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5. *Who are the exploited?*

(i) Women

In the foregoing analyses, women, despite their crucial role in reproduction, never appear as vectors of the social organisation. They are hidden behind men, behind fathers, brothers and/or husbands. As we have seen, this is not a natural given condition but one which results from changing historical circumstances, and always linked to the exploitation of women's reproductive functions.

In the hunting band, in which the problems of membership and mating predominate, and in which long-term reproduction is of little concern, women are more sought after as companions than as reproducers. Very little abduction takes place. Wars seem to be rare and, when they do occur, women are not usually at stake. Unions are precarious. Many observers note that women play an influential role wherever the mode of existence is not altered by the influence of agricultural neighbours.¹

In agricultural societies, where women are wanted for their reproductive capacities, they are more under threat. As we have seen, whatever their physical constitution or capacity to defend themselves, they are more vulnerable because they are permanently subject to the aggression of men who are organised to abduct them. Guarding and keeping them in their original group becomes a major preoccupation which requires the organised participation of everyone in the group - particularly of those who are not threatened by the dangers of abduction: the men. Men thus are led to protect and then to dominate women. Thus, both in relation to the men in their own group who protect them and to the men of other groups who abduct them to protect them in their turn, women are forced into dependent relations which leads on to their time-honoured submission. In societies in which matrimonial exchange is linked to war and abduction, women, made inferior by

their social vulnerability, are put to work under male protection. In return gynecolocality gives women the advantage of living permanently in the same group and thus of being *its most stable component, through whom all goods (and eventually all inheritance) are necessarily transmitted*, including, eventually, cultivated land.²

When the domestic community succeeds in governing reproduction peacefully through the orderly circulation of pubescent women, the latter are not to the same extent 'protected'. But their past history of alienation predisposes them to a submission which remains necessary if they are to accept the alliances and the exile imposed on them by marriage and above all if they are to give up their rights over their progeny. Because a married woman lives with her affines, *her descent relations are always subordinate to her conjugal relations*. It is traitorous to wish otherwise, and wives are always suspected of betrayal. However, the position of women does not necessarily deteriorate in every respect for, since her material production is less determinant than their capacity to reproduce (which is repressed and revered at the same time), women retain an area of autonomy associated with their role as mothers.³

The notion of 'women' in domestic societies thus includes a number of definite functions that vary with age. The social role of women begins at puberty with their potential reproductive capacities. Institutionally, however, this quality is denied to them, for men alone are able to reproduce social ties: filiation only operates through men. Pubescent women are therefore controlled and subordinated, and directed into alliances which are defined by their community's obligations, so that procreation takes place in the context of male relations of descent.⁴

Once married, and therefore potentially fecund, a woman's situation is subordinated to the rules which govern the placing of her children. In contrast, after the menopause, and even more so as a grandmother, she is freed from these constraints and socially she comes into her own, gaining an authority that was denied her as a wife and mother. When old and widowed, and no longer able to procreate, her position becomes closer to that of men, for whom she may sometimes eventually substitute if there is no 'brother' or 'father' in the lineage, and if, through her, it is necessary to establish a patrilineal line of descent which would otherwise, without her mediation be definitely broken. It is when women lose their physiological capacity of reproduction⁵ that they are bound to gain a social capacity of reproduction.

Women's subordination makes them susceptible to two different kinds of exploitation – the exploitation of their labour, in that they lose their claim to their produce, which is handed over to their husbands who take control of it or pass it on to the elder, and is never returned to them in its entirety; and the exploitation of her reproductive capacities, mostly since filiation (that is rights over the progeny) is always established through men. Direct exploitation of women in the domestic community is often alleviated by the fact that they are given allotments or gardens, all or part of whose produce is theirs. The degree of a woman's exploitation, however, cannot be measured only by the amount of time she works, without recompense, for the community. It is also to be measured by the labour-energy she receives back from her children, in other words, by the amount of time given by her children to supply her needs. It happens in domestic societies that women benefit from some of the agricultural labour of their unmarried sons and that their influence depends on the number and position of their children. However, being deprived of actual rights over their progeny, the relations women maintain with their children do not involve obligation, as do those between children and their fathers. If the children desert them, women have no redress; *if childless they cannot, as men can, adopt a descendant*; should they be infertile, in old age they are seen as witches; after death their funerals are often almost unnoticeable, for women do not die, they disappear, without ever reaching – except in rare cases – the status of ancestor.

