

THE Gender Knot

UNRAVELING OUR PATRIARCHAL LEGACY

Allan G. Johnson

author of
*Power, Privilege,
and Difference*

Revised and Updated Edition

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Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy

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FOR NORA L. JAMIESON

*Life partner, dearest friend, comrade and soul companion
in the journey toward understanding
how to live a life that
makes a difference*

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Preface and Acknowledgments

The *Gender Knot* flows from many parts of my life. It is based on more than thirty years of work around issues of gender inequality, from reading and teaching and research to giving speeches at rallies to testifying before legislative committees to writing op-ed pieces to working in corporations and schools with men and women trying to understand what living in a patriarchal world is about.

It has been shaped by my experience growing up and living as a male in the United States. As a boy who liked literature more than football, for example, I often felt on the outside of the young-boy macho in-crowd, a vantage point that ultimately enabled me, I think, to see many things about gender more clearly and notice many other things that I would otherwise have missed. I've also had to come to terms with my mother and father and how their lives and our relationships were shaped by the choices they made within patriarchy as it shaped their generation. I've had to navigate the aggressive ritual of status competition among boys and men. I've had to move from avoiding men as dangerous and untrustworthy to, during five years in a weekly men's group, rediscovering what men can be beneath the distortions of patriarchal masculinity. I've had to resolve the massive contradictions between my need and love for women and the horrendous damage patriarchal culture does to gender relations and sexuality. I've had to learn to accept the social fact of male privilege and the damage it does

to women, without taking it personally as saying something bad about me simply because I'm a man.

This work has been touched in powerful ways by the people I've known who share in the struggle to understand what patriarchy means for the world and their lives. From knowing them has come an unshakable belief that oppression is not an inevitable feature of human life, that the choices each of us makes matter more than we can ever know, and that we must find ways for both men and women to become part of the solution rather than just part of the problem.

This book comes from a place in me once described by a writer friend as "an edificial turn of soul." It bends me toward the underlying structure of things and the work of making sense and finding ways to share that with others. It draws me to build bridges that connect a diversity of life experiences, ideas, and ways of seeing, to create a common ground for people who might otherwise feel driven apart.

This book also arises from a lifelong preoccupation with the moral nature of human life and its connection to fundamental questions about the world and us in it. What *is* this that we are about here? What binds us together in a common lot and what drives us to inflict such suffering on one another? Such questions make it impossible to ignore issues of social inequality, injustice, and disregard for human dignity. They also go to the heart of a moral imperative to do something, however small, for change. But to act, I've needed to find a way to think about what it means to take responsibility for things that seem so huge and beyond my ability to affect anything. This has led me to what is perhaps the most important bridge of all, the one that enables me to find ways to make a difference.

Notes on the Revised Edition

The revised edition benefits from several years of speaking on college and university campuses, an experience that has prompted three significant changes. The first is to describe in greater detail the characteristics of patriarchy, especially male identification. The second is to reposition Chapter 4 to become Chapter 2, moving the discussion of patriarchy to where it's needed most. The third expands the discussion of individuals and systems, with the addition of a graphic that I've found very useful with a wide variety of audiences.

I've also made a point of telling more about Robert Bly and Sam Keen, whose work I often use to exemplify typical "men's movement" takes on

patriarchy and gender inequality. Because many readers may be unfamiliar with them, I hope this will make the discussion more useful.

Definitions of key—and controversial—terms such as *sexism*, *privilege*, and *political correctness* are found in footnotes attached to their first use (denoted by an asterisk with the footnote appearing at the bottom of the page).

Finally, I've tried to respond to suggestions from a variety of helpful sources (see *Acknowledgments*) as well as bring the book generally up to date in its references to current figures, events, and resources. A lot has happened in the world since the first edition was published, most notably the violent events of September 11, 2001 and the virtual state of war embodied in the violent U.S. response to them. Some argue that the terrorist attack on the United States forever altered the basic outlines of social life, but as I believe the chapters to follow make clear, violence is a manifestation of patriarchal dynamics that have been around for a long, long time.

Such changes are in keeping with my most important consideration in preparing the revised edition, which has been to keep a steady focus on the book's original purpose—to illuminate the basic character of patriarchy, the relationship of individuals to it, and the kinds of thinking that get in the way of seeing both in a clear and critical way.

Acknowledgments

When I think about where this book comes from and the parts other people have played in it, the line between “me” and “them” quickly becomes a mysterious and elusive thing. It never would have occurred to me to write this book were it not for the many writers whose work on gender issues has been part of the air I've breathed for most of my adult life. I am especially grateful to Marilyn French, whose monumental book, *Beyond Power*, profoundly shaped my understanding of patriarchy.

The work and the result would have been enormously different without the people who cared enough to read what I wrote and tell me the truth of what they thought of it. As I prepared the first edition, Jeanne Bonaca read the entire manuscript and gave freely of her enthusiasm and support, her fine ear for clarity and the simple elegance of good prose, and her uncanny grasp of things structural. Nicholas Ayo, Michael Kimmel, Jeffrey McChristian, Michael Schwalbe, Sharon Toffey Shepela, and an anonymous reviewer for Temple University Press all shared thoughtful and useful comments. Many of my students at Hartford College for Women read portions of the book, especially the chapter on feminism. In addition to their feedback, they gave

the gift of pushing for things to make sense and to go beyond describing the problem to identifying what we can do about it once we know it's there.

In preparing the revised edition, I benefited from the suggestions of Susan Barger (Idaho State University), Joanne Callahan, Donna Garske (Marin Abused Women's Services), Dr. Lori Handrahan (Oxford University), Heather Howard-Bobiwash (Michigan State University), Judy Jordon (Wellesley Center for Research on Women), Margaret Lazarus (Cambridge Documentary Films), Tamah Nakamura (Kyushu University), The Path of Greater Resistance Group at North Seattle Community College, V. Spike Petersen (University of Arizona), Michael Schwalbe (North Carolina State University), and John Stoltenberg. I thank you all. I am also grateful for the resources available through the WMST-L listserv archives, its extraordinary moderator, Joan Korenman (University of Maryland–Baltimore campus), and the thousands of subscribers who have contributed to them.

I also want to express my profound debt to the generations of activists, scholars, and writers whose courage and vision and hard work have given me the basis for most of what I know about these issues. And to those authors whose work I encountered so long ago that their insights have inadvertently slipped into my store of "common knowledge," I can only offer both my appreciation and my apologies for being unable to give them proper attribution.

