

FREDERICK ENGELS

**THE ORIGIN
OF THE FAMILY,
PRIVATE PROPERTY
AND THE STATE**

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*In Connection with the Researches of
Lewis H. Morgan*

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Lewis H. Morgan*

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March and May 26, 1884

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PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

The following chapters are, in a sense, the execution of a bequest. No less a man than Karl Marx had planned to present the results of Morgan's researches in connection with the conclusions of his own — within certain limits, I may say our — materialistic examination of history, and thus to make clear their full significance. For Morgan in his own way had discovered afresh in America the materialistic conception of history discovered by Marx 40 years ago, and in his comparison of barbarism and civilization it had led him, in the main points, to the same conclusions as Marx. And just as the professional economists in Germany were for years as busy in plagiarizing *Capital* as they were persistent in attempting to kill it by silence, so Morgan's *Ancient Society** received precisely the same treatment from the spokesmen of "prehistoric" science in England. My work can offer only a meagre substitute for what my departed friend could no longer accomplish.

* *Ancient Society, or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery, Through Barbarism to Civilization*, by Lewis H. Morgan, London, Macmillan & Co., 1877. The book was printed in America and is peculiarly difficult to obtain in London. The author died a few years ago.

But I have the critical notes which he made to his extensive extracts from Morgan,* and I reproduce them here in so far as they apply to the theme.

According to the materialistic conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life. This, again, is of a twofold character. On the one side, the production of the means of subsistence, of food, clothing and shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social institutions under which the people of a particular historical epoch and a particular country live are conditioned by both kinds of production: by the stage of development of labour on the one hand and of the family on the other. The less the development of labour and the more limited the amount of its products, and consequently, the more limited also the wealth of society, the more the social order is found to be dominated by ties of lineage. However, within this structure of society based on ties of lineage the productivity of labour increasingly develops, and with it private property and exchange, differences of wealth, the possibility of utilizing the labour power of others, and hence the basis of class antagonisms: new social elements, which in the course of generations strive to adapt the old social order to the new conditions, until at last their incompatibility brings about a complete upheaval. In the collision of the newly developed social classes, the old society founded on lineage groups is broken up. In its place

* This refers to Marx's *Conspectus of Lewis H. Morgan's Book "Ancient Society,"* which can be found in *Marx-Engels Archives* (in Russian), Vol. IX, 1941. Engels' quotations from Marx in the text, unless otherwise stated, are from the *Conspectus*. — Ed.

appears a new society, concentrated in the state, the subordinate units of which are no longer lineage groups but territorial groups; a society in which the family structure is completely dominated by the property structure, and in which there now freely develop those class antagonisms and class struggles that have formed the content of all hitherto *written* history.

It is Morgan's great merit that he has discovered and reconstructed in its main lines this prehistoric basis of our written history, and that in the lineage groups of the North American Indians he has found the key to the most important and hitherto insoluble riddles of earliest Greek, Roman and German history. But his book is not the work of a day. For nearly 40 years he wrestled with his material until he was completely master of it. And that also makes his book one of the few epoch-making works of our time.

In the following presentation, the reader will in general easily distinguish what comes from Morgan and what I have added. In the historical sections on Greece and Rome I have not confined myself to Morgan's evidence, but have added what was available to me. The sections on the Celts and the Germans are in the main my work; Morgan had to rely here almost entirely on secondary sources, and for German conditions — apart from Tacitus — on the worthless liberalistic falsifications of Mr. Freeman.² The economic arguments, which in Morgan's book were sufficient for his purpose but quite inadequate for mine, have all been reworked by myself. And, finally, I am, of course, responsible for all the conclusions drawn, in so far as Morgan is not expressly cited.

PREFACE TO THE FOURTH EDITION³

The earlier large editions of this work have been out of print now for almost half a year, and for some time the publisher has been asking me to prepare a new edition. Until now, more urgent work kept me from doing so. Since the appearance of the first edition seven years have elapsed, during which the study of the primitive forms of the family has made important advances. There was, therefore, plenty to do in the way of improvements and additions; all the more so as the proposed stereotyping of the present text will make any further alterations impossible for some time.

I have accordingly submitted the whole text to a careful inspection and made a number of additions by means of which, I hope, due consideration is paid to the present state of science. I also give in the course of this preface a short review of the development of the history of the family from Bachofen to Morgan; I do so chiefly because the chauvinistically inclined English school of prehistorians is still doing its utmost to kill by silence the revolution which Morgan's discoveries have effected in conceptions of primitive society, while it appropriates his results without the slightest com-

punction. Elsewhere also this English example is in some cases followed only too closely.

