

Reviewers' comments on

Chris Knight, 1991. *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the origins of culture*.
London & New Haven: Yale University Press.

“A most important, novel, well-argued and monumental piece of work.”

J. D. Lewis-Williams, Rock Art Research Unit, University of the Witwatersrand

“This book may be the most important ever written on the evolution of human social organization. It brings together observation and theory from social anthropology, primatology, and paleoanthropology in a manner never before equalled. The author, Chris Knight, who teaches social anthropology at the University of East London, is up to date on all these fields and has achieved an extraordinary synthesis. His critiques of Claude Lévi-Strauss on totemism and myth are a sheer tour de force.”

Alex Walter, Department of Anthropology, Rutgers University

“Blood Relations is an extraordinary work, in which imaginary creatures and magical events are orchestrated on a global scale, from Australia to Amazonia, into a single vision of how humans created humanity.... Though Knight does tend to resemble a shaman with a spread-sheet, he is not concocting some syncretic religious brew of Darwinism and tribal initiation rites. He is every bit as materialist as Dennett or Dawkins – ultra-Darwinian, in Stephen Jay Gould’s terms – but unlike them, he has an intuitive understanding of the sacred. The trick here is to retain one’s sense of magic after one stops believing in it. Blood Relations appreciated the importance of sacred ritual, and of sociobiology, the better for being able to stand outside them. Writing under the influence of *Primate Visions*, Donna Haraway’s feminist interpretation of primatology, Knight felt able to refer to his own narrative as myth, and free to bring his own props to the sociobiology show. ‘If you could have calculating, maximising capitalists operating in human origins narratives, why could you not also have militant trade unionists?’ he asked. ‘If you could have profits and dividends, why not also industrial action, pay bargaining and strikes?’ Culture, he proposed, was the settlement that followed the world’s first strike.”

Marek Kohn, Science correspondent, Independent on Sunday

“The Most Brilliant Anthropological Study Ever Written. The many words used to describe Chris Knight’s ‘Blood Relations’ include, monumental, encyclopedic, brilliant, original, ingenious, and a tour-de-force. It is all of these and more! This work is simply the most brilliant and imaginative book about human cultural development ever written. Its range is astonishing. Its arguments are cogently made with great detail. Its synthesis of primatology, sociobiology, and anthropology are compelling. Where others have depicted women as the victims of a dominant male hierarchy, Knight reveals how the sex roles and behavior of both men and women developed together in a dialectic relationship. Where others have stressed the loss of oestrus and continuous sexual receptivity in the female, Knight spotlights menstruation and its associated marital and other cultural taboos. Where others stress man the hunter and woman the gatherer, Knight envisions paleo-women as evolving an increasing solidarity to shape the structure of both hunting and

gathering. Women are not the passive creatures that are so often depicted by the radical feminists who have an interest in portraying women as the victims of dominant males. Females have been active participants in shaping culture, behavior, and human destiny...Somewhere between 40,000 and 100,000 years ago, Knight believes, a massive social, sexual, and cultural explosion occurred and he does an ingenious job of providing us with insight into how this may have happened. A major change in reproductive strategy had to take place before males could take off as hunters and leave their women behind. Women synchronized their ovulatory cycles with one another; the concept of the “sex-strike” is the heart of the book. Blood as a symbol of menstruation provides a key to much of human culture and Knight uses it to explain the inner logic of many of mankind’s myths and taboos. Because the disruptive effects of sex can be enormous, these controls have played an important role in the development of human culture. The riches of this deeply learned book cannot simply be conveyed in a brief review. It is a work to be read over and over and contemplated. The many insights into human culture and the relationships among the sexes will surely provide any open minded person with a new perspective as to why we are the way we are”.

Amazon.com reviewer Dec 25 2000 (Cincinnati, Ohio U.S.A.)

“Chris Knight’s model is one of the rare successful attempts to solve the many apparent contradictions between anthropological universals and what we expect from evolution through natural selection. His great achievement is to put logic in what, otherwise, looks like a vast mess of anecdotal anthropological facts.”

