

Rolf Wiggershaus - known for his book *Die Frankfurter Schule* (The Frankfurt School) - reviewed Carola Meier-Seethaler's *Ursprünge und Befreiungen. Eine Dissidente Kulturtheorie* (Origins and Emancipations. A Dissident Theory of Culture) on the programme 'Das politische Buch' (The Political Book), broadcast on German radio (Südwestfunk) on 21 May 1989, 5-6 p.m. Here is a slightly abridged version of his text:

A compelling train of thought links the four sections - 'The Early Matricentric Period', 'The Matricentric Advanced Civilizations', 'The Patriarchy Is Constituted' and 'Emancipation towards Partnership' - of Dr. Meier-Seethaler's book:

Recent research in the field of early history increasingly suggests that for many millennia - from the Ice Age into the period of the first advanced civilizations - a matricentric culture existed. Though women were not the express 'rulers', as the childbearers, the source of new life, they were considered to possess magic-maternal powers and were thus the focus of the community and ritual life. The initially 'outsider position of men' in a society shaped by women awakened men's need to compensate. This need turned into an obsessive form of overcompensation: the urge not only to counter women's ability to bear children and their proximity to life, death and nature by means of surrogate achievements, but to surpass them with these achievements. The patriarchy constituted itself: as an ongoing rebellion against women, nature, the realities of life; as men's ceaseless struggle against self-doubt and the collapse of an inflated self-image, of privileges established and maintained by force, of technocratic forms of coping with life; as continual repression of the numinous-female principle and the continual longing for the maternal female. Recognition of this basic constellation of patriarchal civilizations is the central condition for a partnership between the sexes and an obsession-free humanization of the realities of life and nature.

The novelty of this train of thought lies not so much in its individual components as in its overall concept. Positing a 'global matricentric early phase of civilization' disposes of the clearly untenable notion that the patriarchy was preceded by a matriarchate, the rule of women. The premise that a central role in society was ascribed to women as mothers and the main providers in non-hunting cultures, on the other hand, makes the early secondary importance of men and the emergence of the battle of the sexes plausible. But above all: this assumption of a matricentric phase in early civilizations and the incontrovertible simultaneity of men's dominant position and their inferiority complexes and feelings of intimidation vis à vis women in virtually all later cultures is combined with observations on the calamitous consequences of gender

stereotypes in the present-day world. And Meier-Seethaler unites all this in an overall view of human development, integrating a vast quantity of scientific knowledge, present-day problems and crises, and establishing illuminating links between them.

There is little danger of psychological factors and the gender conflict being overestimated; it is clear that for all its feminist and psychoanalytical bias, this dissident theory of culture is intended to function above all as a corrective. It allows for a less compulsive, more plausible classification and interpretation of findings that have thus far been repressed, manipulated, or viewed in isolation. It is a significant contribution on the road to enlightenment.

Heightening people's awareness of past patriarchal recastings of matricentric customs and myths and of modern patriarchal misinterpretations of historical and present-day phenomena connected with the battle of the sexes is, for example, enlightening in the very best sense. Enlightening, too, the unfaltering eye for boundaries, the inhumane sides of matricentric culture, a culture free from the delusion that mastery over nature would one day lead to the conquest of death, or that renouncing this world would gain the next. But also a culture that, with its human and animal sacrifices, went beyond accepting the realities of creatural life to identify itself rapturously with the death side of nature, offering the divine powers advance 'services' to appease their anger.

Meier-Seethaler is at her most brilliant in her numerous psychoanalytically-based observations and insights relative to 'the failure of male emancipation', as proven by the indignities suffered by both sexes as a result of the role division in patriarchal societies. The price for man's exaltation of himself was and is an atrophying of the emotions, of the ability to handle the unpleasant realities of life. He delegates this side to the woman, as a contemptible quantity - which has nonetheless remained the unacknowledged basis of his existence. 'That, when the patriarchy was constituted, man subjugated woman and made her a slave is the one, obvious side,' writes Meier-Seethaler. 'That he never severed the ancient ties to the Mothers and has always sought emotional refuge with women is the other side, a side his pride has repressed.' At the very latest when it comes to coping with emotional problems, men's dependence on women comes to light - men who (to quote Meier-Seethaler once more) 'have the full support of the dominant male society in feeling adult, while secretly remaining children.... Women, on the other hand, are officially protected as if they were children, but unofficially bear the burden of being adult.' Most of this insightful, highly informative book is equally as

enlightening, clearly formulated and emphatic. Though it may not contain a comprehensive theory of culture and often remains theoretically unsatisfying, it is unquestionably a major achievement.