My work has been translated into different languages. First, Italian — *L'origine della famiglia, della proprietà privata e dello stato, versione riveduta dall'autore, di Pasquale Martignetti*, Benevento, 1885. Then, Romanian — *Origina familiei, proprietății private și a statului, traducere de Ioan Nadejde*, in the Jassy periodical *Contemporanul*, September 1885 to May 1886. Further, Danish — *Familjens, Privatejendommens og Statens Oprindelse, Dansk, af Forfatteren gennemgaaet Udgave, besørget af Gerson Trier, København, 1888*. A French translation by Henri Ravé, based on the present German edition, is on the press.

* * *

Before the beginning of the 1860s, one cannot speak of a history of the family. In this field, the science of history was still completely under the influence of the Five Books of Moses. The patriarchal form of the family, which was there described in greater detail than anywhere else, was not only assumed without question to be the oldest form, but it was also identified — minus its polygamy — with the bourgeois family of today, as if the family had really experienced no historical development at all; at most it was admitted that in primitive times there might have been a period of unregulated sexual relations. It is true that in addition to monogamous marriage, two other forms were known to exist — polygamy in the Orient and polyandry in India and Tibet; but these three forms could not be arranged in any historical order and merely appeared side by side without any connection. That among some peoples of ancient history, as well as among some savages still alive today, descent was reckoned not from the

father but from the mother, and that the female line was therefore regarded as alone valid; that among many peoples of the present day marriage is forbidden within certain large groups which at that time had not been closely studied, and that this custom is to be met with in every continent — these facts were indeed known and fresh instances of them were continually being collected. But nobody knew what to do with them, and even as late as E. B. Tylor's *Researches into the Early History of Mankind, etc.* (1865)⁴ they are listed as mere "curious customs," side by side with the prohibition among some savages against touching burning wood with an iron tool and similar religious nonsense.

The study of the history of the family dates from 1861, from the publication of Bachofen's *Mother Right*.⁵ In this work the author advances the following propositions: (1) That originally humanity lived in unrestricted sexual relations, to describe which Bachofen uses the mistaken term "hetaerism"; (2) that such relations exclude any certainty of paternity, that descent could therefore be reckoned only in the female line, according to mother right, and that this was originally the case amongst all the peoples of antiquity; (3) that consequently women, as mothers, and the only parents of the younger generation that were known with certainty, held a position of high respect and honour which, in Bachofen's conception, was raised to a complete rule by women (gynaeocracy); (4) that the transition to monogamy, where the women belonged to *one* man exclusively, involved a violation of an ancient religious commandment (that is, actually a violation of the traditional right of the other men to this woman), a violation which had to be expiated, or indulgence for which had to be purchased, by the woman surrendering herself for a limited period.

Bachofen finds the proofs of these assertions in innumerable passages of ancient classical literature, which he collected with immense industry. According to him, the development from "hetaerism" to monogamy and from mother right to father right is accomplished, as was particularly the case among the Greeks, as the consequence of an advance in religious conceptions, of the insertion of new divinities, representative of the new outlook, among the traditional group of gods, representing the old outlook, so that the latter are more and more pressed into the background by the former. Thus, according to Bachofen, it is not the development of people's actual conditions of life, but the religious reflection of these conditions inside the heads of these same people, which has brought about the historical changes in the relative social position of man and woman. In accordance with this view, Bachofen interprets the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus as the dramatic representation of the conflict between declining mother right and the new father right that arose and triumphed in the heroic age. For the sake of her paramour, Aegisthus, Clytemnestra slays her husband, Agamemnon, on his return from the Trojan War; but Orestes, her son by Agamemnon, avenges his father's murder by slaying his mother. For this act he is prosecuted by the Erinyes, the demonic guardians of mother right, according to which matricide is the gravest and most inextinguishable crime. But Apollo, who through the voice of his oracle had ordered Orestes to this deed, and Athena, who is called upon to give judgment — the two deities who here represent the new patriarchal order — take Orestes under their protection; Athena hears both sides. The whole matter of the dispute is briefly summed up in the debate which now takes place between Orestes and the Erinyes. Orestes contends that Clytemnestra has committed a double crime; she has slain

her husband and thus she has also slain *his* father. Why should the Erinyes prosecute him and not her, who is by far the more guilty? The answer is striking: "*Unrelated by blood* was she to the man she slew."⁶

The murder of a man not related by blood, even if he be the husband of the murderess, is expiable and does not concern the Erinyes; their office is solely to punish murder between blood relations, and of such murders the most grave and the most inexpiable, according to mother right, is matricide. Apollo now comes forward in Orestes' defence; Athena calls upon the Areopagites — the Athenian jurors — to vote. The votes for Orestes' condemnation and for his acquittal are equal; then Athena, as chief judge, gives her vote for Orestes and acquits him. Father right has triumphed over mother right; the "gods of young descent," as the Erinyes themselves call them, have triumphed over the Erinyes, and the latter then finally allow themselves to be persuaded to take up a new office in the service of the new order.