Writing about problems is always easier than doing something about them. I've been fortunate to know people like Bettina Borders, Kim Cromwell, Donna Garske, Annalee Johnson, Charles Levenstein, Anne Menard, and Jane Tuohy, who provide models of how to think about the world and act on what they think. They have profoundly affected my writing of this book, especially the last two chapters.

I have also benefited from the kindness of strangers whose generous response to my call for help in finding the right agent to represent this book spoke volumes about the possibilities of a feminist future. Although I'd never met any of them, when I wrote out of the blue to Barbara Ehrenreich, Susan Faludi, and Marilyn French, they surprised me by writing back with suggestions and support. Arnold Kahn's help came via the women's studies Internet discussion list, whose subscribers have reminded me daily for years with their ongoing conversation that this work is alive and well and goes on all over the world. My publishing journey led to literary agents Gail Ross and Howard Yoon, who from the start believed in this book and the importance of getting it published, and published well. Their faith and good work led in turn to Temple University Press, its director David Bartlett, and its editor-in-chief Michael Ames. Their enthusiasm and commitment to *The Gender Knot's* potential are gratifying reminders of the wisdom of patience.

For this revised edition, I thank my editor, Janet M. Francendese, for all her support; Charles Ault and David M. Wilson for expertly guiding the manuscript into print; and Ann-Marie Anderson and Gary Kramer for all they do to ensure that *The Gender Knot* reaches the broadest possible audience.

Closer to home are people who believe not simply in the writing but, more important, in the writer. Writing is solitary work, but surrounding it have been people whose loving presence and support make the solitude possible. I am especially mindful of my sister Annalee, of my father, Valdemar, my late mother, Alice, and my second mother, Geraldine; and of Annie Barrett, Jeanne Bonaca, Kristin Flyntz, and Cat Proper.

Last and most important is Nora L. Jamieson, to whom the book is dedicated. It is hard for me to grasp the significance of having lived together as life partners these past twenty-five years. As a feminist healer and wise woman, Nora lives and works in the thick of patriarchy and its consequences. In that sense we have breathed the same air of attention, swum in a common sea of ideas, and struggled with the same issues. And yet we are in such different places as woman and man under patriarchy, a fact that both divides us and, in our facing it together, joins us in common purpose. The paths of our work and lives run parallel and cross, diverge and draw near in a continuing flow that enriches beyond measure not only the work, but the experience of being alive. It has been twenty-five years of “Can I run something by you?” and “getting it” and “not getting it,” of bedside tables piled high with books, of play and passion and silent meditation, of struggling with the patriarchal legacy as it lives in each of us and, unavoidably, between us. And it has been twenty-five years of learning how a woman and man can share life and love each other in spite of patriarchy, of learning what is possible across the great gender divide we were born into, of the many meanings that “we’re in this together” can have.

And, of course, she read every word of every draft, and brought to it her uncannily accurate “crap detector” that invariably goes off whenever something doesn’t make sense or reads badly. And she’s brought to it her belief in the work and in me—I can only wonder at the depth of difference that has made to both.

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Part I

What Is This Thing
Called Patriarchy?



1

Where Are We?

Twenty-five men and women gather for a workshop on gender issues in the workplace. In a simple opening exercise, they divide into small single-gender groups and brainstorm four lists: the advantages and disadvantages their own gender has in the workplace, and their perception of the advantages and disadvantages the other gender has. The women dive into the task with energy to spare that gets more intense as their lists of women's disadvantages and men's advantages spill over onto second and third flip-chart pages. Sometimes the energy comes in waves of laughter that roll out into the room and wash up on the still quiet shore of the men's groups. At other times it's felt simply in women's furious scribbling of one item after another: paid less, held to higher or double standards, worked harder, granted little power or respect, judged on physical attractiveness more than performance or ability, confined by glass ceilings, not taken seriously, harassed, given little support or mentoring, allowed little space or privacy, excluded from informal networks, patronized, expected to do "housekeeping" chores from taking notes to getting coffee, treated as weaker and less intelligent, often denied credit for ideas appropriated by men, and treated without recognition of the family roles that also claim their time and energy in a society that makes few such demands on men.

On it goes. The men work in tight-knit little groups on the fringes of the women's energy. Surprisingly for many, their lists are quite similar to the

women's lists, if a bit shorter. Men miss many of the forms that advantage and disadvantage take, but in a basic sense, they know very well what's going on. They know what they've got and what women don't.

When the men are done, they stand in awkward silence and watch the women, still at work. After a while each group shares what it's come up with. There is some good-natured if somewhat nervous laughter over the inevitable throw-away items: men don't have to wait in line to use the bathroom; men can get away with simpler wardrobes. But there soon follows a steady stream of undisputed facts about how gender shapes the lives of women and men in the workplace and beyond.

The accumulated sum hangs heavy in the air. There are flashes of anger from some of the women, but many don't seem to know what to do with how they feel. The men just stand and listen, muted, as if they'd like to find a safe place to hide or some way to defend themselves, as if all of this is about them personally. In response to questions about how the lists make them feel, one man says that he wants to hang on to the advantages without being part of their negative consequences for women. "Depressed" is a frequent response from the women.

In the silence that falls over the room, two things become clear: The lists say something powerful about people's lives. And we don't know how to talk about the lists. If we don't know how to talk about them, we certainly don't know what to do about them.

The result is a kind of paralysis that reflects not only where this particular group—and countless others like it—finds itself as it confronts the reality of gender inequality, but where entire societies are in relation to these issues. Where we are is stuck. Where we are is lost. Where we are is deep inside an oppressive gender legacy, faced with the knowledge that what gender is about is tied to a great deal of suffering and injustice. But we don't know what to do with the knowledge, and this binds us in a knot of fear, anger, and pain, of blame, defensiveness, guilt, and denial. We're unsure of just about everything except that something is wrong and we're in it up to our necks. The more we pull at the knot, the tighter it gets.

Patriarchy

We are trapped inside a legacy and its core is patriarchal. To understand it and take part in the journey out, we have to find ways to unravel the knot, and this begins with getting clear about what it means to be inside a patriarchal legacy. To get clear, we first have to get past the defensive reaction of many people—men in particular—to the word "patriarchy" itself, which they

routinely interpret as a code word for “men.” It will take an entire chapter (Chapter 2) to do justice to this issue, but, for now, the gist of the answer is this: Patriarchy is *not* simply another way of saying “men.” Patriarchy is a kind of society, and a society is more than a collection of people. As such, “patriarchy” doesn’t refer to me or any other man or collection of men, but to a kind of society in which men *and* women participate. By itself this poses enough problems without the added burden of equating an entire society with a group of people.

