

1577 (inedit)
n° 1-20

THE REPARTITION OF TASKS BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

WHAT WE MAY LEARN ABOUT IT BY STUDYING SOWING TECHNIQUES

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It is difficult, when studying historical and cultural technology, not to stumble upon the problem of the repartition of tasks between sexes. But it is still more difficult to tackle it. As often happens in anthropology, generalizations are both premature and necessary, as guidelines in searching for facts. Furthermore, generalizations do exist already, more or less explicitly stated, and we have either to accept or to reject them.

Sowing may be a case in point, since it appears, in many tropical agricultures, as being specifically a women's job. This "fact" supported two broad generalizations. The first was, that women do the sowing because of the ideas of fertility linked with them. The second generalization was derived from the first: it is Eduard Hahn's and others' theory ascribing the "invention" of agriculture to women. These theories have faded away. But they have not been replaced.

Their defect, I feel, was that they ignored technical matters. Sowing can be done in the following ways: dibbling (french semis en poquets, german Horst- or Büschelsaat), line sowing (semis en lignes, Reihensaat), and broadcast sowing (semis à la volée, Breitsaat). In addition, there are techniques of local importance, such as the use of seedbeds for paddy in the Far East. In western France, one such technique is the semis au jet, to which I will return presently. Of course, sowing may be done with seed-drills. Drills are a modern occurrence in Europe. But they are much more ancient in southern India and in northern China, and a drill-ard (an ard fitted with a funnel for dropping in the seeds) is known in the whole Near East from Palestina and Eritrea to northwestern India.

As far as I know, drill and broadcast sowing are always done by men. I would be glad to learn of any example to the contrary, except on french coins or when, in time of war or for other reasons, all the men are away. Anthropologists seem never to have taken the trouble to "explain" this fact, much less by calling forth symbolic reasons. Indeed, the explanation

may be simple enough. Drill sowing requires the command of a machine and team of animals, which until now nobody conceived women capable of. Broadcast sowing is a hard work, requiring too much strength and skills to be left over to women.

Conversely, dropping the seeds in dibbling or line-sowing is frequently a task for women or children. In western France (Anjou, Brittany, etc.), there is a rather complicated technique of preparing the field, the labour en sillons. It is akin to ridge and furrow ploughing. But the sillon is not only a ridge. It is at the same time the spatial unit of sowing (medieval english selion). This means that the sillons are sown one by one, the sowing itself being combined with the last bouts of ploughing which are intended to bury (plough in) the seeds; harrowing is not used in that connexion. As the sillons are rather narrow, their ordinary width being about 80 cm, broadcast sowing is clearly excluded. I do not know the real (local) name of this technique of sowing: one author calls it semis par petits jets, which we could translate by "smallcast sowing".

The point is, that in western France where this technique is, or rather was, used, we find again women doing the sowing. I do not believe that it is just a coincidence.

Going back to tropical countries, we have now perhaps an alternative explanation. If women often do the sowing, could it not be simply because the dominant mode of sowing - dropping the seeds - is exactly the kind of unskilled work which is left over to women just about everywhere?

If so, we could quietly ignore symbolism as an explanation. But this amounts to a new generalization, that there is no such thing as a female job - there are only menial jobs, most of them left over to women.

Of course, this statement leads us into new difficulties. Why should menial jobs be left over to women, in the first place? Besides, exactly what is a menial job, and what is not?

I have not got the answers. All that I am able to add is, that trying to find them is probably more fruitful than musing over symbolic relationships. Regarding the first question, for instance, it could be said that menial jobs are left to women inasmuch as there is nobody below them in society. But this is not always true. Slaves are below women in rank, so we are bound to expect that in societies where slavery is important, tasks otherwise deemed female will be done by slaves. Grinding grain with a hand-quern belongs typically to this kind of work that is either

female or slave work, but never free men's work, as far as I know. Carrying loads presents a similar case, though less clear-cut. Men happen to carry loads, sometimes. But in tropical countries, the preponderance of women in carrying the daily requirements of water, firewood, food, etc., is at least as great as in sowing or planting. (One wonders, by the way, why it is that nobody ever thought of "explaining" the feminine character of grain-grinding or load-carrying with symbolic relationships. Similarly, ideas of impurity linked with menstruation have been used to explain why women are kept out of certain activities. But more often perhaps, women are just kept out and nobody thinks it needs explaining.)

Answering the second question, i.e. telling a menial job, seems to be a rather hopeless attempt. I am not even sure that this question is a right one to ask. I can see but one starting point. It is, that technical innovations often change drastically the respective rôles of men and women in the process of production. Milling grain (in donkey-, water- or windmills) is everywhere as emphatically a men's job as grinding it by hand is a women's. Broadly, the same is true of load-carrying, as soon as burden animals and vehicles set in. In central and western Europe, the replacement of the sickle by the scythe produced a no less clear-cut inversion of the rôles of men and women in harvesting.

But what about pottery-making, basket-making, weaving, spinning, knitting, sewing, etc.? There are numerous cases where new implements or machines do not change anything. There is even a piece of contradictory evidence, concerning office work: when documents had to be copied by hand, copying-clerks were men (expéditionnaires), whereas since the introduction of the type-writer, typists are women...

Clearly, we have still much more to learn about who makes what in work processes, before being able to discuss such questions in earnest. We are lacking facts much more than theories. This will be my last generalization.

Paris, novembre 1977