

## THE PROBLEM OF DOMINANCE

At the post-plenary meetings on the 'Invisibility of Women' after the International Congress of the Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences at New Delhi, in December 1978, Professor Leela Dube and other organizers kindly invited me to make a few general remarks on themes in various sessions of the main Congress concerning women. The remarks I made then were informal and intended merely to provide a basis for discussion. It would not be appropriate now to accord all of them the permanence of print. I was asked, however, to present a note on one of the general points I raised: the problem of dominance. This will ultimately be published in the proceedings.

In the plenary sessions, there were various accounts of male dominance, some of which seemed at the time to be rather mechanical. Whatever the nature of dominance is, to reveal it will require more than the examination of crude, arbitrary, cruelties or exploitations. Dominance when applied to women is also only patchily related to the economic structure. For example the difference between Euro-American women and peasant Asian women economically and socially is so striking that nothing would seem, on the face of it, more inappropriate than the view of apparently privileged women that they are silenced or invisible. Women learn (as do some men) that progress up a social hierarchy may involve the inevitable acquisition of a privileged status in relation to their former fellows which in itself seems to silence the right of complaint. Professor Srinivas's excellent paper, 'The Changing Position of Indian Women'<sup>1</sup> refers to the increasing 'immurement' of Indian women as the price of the rise in apparent status. We detect parallels with mid-nineteenth century England. A.J. Munby, a Victorian gentleman, made studies of working women in 'dirty' occupations - miners, glue-makers,

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<sup>1</sup> M.N. Srinivas, 'The changing position of Indian women', *Man*, n.s. Vol. XII No. 2 (1977), pp. 221-238.

fisherwomen, and others. He was an odd-man-out among liberals of his day in that he opposed the loss of working women's independent industrial occupations, arduous as they were. When he visited a new secretarial school for girls, he asked whether the constraining of girls into artificial and protected 'lady-like' ways, and into the straitjacket-like clothing of the period, was a gain or a decrease in freedom.<sup>2</sup> It is indeed a fact that there is a kind of independence about working women inside the often exploiting work, which is not necessarily preserved as their material position improves.

Nonetheless it is folly to romanticize the lives of such working women: the independence, cheerfulness, and vigour of individuals who are young and have their health and strength show only one side of the question. Modern middle-class writers often similarly describe the working *child* of the last century as sturdy and independent, and some imply that a serious loss resulted later from education. Of course, the match-selling boy was frequently happy, master (as he might think) of his fate. At the age of fifty, perhaps by then a pauper or broken in health, he would not have thanked you for admiring his independence at eight years of age. In judging the 'happiness' of people with their lot, the whole life must be taken into account. The happiness of the hardworking, 'independent', industrially-employed or peasant woman is likewise precarious and dependent on forces she may not be aware of. In a different way, the lot of élite women in the third world, whose 'happy independence' depends on servants, is also precarious. This lesson was learnt by western middle-class women in our time.

It is as if we have to work through the outer defences of the economic and authority systems of the world before we can even *see* the underlying structures of dominance. That is why women so often must become privileged, with a life-style which, perhaps, a peasant woman would gladly settle for, before they perceive its ultimate nature. Dominance then appears like an intricate silver chain that has lain at the bottom of the sea for so long that it has become encrusted with so many particular exploitations that the basic shape has been hidden. Chip away these objective encrustations by social reform, and only at the end is the intricate final chainwork revealed - still intact.

The problem of dominance is, then, a problem of humanity, and no revolution has ever abolished it. Even the most complete and cruel upheavals, destroying authority structures, amending the channels of power, replacing élites, and eliminating individuals in every walk of life, have left the 'templates' of dominance

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<sup>2</sup> See D. Hudson, *Munby, Man of Two Worlds: The Life and Diaries of Arthur J. Munby 1828-1910* (London: Murray 1972), for a biography of A.J. Munby, who was psychologically obsessed by working women. Nevertheless, his accounts of their way of life are of great value, and very revealing.