What is patriarchy? A society is patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privilege* by being *male dominated*, *male identified*, and *male centered*. It is also organized around an obsession with control and involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women.

Male Dominance

Patriarchy is male dominated in that positions of authority—political, economic, legal, religious, educational, military, domestic—are generally reserved for men. Heads of state, corporate CEOs and board members, religious leaders, school principals, members of legislatures at all levels of government, senior law partners, tenured professors, generals and admirals, and even those identified as “head of household” all tend to be male under patriarchy. When a woman finds her way into such positions, people tend to be struck by the exception to the rule and wonder how she’ll measure up against a man in the same position. It’s a test rarely applied to men (“I wonder if he’ll be as good a president as a woman would be”) except, perhaps, on those rare occasions when men venture into the devalued domestic and other “caring” work typically done by women. Even then, men’s failure to measure up can be interpreted as a sign of superiority, a trained incapacity that actually protects their privileged status (“You change the diaper. I’m no good at that sort of thing”).

* I use the term *privilege* according to the definition developed by Peggy McIntosh in her classic article, “White Privilege and Male Privilege,” in *Gender Basics: Feminist Perspectives on Women and Men*, 2nd ed., edited by Anne Minas (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000). Privilege refers to any unearned advantage that is available to members of a social category while being systematically denied to others. In patriarchy, for example, what men say tends to have greater credibility than what women say, even when they’re saying the same thing. Access to privilege depends on the prevailing definition of categories such as “male” and “female” and the advantages and disadvantages socially attached to them. It also depends on related characteristics—a man’s access to male privilege, for example, will vary according to other status characteristics such as race, sexual orientation, disability status, and social class. McIntosh’s approach is important to any understanding of privilege because it refers not to individuals, but to the organization of social systems in which people live.

In the simplest sense, male dominance creates power differences between men and women. It means, for example, that men can claim larger shares of income and wealth. It means they can shape culture in ways that reflect and serve men's collective interests by, for example, controlling the content of films and television shows, or handling rape and sexual harassment cases in ways that put the victim rather than the defendant on trial.

Male dominance also promotes the idea that men are superior to women. In part this occurs because we don't distinguish between the superiority of *positions* in a hierarchy and the kinds of people who usually occupy them.¹ This means that if men occupy superior positions, it's a short leap to the idea that *men must be superior*. If presidents, generals, legislators, priests, popes, and corporate CEOs are all men (with a few token women as exceptions to prove the rule), then men as a group become identified with superiority even though most men aren't powerful in their individual lives. In this sense, *every* man's standing in relation to women is enhanced by the male monopoly over authority in patriarchal societies.

Note that male dominance does not mean that all men are powerful. Most men in patriarchies are not powerful individuals, and spend their days doing what other men tell them to do whether they want to or not. Male dominance does mean that where there is a concentration of power, men are the ones most likely to have it—they are the default.

Nor does male dominance mean that all women are powerless. Supreme Court Justices Sandra Day O'Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsberg, for example, or National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice or Hewlett-Packard Chair and CEO Carleton "Carly" Fiorina, are all far more powerful than most men will ever be. But, they stand out as exceptions because male dominance is the rule. Like all subordinate groups, women also manage to have some power by making the most of what is left to them by men. Just as patriarchy turns women into sex objects who are supposed to organize their lives around men's needs, for example, so, too, does this arrangement grant women the power to refuse to grant men sexual access.²

Male Identification

Patriarchal societies are *male identified* in that core cultural ideas about what is considered good, desirable, preferable, or normal are associated with how we think about men and masculinity. The simplest example of this is the still widespread use of male pronouns and nouns to represent people in general. When we routinely refer to human beings as "man" or to doctors as "he," we construct a symbolic world in which men are in the foreground and women are in the background, marginalized as outsiders and exceptions to

the rule.³ (This practice can back people into some embarrassingly ridiculous corners, as in describing man as a “species that breast-feeds his young.”)

But male identification amounts to much more than this, for it also takes men and men’s lives as the standard for defining what is normal. The idea of a career, for example, with its sixty-hour weeks, is defined in ways that assume the career holder has something like a wife at home to perform the vital support work of taking care of children, doing laundry, and making sure there’s a safe, clean, comfortable haven for rest and recuperation from the stress of the competitive male-dominated world. Since women generally don’t have wives, they find it harder to identify with and prosper within this male-identified model.

Another aspect of male identification is the cultural description of masculinity and the ideal man in terms that closely resemble the core values of society as a whole. These include qualities such as control, strength, competitiveness, toughness, coolness under pressure, logic, forcefulness, decisiveness, rationality, autonomy, self-sufficiency, and control over any emotion that interferes with other core values (such as invulnerability). These male-identified qualities are associated with the work valued most in patriarchal societies—business, politics, war, athletics, law, and medicine—because this work has been organized in ways that require such qualities for success. In contrast, qualities such as cooperation, mutuality, equality, sharing, compassion, caring, vulnerability, a readiness to negotiate and compromise, emotional expressiveness, and intuitive and other nonlinear ways of thinking are all devalued *and* culturally associated with femininity and femaleness.

Of course, femaleness isn’t devalued entirely. Women are often prized for their beauty as objects of male sexual desire, for example, but as such they are often possessed and controlled in ways that ultimately devalue them. There is also a powerful cultural romanticizing of women in general and mothers in particular, but it is a tightly focused sentimentality (as on Mothers Day or Secretaries Day) that has little effect on how women are regarded and treated on a day-to-day basis. And, like all sentimentality, it doesn’t have much weight when it comes to actually doing something to support women’s lives by, for example, providing effective and affordable child day-care facilities for working mothers, or family-leave policies that allow working women to attend to the caring functions for which we supposedly value them so highly, without compromising their careers.

Because patriarchy is male identified, when most women look out on the world they see themselves reflected as women in a few narrow areas of life such as “caring” occupations (e.g., teaching, nursing, child care) and personal relationships. To see herself as a leader, for example, a woman must first get around the fact that leadership itself has been gendered through its

identification with maleness and masculinity as part of patriarchal culture. While a man might have to learn to see himself as a manager, a woman has to be able to see herself as a *woman* manager who can succeed in spite of the fact that she isn't a man.

