

The Matriarchal Politics of Buffalos

by Barbara Alice Mann

Modern western scholarship has been taken in by two breath-taking con jobs. The first con asserted, rather belligerently and until quite recently, that no such cultural form as matriarchy ever existed in human history. The second con, still gleefully afloat, insists that gift economies are but figments of the deranged French imagination. If any gift economy ever existed at all, this line continues, it was only as a transitional form, quickly yielding to capitalism.

As patriarchal capitalism descends into utter chaos around the world, it has become possible to challenge both myths without losing tenure. In fact, matriarchies are ancient and on-going cultural forms worldwide, while the gift-economy functioned in North America both before and after the European invasion. It was the *main* form until the American Revolution and still exists.

Nevertheless, any quiz of capitalism is automatically assumed to come from a Marxist base, as though the only possible economic patterns are capitalism and Marxism. Worse, it is assumed that those two forms are polar opposites, instead of reflections of one another. These built-in assumptions must be dissected and discarded, for they undermine a matriarchal understanding of the gift economy.

Marxism was quintessentially western and patriarchal in its formulations. It assumed that:

- dominion of the earth belongs to *mankind*
- natural resources exist for purposes of *human* exploitation
- history has stages, primly succeeding one another in rote order
- time properly orders perception
- women are an afterthought, compressed into this or that class
- men were born to rule, whatever the system

Marx had exactly one insight, which was that western religious mythology rationalized an economic system that unfairly distributed the goods and services necessary to life. All the rest was window-dressing. The acceptance that Marx gained owed more to his remodeling of familiar western precepts than to any delineation of a new paradigm. For instance, his theory of false consciousness—that people could be deluded into accepting and working from a detrimental fiction of themselves—merely reorganized the old Christian schema of the devil beguiling frail flesh into self-defeating error. Similarly, the Manichean dichotomy of good versus evil, vying to conquer one another, formed the bedrock of his working/ruling-class polarity. Marx's actual contribution to the human conversation was his refusing to allow the haves to continue justifying outrageous inequity using religious, historical, or moralistic dogmas.

Marxism never caught on in Native North America because we already knew the model from which Marx thought he was working: our own cultures. Marx felt that the “science” of *Ancient Society* (1877), a pseudo-ethnology by the early anthropologist, Lewis Henry Morgan, supported the contentions of Marxism. I believe that this was largely because, like Marx, Morgan used stages-of-history thinking, a linear and chronological

approach that was already hoary by the time either man was born. Proposed originally in the *Dissertation historique sur les monnoyes antiques d'Espagne* (1725) by Nicolas Mahudel, a long-forgotten Parisian physician, the idea proposed a regular succession of human stages, “*en antiques, en anciennes, & en moderns*” (“in antiquity, in olden times, and in modernity”). In 1734, Mahudel refined his historical ages into the supposed stone age, bronze age, and iron age, but this work was not published until 1740, when it came out as *Les Monumens les plus anciens de l'industrie des hommes, des Arts et reconnus dans les pierres de Foudres*.

The lasting influence, if not the name, of Mahudel can be seen today in any Western anthropology class, wherein the same “ages” are canvassed as universal truth, not as the Euro-centric measurements they are. Mahudelism completely omits developments outside of the Mediterranean basin, including, for instance, the extraordinary textile science of Native America, which creates textile cables stronger than modern steel cables, for use in bridge construction in the Andes Mountains. Similarly, it encourages western scholarly oblivion of such things as sedentary, large-scale Native American farming existing cheek-by-jowl in the same culture with extensive hunting and fishing, because western anthropology insists that these are mutually exclusive subsistence modes. Worse, agricultural Native Americans on all three continents developed highly complex governmental structures that are ignored, because, according to these same scholars, developed governments are not supposed to exist outside of western, industrialized cultures.

Western scholars may not be the only ones able to disseminate information today, but they are still in control of the pooh-pooh factor, by which alternative cultural structures are gainsaid through ridicule. The main structure in Native North America that is pooh-poohed is the matriarchal gift economy that ran all of Native North America, before the Europeans came calling, with their ruffians’ raiding culture, today gussied up as “mercantilism,” the better to impersonate a respectable forbearer of capitalism.