The subordination of women's reproductive capacities to men, the fact that they are *dispossessed of their children* to the benefit of men, their inability to create descent relations, go along with *women's inability to acquire a status based on the relations of production*. In fact, despite the dominant place which they occupy in agriculture as well as domestic labour, women are not granted the status of producers. Subjected to conjugality which dominates their kinship relations, what they produce enters the domestic sphere through the mediation of a man.⁶ Because of this, they are excluded from the productive cycle of advances and returns which alone establishes collateral relations. A woman is not, in her husband's community, an 'ingenue', one born within the community. Filiation between women, when accepted, is strictly genetic. It is acknowledged between mothers and daughters, not between sisters. The sororate, imposed by the elder to replace an inadequate spouse by her sister, is not, by any means, symmetrical with the levirate.⁷

Françoise Héritier (1974) shows very clearly that among the Samo, even at the level of myth and ritual, collateral inheritance between women is unheard of.⁸

Marx is therefore right to believe that women probably constituted the first exploited class. All the same, it is still necessary to distinguish different categories of women in terms of the functions they fulfil according to age by which they are not in the same relations of exploitation and subordination. We have already touched upon the difference in status between pubescent and post-menopausal women. Research in this field, which would reveal the mechanisms and variations of women's exploitation, has yet to be undertaken. Engels' thesis concerning 'the historical defeat of the female sex', which he associates with the emergence among nomads of movable property, would also have to be re-examined. The advent of 'private property'⁹ certainly brings significant changes in the position of women (Goody and Buckley, 1973), as Engels discerned, but we have seen that the causes for their submission are more intimate and have more distant origins.

Finally, and this is perhaps the ultimate alienation, it is through women that the elders maintain authority over the juniors, it is also through women that the latter emancipate themselves from the elders. In addition to the dependence of the collectivity upon women to reproduce itself, men depend on their wives to feed them. In all agricultural societies wives are answerable for the cooking, i.e. for turning the agricultural produce into an edible form: agricultural produce remains *sterile* unless it can be placed in the hands of a wife.¹⁰ While the male hunter can exist on his own, for meat only requires cursory preparation, the agriculturalist is condemned to marry. Because of this dependence, which arises from the *cultural* division of labour, young men cannot fulfil themselves socially unless they have a wife. But this cultural choice is to the elders' benefit: here again women are instruments of the latter's authority: the actual dependency of the young men is on their elders, not on their wives.

(ii) Juniors

Unlike the band which only *maintains* life, the domestic community is constituted to reproduce it. The dual end of this mode of production is the survival of the members beyond the productive age and the increase in the number of producers. If this end fosters the exploitation of women, it prevents an organised mutual

exploitation of males. Male producers, within their average life expectancy, recover the product of their productive agricultural labour. In communities where production is decentralised, polygyny tends to be limited (often the headman is polygynous because he has inherited wives from his seniors, and is responsible for looking after them in their old age). Its effects in any case are alleviated by the circulation of children and of subsistence goods.

There would be exploitation between males if the redistribution of subsistence and/or of human energy was organically achieved at the expense of a defined category of them. Should this become *institutionalised*, and should it operate in favour of the emergence and reproduction of one specific *class* at the expense of another, we would be dealing with a different social system from the one we have described (even if it were to conceal its nature behind ideological representations borrowed from the domestic community).

In spite of this, the relations between seniors and juniors have been interpreted by several writers, in particular by Rey (1971, 1975) as class relations. Rightly, Rey says that the function of the elder is 'to redistribute producers between different production units' (1975, 519). But the exercise of the managerial function does not necessarily operate to the detriment of the juniors (the decisions of the elder are often discussed and shared with the oldest among them); on the contrary, the opposite is true, since this control offers the juniors access to the means of social reproduction. To support his claim that lineage elders as a whole constitute a social class, Rey relies upon the historical example of populations that had been brutally subjected to the effects of the European slave trade for which they were suppliers. Under such conditions juniors were not only producers, but ultimately commodities as well. The elders' severity towards them was exaggerated by greed. Banished for real or imagined crimes, the juniors were transformed into goods for the slave trade. Alliances were fixed between elders to allow them to sell their respective juniors to each other under the guise of pawning them or settling fines. That it became possible to alienate members of the community by selling them, radically altered the nature of the social system. In fact its end was transformed. Given this, it is possible to note indeed, through the transformation involved, the existence of inequalities between categories of people. But contrary to what Rey suggests, classes do not constitute themselves between the two categories he singles out, namely the group of *all* elders and the group of *all* juniors in the

