

„Origins and Liberations. A Dissident Theory of Culture“

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Specimen texts

The Patriarchal Loss of Reality and the Uncovering
of Repressed Material

At least as important as greater equality of opportunity for women in today's cultural fields would be the recasting of cultural life as a whole into a spiritual world in which women can feel at home and to which women have to make her own contributions.

Female partnership on the cultural level means uncovering the patriarchal loss of reality (Realitätsverlust) in its totality. The second step would then be to venture new creative impulses, which might link up with pre-patriarchal traditions or matricentric undercurrents, but would in any case place different accents on cultural values and revive repressed spiritual potential. Admittedly this enormous task cannot be accomplished by women alone, though today's feminist cultural criticism casts them in a leading role and the essential situation of their lives grants them direct access to the sphere of emotionally repressed material.

To a certain extent the two greatest intellectual revolutions of the last hundred years - *Karl Marx's* economically-based cultural critique and *Sigmund Freud's* psychologically-based cultural theory - paved the way for a comprehensive critique of patriarchy, for both of them heightened awareness of the severe patriarchal loss of reality: *Marx* exposed the way the material conditions of our culture were negated, a process guaranteed solely by the exploitation of the working class (and today of the Third World); *Freud* unmasked repression of sexuality as a motive force of human life. Yet *Marx* and *Freud*, as has already been noted, were largely trapped in patriarchal thought patterns. As *Marx* did nothing to refute the contradiction between culture and nature, so *Freud* found no solution to the conflict between inner drives and civilization. This not only because full scope for sexuality would have run counter to *Freud's* own puritanical moral principles, but be-

cause he believed the overall cultural development of the human race to have been generated by ,sublimated' sexual energy. This confronts individuals with the alternative of choosing sexuality (and happiness) or culture. If culture is imposed on them, they repress their sexuality and become ill; if they consciously place sexuality in the service of culture, they may not become happy, but will produce creative cultural achievements by way of sublimation. These perspectives are none too hopeful; add to that a sexist element in *Freud's* case studies which, in blunt terms, would read: women repress their sexuality and develop neuroses; men sublimate their sexual energies and produce cultural achievements. That women are as likely to suffer from their unrealized creative potential was a notion that *Freud*, with his sexist prejudices, was unable to conceive and that feminist psychotherapy is only today beginning to formulate.

By far the greatest loss of reality in patriarchal thinking became noticeable only in the middle of our own century: the decrease in esteeming nature. Men considered nature not only controllable but inexhaustible, a fact regularly called to mind today by the in part irreversible damage that has been inflicted on our environment. Feminist philosophers have analyzed the profound link between the disdain for women and the abuse of nature, thus bringing out the essentially obsessive character behind the patriarchal repression of reality. The term „loss of reality“, which I have consciously borrowed from psychiatry, refers to the actual loss of contact with reality in psychosis, where the subject withdraws from his or her real surroundings and may live only in a fantastic world of delusion. Therefore the almost fashionable term „male obsession“ should not be understood as a piece of verbal polemic; it constitutes a genuine psychopathological diagnosis, though not an individual but a collective one. The classic example of collective mass obsession were the patriarchal witch-hunts, which did not lead to the psychotic disintegration of individual personalities only because obsession and concomitant loss of reality were born by the collective. Today similar paranoiac phenomena can be found

in the manufacture of weapons of mass destruction or the notion of the omnipotence of technology, that latter giving rise to the idea that natural systems evolved over vast periods of the earth's history can be defied without consequence.

In view of what has been said, feminist-holistic cultural theory has two priority tasks. The one consists in uncovering the obsessive components of techno-scientific thinking in its total historical and present-day dimension; the other is finally to draw the consequences of the discoveries of psychoanalysis, namely that affective and emotional energy is a far more important factor in sustaining human life than rare rational attitudes. Instead of repressing this fact once more and flooding our consciousness with ever new abstractions and rationalizations, we should finally take the sober step not only to recognize the reality of the emotions but to accept them.

The End of Polarized Thinking

French feminist linguistic critics have, moreover, drawn renewed attention to a phenomenon that is reflected in the language of the patriarchy and largely dominates our thinking: the construction of opposites and reliance on pairs of polar concepts. *Hélène Cixous* speaks of 'binary oppositions' which always suggest an 'above' and a 'below', a division between the dominator and the dominated. She rightly recognizes the intellectual compulsion to think in polarized concepts as more than a will to attain a clear and unequivocal definition of a factual event. It betrays the will to power, the will to subjugate, in the form inherent since the establishment of male consciousness, the form that has reached its apex in manipulative - technical thinking.

It is time for the calamitous patriarchal concept of culture - which revolves around ever new variations of subjugation, usurpation, elevation of self above what is, or violent change of what

is - to be taken up on all levels and traced back to its complexity-laden psychological foundations.

Linguistic criteria would already prompt the objection that the word ,culture' did not originate from an etymological context with fighting, ruling, spirit or superiority. It came from the Latin *cultura* = fostering, cultivating, working on, agriculture; and from *cultus* = living habits, domestic arrangements, civilization, or refinement, education, upbringing. Add to this the second meaning of *cultus* = religious veneration, worship and, of particular interest, the male form, *cultor* = planter, breeder, farmer, inhabitant, friend, lover, worshipper, priest. This confirms on a purely linguistic level what research into the matricentric societies has brought to light in terms of substance, namely, that patriarchal culture is based on an antecedent farming culture, which in its social civilization and religious ideas already possessed a firm spiritual structure (whereby use of the same word for lover and priest would suggest matricentric cults).

From this standpoint, the cultural process is marked by neither abstract principles of opposites nor by the heroic transcendence of nature, nor even, as Freud later postulated, by the struggle between the forces of the life instinct and a dark death instinct. My thesis is that during the past 5000 years it was concrete psychological group tensions, more precisely the tensions between the female and the male members of the group, that set human social history and intellectual history in motion.

We have recognized male defensiveness triggered by fear (of the numinous-female principle) and male compensation (generated by the envy of female live-giving potency) as the motive force behind patriarchal cultural development. And both lead, as we have seen, to the establishment of tyranny and war as well as to high cultural achievements, escapist illusions or expansive ambition.

These constellations, basic to western cultural process and indeed to every patriarchal civilization, represent the deepest-seated level of patriarchal repression. In all probability there is even an underlying connection here to the fact that *Alfred Adler's* school of psychoanalysis, whose theory of neurosis centres on overcompensation of feelings of helplessness and frustration, has received far less public recognition than the teachings of *Freud* or *Jung*. Evidently, analyzing the striving for power and the unconscious motives behind it remains a more obstinate taboo than the openly discussing of sexuality.

If my analysis of intellectual history is correct, the patriarchal man will be able to renounce the heroic cultural pattern and his personal compulsion for success - without feeling his own existence rendered superfluous and absurd (*J.P. Sartre*) - only if he approaches the old sense of 'cultura' in a new way: By cultivating the natural world around him and protecting life with the help of his increased standard of knowledge; by expanding and deepening interpersonal relationships (which begins with child nurturing), and by shaping our lives through the creation of an aesthetic culture.