As a result, any woman who dares strive for standing in the world beyond the sphere of caring relationships must choose between two very different cultural images of who she is and who she ought to be. For her to assume real public power—as in politics, corporations, or her church—she must resolve a contradiction between her culturally based identity as a woman, on the one hand, and the male-identified *position* that she occupies on the other. For this reason, the more powerful a woman is under patriarchy, the more “unsexed” she becomes in the eyes of others as her female cultural identity recedes beneath the mantle of male-identified power and the masculine images associated with it. With men the effect is just the opposite: the more powerful they are, the more aware we are of their maleness. In other words, power looks sexy on men but not on women.

But for all the pitfalls and limitations, some women do make it to positions of power. What about Margaret Thatcher, for example, or Queen Elizabeth I, Catherine the Great, Indira Gandhi, and Golda Meir? Doesn't their power contradict the idea that patriarchy is male dominated? The answer is that patriarchy can accommodate a limited number of powerful women so long as the society retains its essential patriarchal character, especially its male identification. Although a few individual women have wielded great power in patriarchal societies, each has been surrounded by powerful men—generals, cabinet ministers, bishops, and wealthy aristocrats or businessmen—whose collective interests she must support by embracing core patriarchal values. Indeed, part of what makes these women stand out as so exceptional is their ability to embody values culturally defined as masculine: they've been tougher, more decisive, more aggressive, more calculating, and more emotionally controlled than most men around them.⁴

These women's power, however, has nothing to do with whether women in general are subordinated under patriarchy. It also doesn't mean that putting more women in positions of authority will by itself do much for women unless we also change the patriarchal character of the systems in which they operate. Indeed, without such change, the Margaret Thatchers and Condoleezza Rices of the world tend to affirm the very systems that subordinate women by fostering the illusion of gender equality and by embracing the patriarchal values on which male power and privilege rest. This does *not* mean we shouldn't try to get women into positions of power, only that making some women powerful will not be enough to bring about fundamental change.

Since patriarchy identifies power with men, the vast majority of men who aren't powerful but are instead dominated by other men can still feel some connection with the *idea* of male dominance and with men who *are* powerful. It is far easier, for example, for an unemployed working-class man to identify with male leaders and their displays of patriarchal masculine toughness than it is for women of any class. When upper-class U.S. President George Bush "got tough" with Saddam Hussein, for example, men of all classes could identify with his acting out of basic patriarchal values. In this way, male identification gives even the most lowly placed man a cultural basis for feeling some sense of superiority over the otherwise most highly placed woman (which is why a construction worker can feel within his rights as a man when he sexually harasses a well-dressed professional woman who happens to walk by).⁵

Lina Wertmuller beautifully portrays this dynamic in her film, *Swept Away*, in which a working-class man is marooned on an island with an upper-class woman. Although disadvantaged by class, he's very aware of his right to sexually dominate any woman he chooses, which he uses to accomplish a temporary overthrow of her class privilege. Under patriarchy, this scenario would have little credibility or mainstream audience appeal if we reversed the situation and had a lower-class woman subdue and dominate an upper-class man. The objection is based not on social class but on the threat to the gender order that subordinates women. She wouldn't be seen as bold or heroic; rather, *he* would be judged for his lack of masculine power and control.

When a society identifies a particular group such as men as the standard for human beings in general, it follows that men will be seen as superior, preferable, and of greater value than women. Not only will maleness be culturally defined as superior, but whatever men do will tend to be seen as having greater value. Occupations performed primarily by men, for example, will tend to be more highly regarded and better paid than occupations done primarily by women even when women's jobs require the same or even higher levels of skill, training, and responsibility. In the nineteenth century, most secretaries, telephone operators, librarians, and nurses were men and those occupations consequently commanded higher pay and status than they do now when most are performed by women.⁶

And just as what men do tends to be valued more highly than what women do, those things that are valued in a social system's culture will tend to be associated with men more than with women. God, for example, is of enormous importance in human life, and so it should come as no surprise that every monotheistic patriarchal religion worships a male-identified God gendered as masculine. As Mary Daly argues in her book, *Beyond God the*

Father, this, in turn, puts men in the highly favorable position of having God identified with *them*, which further reinforces the position of women as “other” and the legitimacy of men’s claim to privilege and dominance.⁷

Male Centeredness

In addition to being male dominated and male identified, patriarchy is *male centered*, which means that the focus of attention is primarily on men and what they do. Pick up any newspaper or go to any movie theater and you’ll find stories primarily about men and what they’ve done or haven’t done or what they have to say about either. With rare exceptions, women are portrayed as along for the ride, fussing over their support work of domestic labor and maintaining love relationships, providing something for men to fight over, or being foils that reflect or amplify men’s heroic struggle with the human condition. If there’s a crisis, what we see is what men did to create it and how men dealt with it.

If you want a story about heroism, moral courage, spiritual transformation, endurance, or any of the struggles that give human life its deepest meaning, men and masculinity are usually the terms in which you must see it. Male experience is what patriarchal culture uses to represent *human* experience, even when it is women who most often live it. Films about single men taking care of children, for example, such as *Sleepless in Seattle*, have far more audience appeal than those focusing on women, even though women are much more likely to be single parents. And stories that focus on deep bonds of friendship—which men have a much tougher time forming than women do—are far more likely to focus on men than women.⁸

In another example, the closing scenes of *Dances with Wolves* show, the white male hero and his Native American-raised wife leaving his recently adopted tribe, which is also the only family she has known since early childhood. The focus, however, is clearly on the drama of *his* moment as she looks on supportively. *She* is leaving her adoptive parents, but we see only the emotionally charged parting (with a touching exchange of gifts) between son- and father-in-law. And the last words we hear are the deeply moving cries of a newfound warrior friend testifying to the depth of feeling between these two men (of which, oddly, this is the only expression we ever see).

By contrast, films that focus on women, such as *Elizabeth*, *Girlfriends*, *Leaving Normal*, *Passion Fish*, *Strangers in Good Company*, *Beaches*, and *Thelma and Louise*, are such startling exceptions that they invariably sink quickly into obscurity, are dismissed as clones of male themes (“female buddy movies”), or are subjected to intense scrutiny as aberrations needing to be explained.