unaffected, able to replicate again in new forms, with new accretions, some more superficially attractive but usually strangely the same. It seems then that authority and power, as generally understood, are not dominance. The charisma of dominance comes from a particular power - that of ultimately defining the world in which non-dominants live. Nothing could be more practical and 'action-based' therefore than a theory of dominance. Robert Hertz<sup>3</sup> showed many years ago how human populations select what may be a very slight, and perhaps in itself trivial disparity, and build elaborations one upon another, until a complex structure of asymmetries emerges. He notes, in his classic example of handedness, that 'The slight advantages possessed by the right-hand are merely the occasion of a qualitative differentiation, the cause of which lies beyond the individual, in the constitution of the collective consciousness'.<sup>4</sup>

If 'An almost insignificant bodily asymmetry' as between the left- and right-hand can be exploited in this way, similarly very slight imbalances in the relations between individuals have become the basis of dominance structures. If these imbalances are persistent and consistent, they are conceptually polarized and are further built upon until they become 'over-determined'. A slight imbalance is thus raised to an imparity, an imparity to an inequality, an inequality to an exploitation, and so on to become the basis for a whole systematization of power. When a set of specific imbalances coincide, the resulting intricate process acquires considerable momentum. The developments become both symbolic *and* action-based, both ideological *and* production-based. The dominance structure always tends to grow as fast and as far as it can. Those of its aspects which involve processes of production are normally the specialization of the historical materialists, who have made useful contributions to this field.

The theory of dominance is not therefore a theory concerned with women alone. It is a theory of the modes whereby societies create the daily realities that their members experience. It is not a branch of anthropology: it is one of anthropology's general theories. The case of women is thus highly instructive: it is perhaps the oldest structural dominance, which has now acquired both decorative and beguiling as well as harsh and occasionally desperate features.

I have time to suggest only one pathway of the structure of dominance as it affects women. There is a certain imbalance of a social kind that occurs between boys and girls in the years about puberty - I say 'social' because it is a mistake to see the imbalance as biological. The 'biological' side lies merely in a set of differences in the chronological age at, and in the physical nature of puberty. Such differences could be potentially

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<sup>3</sup> R. Hertz, 'The Pre-eminence of the Right Hand: A Study in Religious Polarity', in R. Needham (ed.), *Right and Left*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1973.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

neutral in social terms. For example, boys pass through critical adolescent experiences at different ages and rates. Yet, on the whole, imbalance between youths in strength, kinds of experience, or sexuality, does not become permanently embedded in their later social life. Between the sexes, however, a similar difference does characteristically develop such consequences. It seems to stem from an absolute difference in the socially-derived significance of choices made by girls and boys in very young adolescence.

In seeking for the roots of this social difference we may note the degree to which self-identification through identification with the parent of the same sex assists in prejudging the issue. The identification of sons with their fathers differs from the identification of daughters with their mothers in a minor respect which, however, plays its part here. The importance of identification in the first few years of life, when the polarity of the parents' roles and occupations may be very marked, should be noted. In imagining herself as her mother, motherhood becomes the earliest female role that a daughter grasps - so that the onset of puberty is easily seen by the girl-child as the entry to motherhood, even if this may conflict with other roles (such as helicopter pilot) which she will later perhaps, be more aware of. In a sense the most demanding human role of all is conceptualized for her first of all - not last of all or simply later on. For the young pubertal male, in contrast, the 'male' roles that impress his imagination are not preempted by his merely impregnating role. His hard education in male competition begins at once. The young, inexperienced, pubertal female can be trapped - even mesmerized - by the sexual and procreative life. It must be emphasised that we are considering very young girls, aged nearer 13 than 18 - an age of choice in which the sexual fate, as wife, prostitute or unthinking follower of an older male, may be embarked upon with a zest which is literally premature. The 'free' pubertal girl is, if you like, readily distractable from following what the male youth already perceives as a race towards self-fulfilment. It is an injustice to tell her later, or at the time, that this, her first choice, *is* her self-fulfilment.

The problem of according or denying free choice to young pubertal girls is the first problem of women. It is an unfair problem - it is life's first socially derived imbalance between the sexes in their fully human role. A conscious humanistic feminism therefore is dependent on a certain structuring of society in advance - that is, on a willingness to encourage the female to forgo a particular freedom on the very threshold of adult life. This is like the child which loses its eight-year-old independence as a street-trader by opting for the disciplines and subjections of education, to avoid paupery in old age. But the harsh dialectic of dominance begins at once. The requirement of special assistance for very young girls through the sexuality trap requires the cooperation of males as well as of older females - neither of whom necessarily find it in their immediate interest to provide it. The assistance required may be minimal,

but the dominance process has begun. Over-elaboration occurs: assistance becomes protection, which becomes over-protection. These begin to develop their own momentum. The males, potentially equal playmates of the girls before puberty, proceed over the hill to participate in the society at large. They can devote energies and time to the sheer excitement of 'creating' society for better or for worse. Girls who were delayed at the trap struggle up later, and try to learn the rules, in which they are already by now allocated their place. No wonder that, even in enlightened days, many generations of being first into the fray have bequeathed males a world which speaks to them without interpreters, which is their own club.<sup>5</sup>