This new but undoubtedly correct interpretation of the *Oresteia* is one of the best and finest passages in the whole book, but it proves at the same time that Bachofen believes at least as much as Aeschylus did in the Erinyes, Apollo and Athena; namely, he believes that these divinities performed the miracle of overthrowing mother right and replacing it by father right during the Greek heroic age. That such a conception, which makes religion the decisive lever of world history, must finally end in pure mysticism, is clear. It is therefore a tough and by no means always a rewarding task to plough through Bachofen's thick tome. But all that does not lessen his merit as a pioneer. He was the first to replace the vague phrases about some unknown primitive state of unregulated sexual relations by proofs of the following facts:

that abundant traces survive in ancient classical literature of a state prior to monogamy among the Greeks and Asiatics when not only did a man have sexual relations with several women, but a woman with several men, without offending against custom; that this custom did not disappear without leaving its traces in the limited surrender which was the price women had to pay for the right to monogamy; that therefore descent could originally be reckoned only in the female line, from mother to mother; that far into the period of monogamy, with its certain or at least acknowledged paternity, the female line was still alone recognized; and that this original position of the mothers, as the only certain parents of their children, secured for them, and thus for their whole sex, a higher social status than women have ever enjoyed since. Bachofen did not put these statements as clearly as this, for he was hindered by his mysticism. But he proved them; and in 1861 that was a real revolution.

Bachofen's massive volume was written in German, the language of the nation which at that time interested itself less than any other in the prehistory of the modern family. Consequently, he remained unknown. His first successor in the same field appeared in 1865, without ever having heard of Bachofen.

This successor was J. F. McLennan, the exact opposite of his predecessor. Instead of a mystic of genius, we have the dry-as-dust jurist; instead of the exuberant imagination of a poet, the plausible arguments of a barrister pleading his case. McLennan finds among many savage, barbarian and even civilized peoples of ancient and modern times a form of concluding a marriage in which the bridegroom, alone or with his friends, must carry off the bride from her relations by a show of force. This custom must be the survival of an earlier

custom when the men of one tribe did in fact carry off their wives by force from other tribes. What was the origin of this "marriage by capture"? So long as men could find enough women in their own tribe, there was no reason whatever for it. We find, however, no less frequently that among undeveloped peoples there are certain groups (which in 1865 were still often identified with the tribes themselves) within which marriage is forbidden, so that the men are obliged to take their wives, and the women their husbands, from outside the group; whereas among other peoples the custom is that the men of one group must take their wives only from within their own group. McLennan calls the first peoples "exogamous" and the second "endogamous"; he then promptly proceeds to construct a rigid antithesis between exogamous and endogamous "tribes." And although his own investigations into exogamy force the fact under his nose that in many, if not in most or even in all, cases, this antithesis exists only in his own imagination, he nevertheless makes it the basis of his whole theory. According to this theory, exogamous tribes can only obtain their wives from other tribes; and in the permanent state of war between tribe and tribe, which corresponds to savagery, these wives could only be obtained by capture.

McLennan then goes on to ask: Whence this custom of exogamy? The conception of consanguinity and incest could not have anything to do with it, he says, for these things only came much later. But another common custom among savages might — the custom of killing female children immediately after birth. This caused a surplus of men in each individual tribe, of which the inevitable and immediate consequence was that several men possessed a wife in common: polyandry. And this had the further consequence that it was known who was the mother of a child, but not who its father was: hence

kinship reckoned only in the female line, with exclusion of the male line — mother right. And a second consequence of the scarcity of women within a tribe — a scarcity which polyandry mitigated, but did not remove — was precisely this systematic, forcible abduction of women from other tribes.

As exogamy and polyandry are referable to one and the same cause — a want of balance between the sexes — we are forced *to regard all the exogamous races as having originally been polyandrous*. . . . Therefore we must hold it to be beyond dispute that among exogamous races the first system of kinship was that which recognized blood-ties through mothers only. (McLennan, *Studies in Ancient History*, 1886. *Primitive Marriage*, p. 124.)⁷

It is McLennan's merit that he directed attention to the general occurrence and great importance of what he calls exogamy. He did not by any means *discover* the existence of exogamous groups; still less did he understand it. Besides the earlier, scattered notes of many observers (these were McLennan's sources), Latham (*Descriptive Ethnology*, 1859) had given a detailed and accurate description of this institution among the Magars in India, and had said that it was very widespread and occurred in all parts of the world — a passage which McLennan himself cites. And our Morgan, in 1847, in his letters on the Iroquois (in the *American Review*) and in 1851 in *The League of the Iroquois*,⁸ had already demonstrated the existence of exogamous groups among this tribe and had given an accurate account of them; whereas McLennan, as we shall see, wrought greater confusion here with his lawyer's mind than Bachofen wrought in the field of mother right with his mystical fantasy. It is also a merit of McLennan that he recognized matrilineal descent as the original system, though he was here anticipated by Bachofen, as he later acknowledged. But McLennan is not clear on this either; he always speaks of "kinship through females only,"