Jean-Louis Dessalles, Télécom ParisTech

“This book was a revelation to me. Having struggled through numerous turgid anthropological works by the likes of Lévi-Strauss, Róheim etc., it was thrilling to read such an ambitious clear-sighted and compelling account of the origins of human culture, together with an excellent critique of much current anthropological thinking.a wonderfully stimulating book”.

Mick Hartley, Amazon.com

“A man writing about menstruation as empowering not polluting; a Marxist analysis in which sex solidarity and class analysis assume equal explanatory power; a fully social and revolutionary account of our human cultural origins that privileges women; an explicitly political narrative of science in the first person; an interweaving of anthropology, biology, history of ideas, and philosophy; an attempt not just to interpret the world but to change the world: *Blood Relations* is all this and more”.

Diane Bell, American Ethnologist

“Ignoring this book is a mistake. It is a very readable, witty, lively treasure-trove of anthropological wisdom and insight....Chris Knight has taken on the task of explicating not only the whys and hows of human cultural evolution, but also vast constellations of cultural behaviour covering Australia, Africa, Europe and all of the Americas. In this endeavour he is extraordinarily cross-disciplinary in his approach, utilizing insights from cultural anthropology, sociology, sociobiology and palaeo- and ethno-archaeology. In short, Knight is a complete anthropologist, one who realizes the value of exploring all corners of his field to synthesize disparate work into a cohesive whole. His deep commitment to such synthesis should give pause to those of us who refuse to look outside our own areas of expertise for support or contradiction of our theories. His Marxist perspective, while of questionable practical value, is metaphorically rich. And his scholarship is impeccable. While many of us rarely bother to read ‘the greats’ of our field any more, Knight delves deep into

Durkheim, Frazer and Lévi-Strauss and many others, coming up with long-forgotten insights and providing his readers with an enormously useful review of a century of evolutionary theory and ethnographic data... In fact, as a feminist, I would very much like it if Knight's story turned out to be true, since it gives so much credit to women's collective solidarity, strike power and biological and intellectual creativity.... Best of all, it's a story that's 'good to think with'. It made me review in my mind everything I ever learned about evolution and rethink it in a new way."

R. E. Davis-Floyd, Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute

"Revolutions in science seldom appear ready made.... But I suspect that the basis of a new synthesis between anthropology and biology may well lie within the pages of this book."

Robin Dunbar, Times Higher Educational Supplement

"Imagine a time when women lived together, worked together, sang and danced together, and our lives, work rhythms, songs and dance rhythms were all governed by the cycles of the moon. Imagine a time when all our skins were dark, Europeans having newly arrived from Africa. Imagine a time when women had the power and solidarity to make men leave their warm hearth-sides, go out into the howling wastes of Ice Age Europe to hunt giant and ferocious mammoths and then transport their kills proudly back to the women's camp. This is not a feminist matriarchalist dream. This happened somewhere between 60,000 and 40,000 years ago, according to the latest scientific account of human cultural origins given by male Marxist anthropologist Chris Knight in *Blood Relations*. The 'Human Revolution', as archaeologists call it, sparked an explosion of symbolic culture that was carried from Africa into Europe, Asia and all the way to Australia 40,000 years ago, and later all over the planet."

Camilla Power, Everywoman

"No, this is not another Man the Hunter origins myth, with man simultaneously inventing technology, culture and the nuclear family, and teaching it all to his dumb wife sitting at home with baby, waiting for the bacon. On the contrary. First it is not about Man or even Woman: it is about women organising in solidarity with one another. Yes, it is about culture: how women's solidarity was at the core of it. And yes, it is also about the family: how women's solidarity exploded the 'natural family' of most primate societies, in which the females are the sexual possessions of the male or males. Knight argues that the first human societies were communist. For him, as for Friedrich Engels, this means something historically specific (and nothing whatsoever to do with the monstrosity of Stalinism). Communism meant a society in which women – as never before or since – were free. Women collectively said No to rape, and men obeyed. Responsibility for children belonged to the whole community. Women's rule – matriarchy – in this sense meant freedom for everyone. Language, co-operation and science replaced physical coercion, animal individualism, and the rule of genes."