Nevertheless, capitalism originates in the culture of the raid. However it may settle into farming or industry, the motivation remains the ability to take more than is given. This privileges personal strength, maleness, and youth, unencumbered by interpersonal obligations or affective relationships. Seeing Native American cultures that emphasized fairness, femaleness, and age, with responsibility to others, including non-human others, as the primary obligation, immediately set the Europeans to dismantling the threat to their rationalizations of the raid. To a large degree, Europeans succeeded, not the least through killing between 95% and 100% of Native North Americans. The saving remnants of our cultures were deliberately separated from each other and their land; assaulted by forced assimilation programs; and imprisoned, literally and figuratively, in the lowest classes of settler society.

Against the onslaught, pockets of traditional knowledge and practice remained, however, and they are regaining ground today. As one capitalist environmental disaster dogs another—from turning the Gulf of Mexico into a giant oil slick, to exposing Japan to nuclear meltdown—forward thinkers start looking to other types of economies. In America, that means that they start looking to Native America, especially the Woodlands cultures. The Woodlands encompass all the land between the Atlantic coast and the Mississippi River, which sits dead center of the Turtle Island, the North American continent.

Turtle Island’s First Truth is that the Earth is Our Mother.

Her Second Truth is that, as Daughters of Mother Earth, women, alone, properly control and distribute the gifts that Our Mother gives to all her children.

The gift economy flows from these two principles.

In my tradition, that of the Bear Clan, Ohio Senecas (Iroquois), Our Beloved Mother Earth is the Lynx, the daughter of the First Woman, Aetensic, Sky Woman, the Mature Flowers. When the Lynx died, she permanently reincarnated as the body of the Our Mother, The Earth, whose soil Aetensic had created in her first days, after accidentally landing on this planet. The Lynx’s children, the twin girls of North and South, and the twin boys of East and West, continued walking on the body of their Mother, who gave them everything they needed to survive. Meantime, when Aetensic died, she was lifted into the sky, permanently reincarnating as Our Grandmother, The Moon, giving her grandchildren light, so that they would never be lost in either darkness or time. (Woodlands time is organized around the menses cycle, as articulated in the Seneca tradition of Grandmother Moon knitting days together through her phases, until her little dog seizes and pulls on the red string, so that all her knitting falls out. Then, Grandmother Moon starts her red garment, anew. She is knitting and re-knitting the menstrual cycle.)

Because one woman (Aetensic) had created Turtle Island, seeding it with corn, beans, and squash; and another woman (The Lynx) had peopled it, while creating potatoes and growing all the crops from her body, it was only right that the female descendants of Grandmother Aetensic and Mother Lynx maintain the crops, store

all goods, and organize their distribution. Just how that was to be managed was decided early on in our traditions, in a large council that created the governing structure of the complementary the clan and national bodies. Each living person was given two ways of relating to the whole, through her “blood” (Mother Earth), which is the clan, and through her breath (Brother Sky), which is the geographical space she occupies, creating our all-important spatial logic.¹ (We relate to physical reality spatially, not chronologically.)

The two halves of blood and breath are necessary, for our cultures see everything in terms of twinned binaries, so that both halves must co-exist for the benefit of one another, even as Grandmother Moon and Turtle Mother Earth aid one another, forming a complete whole. (Men enjoy a similar whole, through Brother Sun and the Great Horned Serpent, the male symbol of earth.) The basic halves of Blood and Breath are usually described to Europeans as Earth and Sky, respectively.² Women’s Earth forms the blood relationships of clan, whereas men’s Sky forms the breath relationships of space that Europeans call “nation.” Blood = $\frac{1}{2}$. Breath = $\frac{1}{2}$. Both must coexist peacefully and for each other’s benefit to form the whole ($\frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{2} = 1$) of reality.

In the instance of food, the twinned binary means that the women cultivate the crops ($\frac{1}{2}$), and the men conserve the forest, taking animal food ($\frac{1}{2}$). By the way, the hunt is not the opportunistic animal murder of European hunts. It is conservation husbandry that identifies and culls specific animals, to keep the environmental balance of the forest. Deer may seem cuddly to Westerners, but they are not too adorable when their overpopulation compels them to overrun and eat up the women’s crops, leaving the children to starve. To this day, traditional Native men in Ohio winter-hunt deer to help see their kin through the cold months.