TABLE 1 Films Winning the Oscar for Best Picture, 1965–2003

2003	Lord of the Rings
2002	Chicago
2001	A Beautiful Mind
2000	Gladiator
1999	American Beauty
1998	Shakespeare in Love
1997	Titanic
1996	The English Patient
1995	Braveheart
1994	Forrest Gump
1993	Schindler's List
1992	The Unforgiven
1991	The Silence of the Lambs
1990	Dances with Wolves
1989	Driving Miss Daisy
1988	Rain Man
1987	The Last Emperor
1986	Platoon
1985	Out of Africa
1984	Amadeus
1983	Terms of Endearment
1982	Gandhi
1981	Chariots of Fire
1980	Ordinary People
1979	Kramer vs. Kramer
1978	The Deer Hunter
1977	Annie Hall
1976	Rocky
1975	One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest
1974	The Godfather, Part II
1973	The Sting
1972	The Godfather, Part I
1971	The French Connection
1970	Patton
1969	Midnight Cowboy
1968	Oliver!
1967	In the Heat of the Night
1966	A Man for All Seasons
1965	The Sound of Music

To get a full sense of what I mean, look at Table 1, which lists films awarded the Oscar for Best Picture since 1965. Of the almost forty films, only four tell a story through the life of someone who is female—*Chicago*, *Out of Africa*, *Terms of Endearment*, and *The Sound of Music*—and only the middle two focus on a serious subject, the other two being musicals.

A male center of focus is everywhere. Research makes clear, for example, what most women probably already know: that men dominate conversations by talking more, interrupting more, and controlling content.⁹ When women suggest ideas in business meetings, they often go unnoticed until a man makes the same suggestion and receives credit for it (or, as a cartoon caption put it, “Excellent idea Ms. Jones. Perhaps one of the men would like to suggest it”). In classrooms at all levels of schooling, boys and men typically command center stage and receive most of the attention.¹⁰ Even when women gather, they must often resist the ongoing assumption that no situation can be complete or even entirely real unless a man is there to take the center position. How else do we understand the experience of groups of women who go out for drinks and conversation and are approached by men who ask, “Are you alone?”

Many men, however, will protest that they don’t *feel* at the center, and this is one of the many ironic consequences of male privilege. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf writes that women often serve as “looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.”¹¹ Woolf’s insight suggests several things about what happens to men in patriarchal societies. As part of men’s training, they are affirmed through what they accomplish.¹² This contrasts with women, whose training mirrors them in different ways, affirming them less for what they accomplish than for their ability to empathize and mirror others as they form and maintain personal relationships. If men want to satisfy the human need to be seen and acknowledged by others, it will be through what they do and how well they live up to the standards of patriarchal manhood (which is one reason why male friendships tend to focus so heavily on competition and doing things together). This affects both individual men and patriarchy as a system, for men’s focus on themselves (“See me!”) and women’s focus on others reinforce patriarchy’s male-identified, male-centered aspects. These, in turn, support male dominance by making it easier for men to concentrate on enhancing and protecting their own status.

Another consequence of patriarchal mirroring is that heterosexual men in particular are encouraged to relate to women with the expectation of seeing only themselves. When men’s reflection is obscured by the reality and demands of women’s own lives, men are vulnerable to feeling left out and neglected. Like cold-blooded animals that generate little heat of their own, this dynamic makes it hard for men to feel warm unless the light is shining on them at the moment, something well-known to women who spend inordinate amounts of time worrying about whether they’re paying enough attention to their male partners, about whether they should be sitting quietly and reading

a book or spending time with women friends when they could be with the men in their lives. It is a worry few men wrestle with unless women complain.

All of this is compounded by the expectation that in order to feel normally alive, patriarchal men must be reflected as larger than life. This makes it difficult to develop an acceptable sense of self as an ordinary human being with a relatively stable center from which to relate to other people. As a result, feeling themselves the focus of a one-way flow of attention is the closest that patriarchal training allows many men to come to authentic personal relationships.

This shouldn't be confused with most of what passes for "male bonding." When men get together with other men, they typically are male centered in the general sense of focusing attention on men and what men do. On an interpersonal level, however, men generally don't put other men at the center of their attention because they are in competition with one another and because they are too busy looking for someone to put *them* at the center. As I've wrestled with the difficulty of forming friendships with other men, for example, it's been both puzzling and painful to realize how rarely it occurs to me to telephone a male friend simply to ask how he is, to place his life at the center of my attention at my own initiative. For many years I simply couldn't see the point. I was in the middle of one of many patriarchal paradoxes: that men live in a male-centered society and yet act as though the reality of other men's inner lives matters very little.

Although men generally don't provide one another with the kind of mirroring they expect from women, they do play a part in fostering the illusion of being larger than life, especially through competition. When men compete, they enter the pumped-up world of winners and losers, in which the number of times a ball goes through a hoop or is carried over a line elevates some men over other men (and, by default, over all women) in ways judged to be important in patriarchal culture. If ever there were an assertion of larger-than-life status, the triumphant shout of "We're number one! We're number one!" is it. (Not asked is, For how long? Compared to whom? So what?) Even the losers and the male spectators share in the reflected glow of the noble masculine striving after the coveted opportunity to stand before the mirror that makes us look bigger than we are, if only for a little while—until the next season begins or someone faster, stronger, younger, or smarter comes along.

All of this, of course, is impossible for men to sustain. Women have distracting lives of their own in spite of their training to keep men at the center of attention. And the fleeting moments of actually living up to the expectation of being larger than life are just that. As a result, patriarchal

expectations that place men at the center paradoxically perch men just a short drop away from feeling that they are not at the center—and, therefore, on some level, that they don't exist at all.

The Obsession with Control

The fourth characteristic of patriarchy is an obsession with control as a core value around which social life is organized. As with any system of privilege that elevates one group by oppressing another, control is an essential element of patriarchy: men maintain their privilege by controlling women and anyone else who might threaten it. Given the primacy of control, it becomes the cultural standard for a truly superior human being, which is then used to justify men's privileged position. Men are assumed (and expected) to be in control at all times, to be unemotional (except for anger and rage), to present themselves as invulnerable, autonomous, independent, strong, rational, logical, dispassionate, knowledgeable, always right, and in command of every situation, especially those involving women. These qualities, it is assumed, mark them as superior and justify their privilege. Women, in contrast, are assumed (and expected) to be just the opposite, especially in relation to men.

It would be misleading to suggest that control is inherently bad or inevitably leads to oppression. Control is, after all, one of the hallmarks of our species. It is our only hope to bring some order out of chaos or to protect ourselves from what threatens our survival. We imagine, focus, and act—from baking bread to composing music to designing a national health plan—and all of this involves control. Even small children delight in a sense of human agency, in being able to make things happen. Under patriarchy, however, control is more than an expression of human essence or a way to get things done. It's valued and pursued to a degree that gives social life an oppressive form by taking a natural human capacity to obsessive extremes.