Liz Dalton, Sulfur Magazine

"Read this book and be changed. It is another of the great books of our time whose far-reaching influence in modern culture has not even begun to be felt. BLOOD RELATIONS is beautiful."

Earl Hazell, Amazon.com

"Chris Knight has produced a book of absorbing interest. The author likens himself to the palaeoanthropological storytellers and it is a fascinating tale that he has to tell. His setting is some 40,000-45,000 years ago... Recommended for health sociologists and students, especially those

interested in the gender order of society and in the social significance of biological processes. The book is a narrative, best read through from cover to cover, and this is an agreeable and thought-provoking task.”

Agnes Miles, Sociology of Health and Illness

“One of Knight’s chapters is headed ‘The Revolution’..., but his whole book might well have had this in the title for his thesis has revolutionary implications for modern scholarship as well as hypothesising a revolution in the remote past.”

Emily Lyle, School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh

“A refreshing alternative to the plethora of prosaic and sexist variations on the ‘Man-the-Hunter’ theory of the origins of human culture.”

Cris Shore, Dept. of Social Anthropology, Goldsmiths’ College London

“Blood Relations is magnificent. Comprehensive in design, powerfully informed in execution – this book clarifies not only the problems of the past, but posits the need for a new cultural leap if we are to survive the present.”

M.R.A.Chance, Department of Anthropology, University College London

“Chris Knight in Blood Relations has this ‘extraordinary resolve’. His is an immense work of documentation and close argument. For all its obvious risks, the model offers no hypothesis which is not rigorously testable. Not only this, but it appears to solve most of the outstanding conundrums in contemporary anthropology.”

Peter Redgrove, Times Literary Supplement

“Blood Relations points us all in a refreshingly new direction.”

Clive Gamble, Department of Archaeology, University of Southampton

“Encyclopaedic in scope, this is a seminal work that will certainly stand as a classic example of the application of the Marxist anthropological model to an examination of the origin of human culture...”

Choice, American Library Association

“Chris Knight has a political agenda, and he is not going to hide it from us. He is a good Marxist (‘old fashioned’ as some readers are bound to conclude), believing in class struggle, trade-union activism, workers’ solidarity, and most of all in Engels’s version of primitive communism and the early matriarchate....This theory is designed to cock a snook at every premise which sleeps undisturbed in our current assumptions....The result is an exhilaratingly original edifice of astonishing range.”

Caroline Humphrey, London Review of Books

“Blood Relations is an incredible work of scholarship, and in particular of Marxist scholarship – a vindication of scientific socialist theory at a time when Marxism is supposed to be dead. Here we have the actual proof that Marxist theory works. Not by ignoring facts that don’t fit – but by putting the facts first. The facts are sacred. The theory must fit the facts. We’re so used to having

paraded before us Marxism and Marxism-Leninism as it was prostituted by the Soviet Union – where if the facts didn't fit they were ignored – that we've forgotten what Marxism really means. Chris' book is based on the facts. These facts were well-known within a variety of scientific disciplines – sociology, anthropology, archaeology. You look at these facts, and a lot of them seem completely inexplicable. They appear bizarre. Why do women co-ordinate their menstrual cycles? Why do so many religions have taboos on menstruation? Why do they have taboos on eating bloody meat? And this is not just in one or two societies, but all round the world, in societies which appear to have very little else in common. Now, men were not very interested in these facts. They just seemed to be bizarre things that primitive societies did. Their importance is that they're the key to understanding how we became human.... Chris' theory may not be 100 per cent correct. But so far, it explains all the known facts. None of the other theories did. And I don't think it's too strong to say that in time to come it will be seen as significant perhaps in the way Darwin was seen as significant, in really changing the way we look at what it is to be human."