associated communities. Age, even understood in its social sense, is only a transitional moment in the life of an individual. If the elders do constitute an exploiting class, each of the members which compose it could only reach his position having previously been a member of the inferior, exploited class – that is, after having been exploited himself. If, on the other hand, the elder has always enjoyed a status of exploiter, it is not the category of 'elders' which is concerned but a far more complex social group, either able to produce and reproduce privileged individuals living off the labour of others, whatever their age or sex, or able to recruit its members before they themselves had been exploited. In the domestic community elders are such because they themselves have invested their own labour-energy in breeding juniors intended to reproduce the same cycle of advances and returns. They maintain themselves beyond their productive age only because they give these juniors access to the means of reproduction, i.e. wives. In so doing, they also weaken the juniors' dependence on them since the former thus acquire the possibility of becoming 'fathers' in their turn, and, in time, gaining increasing authority.¹¹ But by taking advantage first of the work done by their mothers¹² and then by their wives, junior men act like the partners of their elders in relation to women. In relation to their elders, the juniors' situation is comparable to that of clients rather than to that of the exploited group. Conflicts between elders and juniors reflect an opposition which remains within the system, that the junior members strive to reproduce to their advantage as early as possible by having a wife. But such an opposition is not radical and does not aim at questioning the institution but at benefiting from it, and so always, by alienating a woman.¹³

It is certainly true that access to the status of adult, of 'father', presupposes the obedience of juniors to the restrictive rules of the social order, of which the elders are the severe and vigilant guardians – rules which subject the juniors' individuality and their powers of decision to the collectivity. Juniors do not directly possess the immediate product of their labour, they cannot accumulate on their own account, cannot freely choose their wives, and are often subject to harsh sexual abstinence. When they are in conflict with the elders, the latter's council do not generally arbitrate in their favour. Segmentation is one way of resolving the tensions implicit in this form of discipline when it becomes too acute. We also know that, under the impact of colonisation and the money economy, village youths try to escape these constraints by emigration.¹⁴ Younger brothers are disadvantaged in the pro-

cess of attaining the rank of 'family head' and some are left out and remain unmarried. If they do not have the intellectual, physical or social means of leaving their communities, these men constitute a small exploited group. However, there are never many of them, and never enough to justify saying they constitute an exploited class, in other words one which is *maintained and reproduced as such*.

The mere exercise of authority by the elders over the juniors does not in itself create a class relationship. For this to occur, it must go along with an organisation of the relation of exploitation. Now no dominant class willingly gives up the means of power to the class it dominates. Capitalists do not give the capital to the worker; the feudal lord does not give land to the serf: such are the conditions for the reproduction of the dominant class. In contrast to this, to ensure domestic reproduction, the elder must and does give wives to his dependants. This does not happen any more when class relations develop: the male slave is not the *husband* of the woman he lives with, nor the father of their offspring; aristocratic classes do not offer their daughters to bondsmen from the exploited classes. Endogamy and hypergamy in fact indicate the constitution of social classes. Class relations are created, not out of categories like 'elders' and 'juniors', but through the dominance of entire, organically constituted communities which endow *all their members*, irrespective of age or sex, with prerogatives and privileges, over *all* the members of the dominated communities (Meillassoux, 1960). In fact, classes cannot be reduced to categories of age and sex. They are organic social groups, operating in functional relations, dependent one upon the other, and each possessing their own mode of reproduction. Among the Kukuya (Bonnafé, 1975, 350) social divisions split seigneurial *lineages* from subordinate *lineages*, not elders from juniors. To see social classes (which are moreover exclusively male) as classes seems to me to derive from the same sort of confusion that is often made between castes and classes, that is between client groups and exploited classes (Meillassoux, 1973). Nor, let us add, does P. P. Rey accord women any particular position in his analysis of classes. In reality, what he analyses is a present society in which communal relations (originally matrilineal) have been profoundly altered under the impact of the slave trade and colonisation. Since the differences between the pre-slavery system and the subsequent system are not clearly presented, it is difficult to characterise the social relations which dominated either one or the other.