Because creation is a woman-gift, women do all the farming, which is viewed as giving birth to crops by pulling them out of the ground, even as they give birth to children by pulling them out of themselves. Women also store and distribute all the goods necessary to life, including not just women’s crops, housing, and clothing, but also the fruits of male hunting, fishing, and manufacturing of such items as wooden carved spoons and any weapons. All are in the keeping of the Grandmothers, who, in conference with the younger Clan Mothers, decide which clans need how much of what, when. Traditionally, we conference in the spring, at the first sight of the Seven Sisters (the Pleiades) to decide on planting, and at the Burning Bush in fall, when the leaves change color, to decide on winter storage. Whatever is required is distributed, with no arguments. Today, when the men hand over the deer carcasses, the women may store the meat in large freezers instead of burying it in a snow mound or in a bark-lined pit, but the women properly control its storage and distribution.

To ensure that everyone always has the best crack at every *thing*, regular give-aways are held, during feasts, festivals, governmental meetings, and any other gathering. During a give-away, each lineage is responsible for putting out the *best* of its goods. Then, during the gathering, anyone may go to the give-away table to select whatever s/he wants or needs. It is also customary among traditionals that, should anyone admire anything that another is currently using—say, a necklace, a blanket, a knife—the current possessor immediately hand it over to the admirer.

A Blackfoot colleague of mine, who had not been home for a while, recently attended a traditional wedding. In professor mode, instead of Blackfoot mode, she unthinkingly admired the groom’s magnificent turquoise ring. He immediately took it off his finger and handed it to her. She felt bad for having crossed her etiquette wires like this but did not offer to give it back. That would have insulted him. When my daughter was diagnosed with a bad form of Multiple Sclerosis a couple of years ago, I asked her what I could do, and she replied, “Get me a kick-ass cane.” When a Grandmother offered me any of her own canes, stored in a corner, she saw my eye light on a remarkable cane, with a carved turtle handle. She immediately gave it to me, and I made it over to my daughter, although it was hand-carved and a considerable work of art. We take give-aways seriously.

It is also customary to hold a give-away at every council or festival. Long ago, this meant that able-bodied young women and men carried gifts on their shoulders over long distances. If the gathering is traditional, today, that means loading up the car. Last spring, my daughter and I stuffed my car full of nice items to ride them to a conference a three hours’ drive away. The give-away table became so full, that the hosts had to put up two more.

Even when individual Native scholars go to academic conferences, they typically bring gifts for, and also receive gifts from, any fellow Native host. Usually, we do this privately, for westerners do not understand what is going on, but this last November 8, 2010, when George Tinker, Eagle Clan, Osage, came to speak at the University of Toledo, I gave him a nice deer pouch containing good sweet grass, and he gifted me with a beautiful Osage shawl.³ We exchanged our gifts even as I introduced Dr. Tinker to the audience. Although we explained what was going on, many in the audience still looked puzzled. This is not how Euro-Americans expect introductions to be conducted!

Authority rests in the hands of Grandmothers, but they can delegate the responsibility for the physical safety of The Innocents (all the women, children, elders, and the physically or mentally challenged) to the Young Men. Contrary to western perceptions, this does not mean “warfare.” It means that, if a rampaging river must be crossed, the Young Men must risk their own lives to transport all across it, safely. It means that, if a tornado is spotted by a Guardian, then the Young Men must pick up everyone, from toddlers to elders, and race with them to the nearest shelter, going back out into danger as often as it takes to rescue everyone. Today, it is still commonplace for Young Men to stand patiently outside of women’s councils, to ensure the Grand/Mothers’ safety while they deliberate. As a Grandmother, I have arranged for such Guardians, myself.

The Grandfathers oversee the Young Men in planning out their duties, for instance, in old time, setting the rotation of Guardians in tree-top perches as lookouts for weather or settlers, but the Grandfathers have no authority to direct anything that the Grandmothers have not given them to do. Traditionally, the Grandfathers might not even officially discuss an issue that the Grandmothers had not yet sent for their consideration, although the U.S. government disrupted that as an evil system. We are trying to resurrect it. Even still, should either the Clan Mothers or the Grandmothers dislike the outcome of the Grandfathers’ deliberations, they can overturn their decisions. We can also remove anyone from office any who is not conducting him- or herself properly. I have, accordingly, both appointed and discountenanced officials.