Dorothy Macedo, Vice-Chair, Campaign for Labour Party Democracy

"A quite remarkable contribution to our subject."

Marilyn Strathern, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Manchester

"From the evidence of burials and symbolic objects, rituals and religious beliefs probably go back more than 100,000 years, but could they actually have been central to the origins of modern humans? A British anthropologist, Chris Knight, certainly thinks so, and in a wide-ranging synthesis of data from present-day anthropology, primatology and sociobiology, together with archaeology, he and his collaborators have argued that women collectively produced a social revolution in Africa over 100,000 years ago. The symbolic use of red ochre began as part of a female response to accumulating social and reproductive stresses caused by the increasing demands of pregnancy, infant and child care, and the need for male provisioning. The blood-red pigment was deployed by menstruating *and* non-menstruating women, speared on their bodies to spread the taboo on menstruation across alliances of female kin. This instituted a "sex-strike", which could only be broken when the men returned from collaborative hunts with food to share. Female rituals evolved around the sex-strike, male rituals around the hunt (begun under a dark moon, returning at full moon, thus linking menstrual and lunar cycles and the blood of women and of animals), and tribal rituals of celebration and feasting would follow the return of the successful hunters."

Chris Stringer, London Natural History Museum

"From apparently modest beginnings, this is the most ambitious project on the origins of culture to have emerged for decades. The effort to establish a collectivist point of departure for the theory of human communication has had to struggle against the individualist assumptions that dominate cognitive science, but this very struggle makes the book original and important".

Mary Douglas, C.B.E., F.B.A.

"I suspect that it will be a slow burning classic, revived from time to time, but then discarded because it repudiates bourgeois metaphysics."

Keith Hart, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge

"As women all over the world fight for control over their own sexuality and fertility, Chris Knight in *Blood Relations* has performed a service. We can now prove that we're demanding nothing new. We once had collective control over our own bodies; our fight now is to regain it."

Leonora Lloyd, Secretary, National Abortion Campaign

“Chris Knight is reconstructing a human revolution that occurred many thousands of years ago. Whether his argument is true or not I am not qualified to judge. But what I want to convey here is the excitement – and the quite extraordinary sense of homecoming and comradeship – which this magnificent book has caused me. But also relief, such relief: as if I am at last in the presence of an understanding which allows something hard and knotted and perverse and intrinsically unshareable, to unfold, stretch, breathe. The release of tension as I read page after page of the detailed, passionate and ironic argument was extraordinary, and something for which I still feel great waves of gratitude.”

David Holt, Lecture to The Guild of Pastoral Psychologists

“This book is a revolutionary textbook for socialists and feminists. It turns upside down the reactionary developments in biology and evolutionary theory that dominated the 1980s.... Communism – the ideas of revolutionary change, of solidarity, of feminism and of a society organised for the benefit of everyone – is not only still the spectre that haunts Europe, but it is the very thing that created us as human beings...”

Keith Veness, Labour Briefing

“How did human language and culture first emerge? The answer has now been found. It points us back to the very place where we all learned our craft. Human solidarity and culture began on the picket line.”

Jim Perry, Secretary, Cannock Chase & Littleton National Union of Mineworkers

“Blood relations is a bold, panoramic and, in my opinion, easily the most persuasive account of the human revolution. Like any great work there are gaps and unfinished lines of thought – doubtless they will stimulate scholars in the years to come. However, Knight has made the decisive breakthrough which anyone who wants to be taken seriously must develop ... or decisively disprove.

Jack Conrad, Weekly Worker

“What we find most remarkable in Knight’s work is precisely this effort to bring together genetic, archaeological, paleontological and anthropological data in a ‘theory of everything’ for human evolution, analogous to the efforts of the theoretical physicists who have given us super-string or quantum loop gravity theory.

Jens’, International Review

“Knight offers us a model of the birth of culture which, born in practices and needs which are firmly rooted in our biological nature, nevertheless takes form in the real will of our ancestors to impose a collective and liberatory solution to a common problem.”

Timothy Mason, University of Paris