Under patriarchy, control shapes not only the broad outlines of social life but also men's inner lives. The more men see control as central to their sense of self, well-being, worth, and safety, the more driven they feel to go after it and to organize their inner and outer lives around it. This takes men away from connection to others and themselves and toward disconnection. This is because control involves a relationship between controller and controlled, and disconnection is an integral part of that relationship. In order to control something, we have to see it as a separate "other." Even if we're controlling ourselves, we have to mentally split ourselves into a "me" that's being controlled and an "I" that's doing the controlling. And if we're controlling other

people, we have to justify the control and protect ourselves from an awareness of how our control affects them.

As a result, controllers come to see themselves as subjects who intend and decide what will happen, and to see others as objects to act upon. The controlled are seen without the fullness and complexity that define them as human beings. They have no history, no dimensions to give them depth or command the controllers' *attention* or *understanding* except by interfering with control. When parents control small children, for example, they often act as though children aren't full human beings, and justify punishment by saying that children can't reason and don't understand anything else. As children grow older, it becomes more difficult to see them as "other" and control becomes more difficult, especially in that memorable moment when a parent looks at a maturing child and sees a person looking back. Suddenly, control that once seemed justified may feel awkward, inappropriate, or even foolish.

Because patriarchy isn't organized around simply an obsession with control, but around an obsession with *male* control, the more men participate in the system, the more likely they are to see themselves as separate, autonomous, and disconnected from others. They may become versions of the western hero who rides into town from nowhere, with no past, and leaves going nowhere, with no apparent future. Women's lives, of course, also involve control, especially in relation to children. But the idea and practice of control as a core principle of social life is part of what defines patriarchal *manhood*, not womanhood, and so women are discouraged from pursuing it and criticized if they do. A woman perceived as controlling a man is typically labeled a "castrating bitch" or a "ball buster," and the man she supposedly controls is looked down upon as "henpecked," "pussy whipped," and barely a man at all. But there are no insulting terms for a man who controls a woman—by having the last word, not letting her work outside the home, deciding when she'll have sex, or limiting her time with other women—or for the woman he controls. There is no need for such words because men controlling women is a core aspect of patriarchal manhood.

Women and Patriarchy

An inevitable consequence of patriarchy is the oppression of women, which takes several forms. Historically, for example, women have been excluded from major institutions such as church, state, universities, and the professions. Even when they've been allowed to participate, it's generally been at subordinate, second-class levels. Marilyn French goes so far as

to argue that historically women's oppression has amounted to a form of slavery:

What other term can one use to describe a state in which people do not have rights over their own bodies, their own sexuality, marriage, reproduction or divorce, in which they may not receive education or practice a trade or profession, or move about freely in the world? Many women (both past and present) work laboriously all their lives without receiving any payment for their work.¹³

Because patriarchy is male identified and male centered, women and the work they do tends to be devalued, if not made invisible, and women are routinely repressed in their development as human beings through neglect and discrimination in schools¹⁴ and in occupational hiring, development, promotion, and rewards. Anyone who doubts that patriarchy is an oppressive system need only consult the growing literature documenting not only economic, political, and other institutionalized sexism, but pervasive violence, from pornography to the everyday realities of wife battering, sexual harassment, and sexual assault.¹⁵ And there are also the daily headlines—such as recent revelations of a long history of sexual assault at the U.S. Air Force Academy that was allowed to continue for years before a public scandal forced corrective action.

This is not to deny that much has changed in women's position over the last hundred years—from the appointment of women to the U.S. Supreme Court to assigning women to combat zones during the Iraq War. There is less tolerance for overt sexist behavior toward women in many settings. An elite of women has managed to enter the professions and, to a degree, upper levels of corporate management. And most laws that blatantly discriminate against women have been repealed.

To a great degree, however, such highly publicized progress supports an illusion of fundamental change. In spite of new laws, for example, violence and sexual harassment against women are as pervasive as ever, if not more so. Inequality of income and wealth has not changed much from the 1950s, and women are still heavily concentrated in a small number of low-level service and pink-collar occupations. In spite of the huge influx of married women, many of them mothers, into the paid labor force, and in spite of a great deal of talk about the joys of fatherhood, there's been no substantial increase in men's sense of responsibility for domestic labor or their willingness to actually participate.¹⁶ And women's share of authority in major institutions—from the state to organized religion to corporations to science, higher education, and the mass media—remains low.¹⁷ In short, the basic features that define patriarchy as a type of society have barely budged, and

the women's movement has stalled in much the same way that the civil rights movement stalled after the hard-won gains of the 1960s.

Thus far, mainstream women's movements have concentrated on the liberal agenda, whose primary goal has been to allow women to do what men do in the ways that men do it, whether in science, the professions, business, or government. More serious challenges to patriarchy have been silenced, maligned, and misunderstood for reasons that aren't hard to fathom. As difficult as it is to change overtly sexist* sensibilities and behavior, it is much harder to raise critical questions about how sexism is embedded in major institutions such as the economy, politics, religion, and the family. It is easier to allow women to assimilate into patriarchal society than to question society itself. It is easier to allow a few women to occupy positions of authority and dominance than to question whether social life should be organized around principles of hierarchy, control, and dominance at all, to allow a few women to reach the heights of the corporate hierarchy rather than question whether people's needs should depend on an economic system based on dominance, control, and competition. It is easier to allow women to practice law than to question adversarial conflict as a model for resolving disputes and achieving justice. It has even been easier to admit women to military combat roles than to question the acceptability of warfare and its attendant images of patriarchal masculine power and heroism as instruments of national policy. And it has been easier to elevate and applaud a few women than to confront the cultural misogyny that is never far off, waiting in the wings and available for anyone who wants to use it to bring women down and put them in their place.

"Easier," yes, but not easy or anything close to it. Like all movements that work for basic change, women's movements have come up against the depth to which the status quo is embedded in virtually every aspect of social life. The power of patriarchy is especially evident in the ongoing backlash against even the liberal agenda of women's movements—including the Supreme Court's retreat on abortion rights, the widespread effort to discredit feminism resulting in women's growing reluctance to embrace or identify with it, and the emergence of a vocal movement of men who portray themselves as victims not only of the sex/gender system but of women's struggle to free themselves from their own oppression under it.