The Grandfathers had no ability to declare war; only the Grandmothers could do that. In modern times, I know of no wars declared since the Oka, Québec, face-off over the summer of 1990 at Kanesatake. The settlers were trying to site a private golf course and upscale housing on *Mohawk* land, clear-cutting a pine woods to do it. The Grandmothers authorized the Young Men barricading the land to defend themselves against the *Sûreté du Québec* (provincial police), should the *Sûreté* open fire on them.

Even in such declarations, the Grandmothers are bound by strict laws requiring three sincere attempts—once for each ear, and once for the heart—to talk problems through diplomatically before they empower the Young Men to “do as they please.” Giving Young Men the black wampum does (and access to the weapon the Grandmothers hold) does not mean that the Young Men are automatically expected to engage in violence, by the way, for the Young Men are also first obliged to emplace peaceful solutions, if they can. The modern-day rule, adopted by labor unions, that all workers be given three warnings before management can fire them echoes the three-warning rule of the Woodlands.

Part of being a Grandmother is nominating all public officials, both male and female, to office. Preliminary to this obligation was ensuring that talented people, female and male, had been carefully trained up to take on positions of responsibility in adulthood. I was mentored by elders for years and found ready before I ascended to any position. Even then, I am responsible to the people. In Native North America, leaders do not sit at a distant remove from the people like European-style kings. Instead, they must daily walk among all the people, to see the results of their decisions. Should they have caused pain, they must witness it. Indeed, they must explain themselves to those feeling the pain. Leaders will be called on any missteps. Because of the very personal touch required by our leadership style, Woodlanders do not like large organizations. In early times, we deliberately kept our towns to a couple thousand people, because 2,000 is the outside limit of people any one person can know with any intimacy.

Obviously, the spectacle of gift-giving, female leaders was (and still is) horrifying to most Westerners, so much so that settler histories decided to ignore them until they went away. The Grandmothers did not go away, however. Although the compulsory patriarchal capitalism of the U.S. makes it hard to maintain a matriarchal gift economy, more and more Native North Americans are attempting to do so. There are, of course, certain concessions that must be still made—money must be used, taxes must be paid—but among ourselves, the communal gift remains paramount.

One sterling example in southeastern Ohio is the Crandell Ranch, started as a horse farm in 1962 by Barbara Crandell, born 15 May 1929 into the Bird Clan of the Cherokees. The original house and barn dated to 1848, and lacked almost everything but a roof. She improved the buildings and added land as she could afford to, the Crandell Ranch growing with her children. Now the Head Mother of the Ohio Cherokees, Barbara Crandell became a well-respected horse breeder and trainer in a day when no women rode professionally, let alone trained and bred horses. She managed all the finances of the farm, legally keeping all the proceeds in her own name, while seeing to it that her family’s needs were met. She forbade any fertilizers or insecticides to be used on any Crandell land. The result today is the very lush “Cherokee Valley” that is seeing the return of animals supposedly long gone, including a panther, which can be heard bawling at night.¹ In her eighties, Grandmother Crandell deeded over her land to her successors, without hesitation. They all live in the valley.

One of her daughters, Doris Crandell, took over the horse farm, while Carie Starr, a granddaughter through another Crandell daughter decided to bring the buffalo back to Ohio.² The American bison called

buffalos used to run as far east as the Atlantic coast, but they were, everywhere and deliberately, hunted to extinction by the settlers. In Ohio, the last buffalo was killed by a settler in 1814. Not only does bringing the buffalo back fulfill a lot of Native North American prophecies, but it also allows the Crandell Bird Clan lineage to continue living on clan land. Carie Starr has expanded her pastures and can just barely keep up with local demand for free-range, naturally bred, chemical-free buffalo meat.

At least for now, certain concessions must be made to the larger capitalist culture, but to the extent possible, modern traditional women of the Woodlands are keeping the gift economy alive.

¹ West of the Mississippi River, “blood” and “breath” are usually termed “water” and “air,” respectively.

² Sky means outer space.

³ Deer items and sweat-lodge herbs are standard Breath gifts to men, whereas cloth and sewing items are standard Blood gifts to women.

⁴ A panther call sounds like an infant crying.

⁵ http://www.cherokeevalleybisonranch.com/photo_gallery