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A Thermodynamic Interpretation of History
PART TWO: The Origin of Women's Oppression
Chapter 9
The Origin of Western Nation-State (Minor) Patriarchy

2006 - 7 by L. C. Chin.

The nuclear family monogamy is the necessary condition for the formation of nation-state and the beginning (formative or production) phase of capitalism, because both require an atomization of society that, with a new population distributional pattern, can best command the allegiance of the populous to the central authority and most effectively maximize their labor out-put. Now the Western European society was predisposed toward the development of nation-state because monogamy had always prevailed as a rule in it: it had never been much of a "patriarchal" society as compared with the rest of Eurasia. Why was this, while the rest of Eurasia developed toward the classical patriarchal mode? Again, Kevin MacDonald, in "What Makes Western Culture Unique", has summarized the historical mechanisms causing the prevalence of monogamy in Western Europe, even if his racist framework within which his summary works must be rejected.

The two factors, peculiar to Western Europe but not elsewhere, which are responsible for the pre-eminence of monogamy in Western Europe since the beginning, are:

1. The relatively under-developed economic situation of Western Europe during the early Middle Ages compelled polygyny among European aristocrats to remain at low level. "After all, the emperor[s] of China presided over a vast and populous country with huge surplus economic production. They were much wealthier than the tribal chieftains of early medieval Europe, and they used that wealth and power to obtain vastly more women" (ibid.).
2. The Catholic church, a religious establishment, claimed to be superior to, and more or less managed to exercise authority over, the secular establishment, and it was successfully regulating the reproductive behavior of the secular elite. This did not happen in any other civilizational centers of Eurasia. Specifically, it sought to impose monogamy on the ruling elite. Thus, "during the Middle Ages [polygyny] became the object of conflict between the Church and the aristocracy." With the success of the church in this conflict, "[t]he result was that the same rules of sexual conduct were imposed on both rich and poor. The program of the Church 'required

above all that laymen, especially the most powerful among them, should submit to the authority of the Church and allow it to supervise their morals, especially their sexual morals. It was by this means, through marriage, that the aristocracy could be kept under control. All matrimonial problems had to be submitted to and resolved by the Church alone" (ibid.)

Thus the attempt of the Church to impose monogamy (effectively upon the whole of society) was primarily motivated by power concerns; but it was also motivated by religious-ideological reasons, i.e. asceticism and salvation, or the need for the soul to be concentrated away from the body in order for it to attain salvation and enter heaven: keeping away from "sin" so as to maintain the salvational state of the soul. The Church wanted the whole society to remain more or less ascetic and stay in the salvational state. But this also reinforced its hold over the whole of society. "One unique feature of the Church is that its popularity was aided by the image (and reality) that the Church was altruistic. The medieval Church successfully portrayed the image that it was not concerned with controlling women or having a high level of reproductive success... [even if t]his was not always the case... This asceticism was an important part of the public's perception of the Church during the high Middle Ages" (ibid.). This image of monastic altruism was especially reinforced by the fact that monasteries established since the 11th and 12th centuries onwards and the mendicant movement (Dominicans, Franciscans) since the 13th century onwards recruited mostly from the aristocracy, the landed gentry, and affluent families. Many from the highest and wealthiest of society, who had the best chances of enjoying earthly pleasures to the full, now renounced them.

Robert Fossier (in *Histoire de la famille* vol. II, sous la direction de A. Burguière, C. Klapisch-Zuber, M. Segalen, F. Zonabend, 1986; "L'ère féodale") locates the origin of monogamous nuclear family in Western Europe, noting the transitional period around 900 and 1,000 AD, before which there existed no nuclear family coupling as such, but 30 or 50 people could be sharing the same house and the same generic name.¹ Two centuries afterwards, the drastic increase in population caused the break-up of the large house of the extended family (*joint families*) and the consequent atomization of the couples, or the formation of nuclear family coupling.² Another cause seems to have been the increased taxation by the lords (p. 146). Primogeniture (favoring the elder male descendant in inheritance) has also facilitated the dissolution of large family (p. 154). He notes that archaeology has revealed, in England, Germany, and the Low Countries, the diminishing of the size of dwellings that indicates the nuclearization of the family (p. 148). Finally, in conjunction with the higher status of women despite the ascendancy of masculine values (virility), Church influence, again, contributed to the growing emphasis on mutual consent between the partners in the constitution of marriage, free of intervention by kinship families and authorities. This is the Gregorian revolution.

The Gregorian revolution imposes a uniformity of marriage system across Latin Christendom; marriage was to be monogamous and indissoluble, with the prohibition of the re-marriage of widows/ widowers. But the products of the reform, notes Henri Bresc ("L'Europe des villes et des campagnes", *ibid.*, p. 173), "ran counter, all at the same time, to the realities of patrimoine, familial power, and the necessities of production, and to those of the reproduction of social order".³ Bresc warns against the idea of a progressive evolution from the joint family toward the nuclear family. In fact, after the thirteenth century, in the aftermath of black death and with the recurrence of epidemics, Europe witnessed a resurgence of the traditional lineage system (p. 170), with the creation of many large artificial kinship systems (the example of *alberghi*, p. 183).

Footnotes:

1. "... les hommes vivent à trente ou cinquante dans de grandes huttes, au moins dans le nord de l'Europe, les nécropoles sont communes, le groupe porte un nom générique..." (*ibid.*, p. 143)
2. "En premier lieu, la surcharge croissante rend de plus en plus difficile, parfois même matériellement impossible, la coexistence sous le même toit d'un très grand nombre de personnes apparentées" (p. 145).
3. "L'ensemble de ces principes s'est évidemment heurté à la fois aux réalités du patrimoine, du pouvoir familial et des nécessités de la production, et à celles de la reproduction de l'ordre social."

[| previous section](#) | [Table of Content](#) | [next section](#) |