* The words *sexism* and *sexist* are commonly used to describe a personal prejudice or the person who holds it. As sociologist David Wellman argues in *Portraits of White Racism*, however, that approach is far too narrow to be of use because male privilege requires far more than this to continue. Following his lead, I use the term to indicate anything that has the effect of promoting male privilege, regardless of the intentions of the people involved. By judging actions, policies, and institutional arrangements solely in terms of their consequences, Wellman's conceptualization allows us to focus on the full range of forces that perpetuate male privilege, and saves us from the trap of personalizing what is essentially a social and systemic phenomenon.

The power of patriarchy is also reflected in its ability to absorb the pressures of superficial change as a defense against deeper challenges. Every social system has a certain amount of “give” in it that allows some change to occur, and in the process leaves deep structures untouched and even invisible. Indeed, the “give” plays a critical part in maintaining the status quo by fostering illusions of fundamental change and acting as a systemic shock absorber. It keeps us focused on symptoms while root causes go unnoticed and unremarked, and it deflects the power we need to take the risky deeper journey that leads to the heart of patriarchy and our involvement in it.

Like all social systems, patriarchy is difficult to change because it is complex and its roots run deep. It is like a tree rooted in core principles of control, male dominance, male identification and male centeredness.¹⁸ Its trunk is the major institutional patterns of social life as shaped by the roots—family, economy, politics, religion, education, music and the arts. The branches—first the larger, then the progressively smaller—are the actual communities,

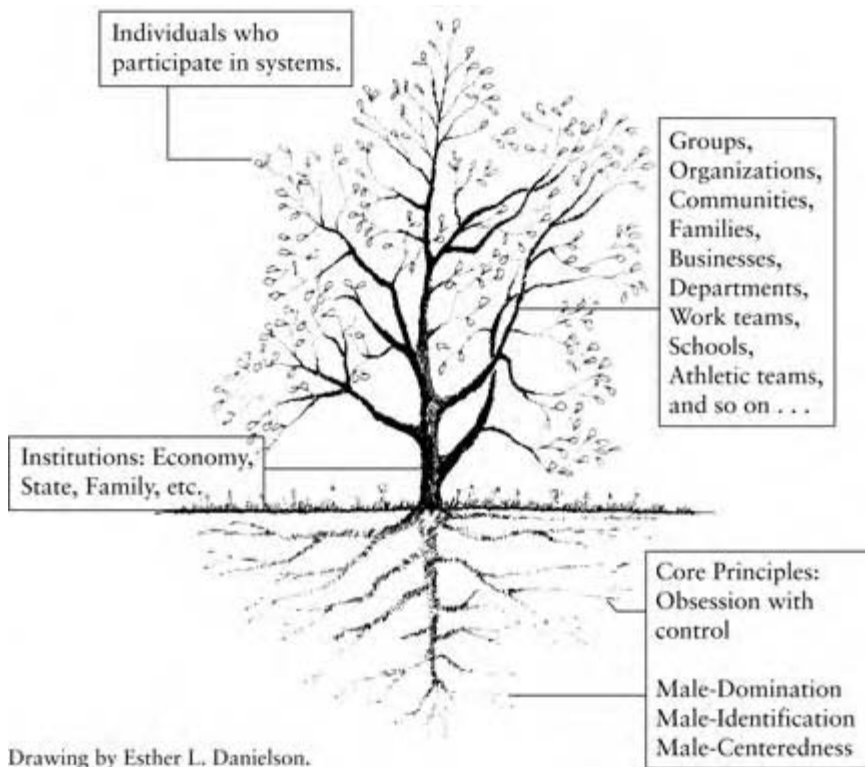


Fig. 1 Patriarchal Tree

organizations, groups, and other systems in which we live our lives, from cities and towns to corporations, parishes, marriages, and families. And in all of this, individuals are the leaves who both make possible the life of the tree and draw their form and life from it.

Obviously, we're in something that's much larger than ourselves, that isn't us. But equally obvious is our profound connection to it through the social conditions that shape our sense of who we are and what kinds of alternatives we can choose from. As a system, patriarchy encourages men to accept male privilege and perpetuate women's oppression, if only through silence. And it encourages women to accept and adapt to their oppressed position even to the extent of undermining movements to bring about change. We can't avoid participating in patriarchy. It was handed to us the moment we came into the world. But we can choose *how* to participate in it.

In this sense, we are far more than passive leaves on a tree, for human beings think and feel and, most important, make choices through which we either perpetuate or challenge the status quo. But as later chapters show, our relationship to the system of patriarchy is complex and full of paradox, challenging us to do the necessary work to understand what's going on and what it has to do with us.

Deep Structures and the Way Out

Over the last century or so, a lot has happened around the subject of male privilege and patriarchy. There's been an enormous amount of feminist writing and social action in Western industrial societies. And for the first time, the potential exists to challenge patriarchy in a serious and sustained way. Most people's attention is on the surface storms raging around particular issues such as abortion, pornography, sexual harassment and violence, and political and economic discrimination. But these struggles rarely if ever raise critical questions about the nature of patriarchy itself. In spite of the important feminist work being done on the patriarchal roots of pornography and men's violence against women, for example, public discussion rarely gets beyond issues of free speech, constitutional rights, and individual psychopathology.¹⁹ In part this is because we don't know how to get beyond such questions to explore the trunk and roots of patriarchal society, but it is also a way to avoid going deeper into our own lives and the world that shapes them.

To go deeper, we need both inner and outer awareness, which flow from different yet related kinds of insight. I've come to know the first as a client in psychotherapy, which more than anything else introduced me to the existence of deep structures inside each of us—webs of belief, experience, and feeling

that help shape the patterns in our lives. They affect us so deeply in part because we aren't aware of them in a critical way. Most people, for example, have a strong personal sense of what it means to be a woman or a man, a sense that profoundly affects how they think, feel, and act. But rarely do we think about such ideas critically. Rarely do we look closely at how they affect us or explore alternatives to them.

We're unaware because awareness is hard work (try to monitor your thoughts for just five minutes), and also because we're easily threatened by anything that questions our basic assumptions. As a result, we live as if these deep structures did not exist at all, as if life's surface that presents itself most immediately to us is all there is. This makes us least aware of aspects of our selves that most affect us, except, perhaps, when a crisis forces us to look deeper, to overcome our resistance simply because we feel we have no other choice. We're like spouses who confront the reality of how they actually experience each other only when their marriage is falling apart.