It is unlikely that any group difference of strength between males and females would have affected the issue of dominance between the sexes if the sexuality trap did not tend to introduce an imbalance into the adolescent age-group as a whole, preventing its maintenance as a continuous social entity. The humane 'protection' of girls from a premature sexual choice, leading to 'over-protection', generates an equal and opposite image of female 'vulnerability' on the male side. The males become ideologically stronger and stronger, the females weaker and weaker. The idea becomes event, and daily evidences of its physical manifestation confirm its apparent 'natural' reality. It is quite characteristic of human social semantics that arabesques and detailed elaborations develop from quite simple 'simultaneities' of definition and action. The one chosen here to illustrate this proposition is a minor 'hiccup' in the differentiation of males and females at puberty: that 'absolute' freedom of choice produces totally different ultimate social results between pubertal females and males; requiring, in order to restore parity, some positive social action.

Since this is simply the first of many imbalances in life-trajectories<sup>6</sup> introduced by the reproduction cycle, it would still be likely that structural dominance in the defining of society, and of the cognitive experiences within it, would tend to favour males. Nevertheless, the puberty trap by being the first imbalance sets the structure askew from the beginning. It is suggested that social reform and material betterment, by reducing the 'encrustation' or crude elaborations of dominance, begin to reveal the ultimate 'silver chain', and that that is why western women are more concerned than peasant women about the subject. Peasant women may not even question that the reproductive choice

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<sup>5</sup> See E. Ardener, 'Belief and the Problem of Women' and 'The Problem Revisited', both in S. Ardener (ed.), *Perceiving Women*, London:Dent/New York: Halsted 1975, and other papers therein; S. Ardener (ed.), *Defining Females*, London:Croom Helm/New York: Halsted 1978. The argument of this paper has special relevance to the theory of 'muting' and the way groups are defined.

<sup>6</sup> For work on life-trajectories see also *Defining Females*, *ibid.*, pp. 40-43.

at puberty is the only life-choice. In the west it is a paradox that 'freedom' has left the 'puberty trap' relatively unattended. 'Reformed' sexual mores have left choices of pubertal females highly imbalanced vis-à-vis those of males.

Yet the dialectic can work in other ways. If the particular effect of the identification of daughters with their mothers introduces a slight disparity between males and females with dangerous possibilities, the identification of fathers with their daughters has its own ambiguous effects. It is often the unexpected source of some female emancipation, providing one reason why changes *do* occur - why, for example, girls' education becomes permitted. Some fathers treat their daughters as surrogate sons. Human love (or ambition) is thus a great emancipator, although the emancipation of daughters in any historical period can expand only as far as the vision of the most indulgent father. It may be that when other historical conditions are favourable, these 'surrogate sons' are poised to be the first to take advantage of them.

It seems that life imposes many kinds of handicaps and disadvantages upon us all, rather like hands of cards for a game we did not choose. Perhaps taking all in all, as far as peasant societies were concerned the supreme importance of progeny and the hard life of everyone in subsistence economies made the power-play of men of little interest and even a thing of fun for women. Perhaps it was the growth of literacy and the storage of information that exaggerated the imparity of the sexes. When the women woke up, the men's game had become a serious matter - they had changed the world. There is surely no need, however, for women to be continuously represented as downtrodden 'invisibles' - a simple mental act of confidence in every situation, as many have discovered, may be all that is required. By something more powerful than that 'bloodless decree' which Engels quaintly imagined to have led to the 'world-historical defeat' of women, both sexes may so act as to reduce each inequality to an imparity, each imparity to an imbalance, and then to dissolve the imbalance into a simple, un-marked, difference. The world would then still contain the empty shells of dominance, but that particular game would be truly over. The problem of dominance within human beings as a whole would not disappear, but perhaps it too would be illuminated.

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