the fact that in 1970, in Asia, there were more than 1.1 billion males compared to 983 million females. This difference is due to the higher rate of mortality of female children, suggesting that female children are more neglected than male children. Although, physiologically, the male of the species is more vulnerable in the early years, in India female infant mortality is significantly higher than male, and of every 100 infants abandoned, 95 are females.

Even in western society, when a decision is reached about definitive contraception, the men are frightened with tales of improbable complications of vasectomy (of which nobody has ever died except,

maybe, from fright). Yet, rarely mentioned is the mortality and serious morbidity attached to tubal ligation. Similarly, in the recent French legislation liberalizing the abortion law, the woman must be warned about the physical and psychological consequences of abortion, but not about the greater risks of continued pregnancy and delivery, nor about the consequences of a birth which will mobilize the woman's life for 15 or 20 years to come.

It is quite evident that under a patriarchal system, women are made to pay heavily for sexuality, either with undesired pregnancy or by bearing alone the responsibility of contraception. In this year dedicated to the status of women, equality with men in politics, education

and daily life is still, in reality, far away. But it can be achieved and we will know it has arrived when, to quote Françoise Giroux, "women will have the right, when they hold important positions, to be as incompetent as men."

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Planned and Unplanned Fertility in a Metropolitan Area: Black and White Differences

By John E. Anderson and Jack C. Smith

Since 1960, fertility patterns in Georgia and the Atlanta area have paralleled those of the nation: Both whites and nonwhites* have shared in the rapid fertility decline that has occurred; but, because the decline has been generally of the same magnitude, there has not been much of a reduction in the fertility differential between the two groups during this period. For example, as may be seen in Table 1, the difference between whites and nonwhites in the U.S. total fertility rate (TFR)† was about one birth per woman in 1960, and decreased by only one quarter of a birth by 1972. Essentially the same pattern is evident for Georgia and the Atlanta area (Fulton County). It seems likely, therefore, that the same in-

Table 1. Total fertility rate (TFR), and age-specific fertility rates, by race, United States, Georgia and Fulton County, 1960 and 1972

Age and year	Fertility rate, by race					
	United States		Georgia		Fulton County	
	White	Nonwhite	White	Nonwhite	White	Nonwhite
TFR						
1960	3,533	4,522	3,210	4,525	3,042	3,982
1972	1,917	2,650	1,980	2,895	1,470	2,395
15-19						
1960	79	158	99	154	100	180
1972	51	125	73	143	52	133
20-24						
1960	253	294	235	281	201	256
1972	126	185	126	186	75	147
25-29						
1960	195	215	163	214	162	185
1972	118	121	118	127	91	107
30-34						
1960	110	136	89	146	94	110
1972	59	69	55	74	53	58
35-39						
1960	54	74	43	81	41	50
1972	23	35	20	38	20	27
40-44						
1960	15	22	13	29	11	14
1972	6	10	4	11	3	7

Sources: **United States, 1960:** National Center for Health Statistics, DHEW (NCHS), *Vital Statistics of the United States, 1968, Vol. 1, Natality*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1970, Table 1-6; **1972:** NCHS, "Summary Report: Final Natality Statistics, 1972," *Monthly Vital Statistics Report*, Vol. 23, No. 8, Supplement, 1974, Table 3; **Georgia:** P. D. Darney, "Fertility Decline and Participation in Georgia's Family Planning Program: Temporal and Areal Associations," *Studies in Family Planning*, 6:156, 1975, Table 3; **Fulton County:** unpublished data, Family Planning Evaluation Division, Center for Disease Control.

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*In this article, nonwhite describes all races other than white, 90 percent of whom are black.

†The total fertility rate is the estimated total number of births a cohort of 1,000 women aged 15-44 would have if all passed through their reproductive years subject to the age-specific fertility rates in effect at a particular time.