A second kind of insight is grounded in my work as a sociologist, through which I've been able to see a similar phenomenon at a larger level. As a matter of course, we go about our daily lives without any ongoing awareness of the deep underlying structures and shared understandings that define the social terms on which we live. It's as if the other leaves and small branches to which they cling are all there is to the patriarchal tree. To some degree, we're unaware of deeper social realities because we don't know *how* to be aware. We lack a clear working sense of what a society actually is, for example, or how to think about large systems like industrial capitalism, much less about how we're involved in them. In part, this is just a matter of training. Two hundred years ago, for example, psychology didn't exist, and barely a century ago Freud still hadn't come along to suggest the existence of the subconscious and offer his ideas on personality and the meaning of dreams. And yet today a basic psychological language for making sense of inner experience has become the stuff of everyday conversation. In a similar way, we need to incorporate into common usage ways of making sense of societies and our relation to them.

What is perhaps most important about the deep structures of individuals and societies is how closely they're connected to one another. It's easy to think, for example, that reality is just what we think it is, that a phenomenon like sexuality is a fixed concrete "thing" that simply exists, waiting for us to discover and experience it. But as Michel Foucault has argued, our intensely personal experience of ourselves as sexual beings is profoundly shaped by the society we live in and ways of thinking about sex that are part of its culture.²⁰

In a heterosexist culture, for example, when people say “sexual” they typically mean “heterosexual” and exclude all other forms of sexual expression as possible meanings. In ancient Greece, however, “sexual” included a much broader range of human potential and experience which, in turn, shaped people’s perceptions and experience as sexual beings. And only a century or so ago in Europe and the United States, “homosexual” was a term that described behavior but not people: People could behave in homosexual ways, but this didn’t make them “homosexuals.” The word “homosexuality” first appeared in print in Germany in 1869 and was first used in the *New York Times* in 1926.²¹ Today, by contrast, being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered is treated as an aberration at the core of people’s social identities and an oppressive system of heterosexual privilege that excludes and persecutes them.²²

Just what we think sexuality *is*, then, depends on which society we’re participating in and shapes our sense of who we are. “Female” and “male,” for example, are in the simplest sense words used to categorize people. We tend to experience them as more than words, however, treating them as representing some fixed, objective reality. We act as though “sex” is a word that refers to just one thing, regardless of culture, and that it includes two and only two possible categories, male and female. But in fact, things don’t divide up so neatly. An estimated 2 to 3 percent of babies are born with physical characteristics that don’t fall clearly into one sex category or another. A baby might be born genetically female, for example, with a “normal” vagina and a clitoris that has developed as a penis. In cultures that admit only two sexes, there’s little tolerance for such ambiguity, and parents usually feel compelled to do something about it, from infanticide to surgically assigning one sex or the other to the newborn.²³

From this perspective, words like “female” and “male” are cultural categories that have as much (if not more) to do with creating reality as they do with objectively naming it. Since the categories are cultural creations, they inevitably differ across cultures and shift over time. In general, for example, the idea that everyone must have a clear and fixed identity as male or female is relatively new in human societies, and contrasts with societies that provide other alternatives.²⁴ The Native American Navahos allow those born with sexual “ambiguities” to occupy a third sex category (called *nadle*) with its own legitimate social standing. In some other cultures, people have been allowed to choose their gender regardless of what it appears to be “objectively,” as was the case historically in several Native American Plains tribes, where men sometimes responded to a spiritual vision by taking on the dress and social standing of women.²⁵

In our everyday lives we pay scant attention to the deep patriarchal roots that shape both the world we live in and our seemingly private selves. There are many reasons for this and much that gets in the way that thread together to make a tangled knot. Finding a way to unravel that knot is the major purpose of this book.

We'd Rather Not Know

We're as stuck as we are primarily because we can't or won't acknowledge the roots of patriarchy and our involvement in it. We show no enthusiasm for going deeper than a surface obsession with sex and gender. We resist even saying things like "patriarchy" or "male privilege" in polite conversation. We act as if patriarchy isn't there, because the realization that it does exist is a door that swings only one way and we can't go back again to not knowing. We're like a family colluding in silence over dark secrets of damage and abuse, or like "good and decent Germans" during the Holocaust who "never knew" anything terrible was being done. We cling to the illusion that everything is basically all right, that bad things don't happen to good people, that good people can't participate in the production of injustice and cruelty, and that if we only leave things alone they'll stay pretty much as they are and, we often like to think, always have been.

Many women, of course, and a few men do dare to see and speak the truth, but they are always in danger of being attacked and discredited in order to maintain the silence. Even those who would never call themselves feminists often know there is something terribly wrong with the structures of privilege that are so central to life in modern societies and without which we think we cannot survive. The public response to feminism has been ferociously defensive precisely because feminism touches such a deep nerve of truth and the denial that keeps us from it. If feminism were truly ridiculous, it would be ignored. But it isn't ridiculous, and so provokes a vigorous backlash.

We shouldn't be too hard on ourselves for hanging on to denial and illusions about patriarchy. Letting go is risky business, and patriarchy is full of smoke and mirrors that make it difficult to see what has to be let go of. It's relatively easy to accept the idea of patriarchy as male dominated and male identified, for example, and even as male centered. Many people, however, have a much harder time seeing women as oppressed.²⁶ This is a huge issue that sparks a lot of argument, and for that reason it will take several chapters to do it justice. Still, it's worthwhile outlining a basic response here.

The reluctance to see women as oppressed has several sources. The first is that many women have access to privilege based on race, class, disability

status or sexual orientation and it's difficult for many to see women as oppressed without insulting "truly oppressed" groups such as the lower classes or racial minorities.²⁷ How, for example, can we count upper-class women among the oppressed and lower-class men among their oppressors?

Although this objection has a certain logic to it, it rests on a confusion between the position of women and men as groups and their experience as individuals. Identifying "female" as an oppressed status under patriarchy doesn't mean that every woman suffers its consequences to an equal degree, just as living in a racist society doesn't mean that every person of color suffers equally or that every white person shares equally in the benefits of white privilege. Living in patriarchy does mean, however, that every woman must come to grips with an inferior gender *position* and that whatever she achieves will be *in spite of* that position. With the exception of child care and other domestic work and a few paid occupations related to it, women in almost every field of adult endeavor must labor under the presumption that they are inferior to men, that they are interlopers from the margins of society who must justify their participation. Men may have such experiences because of their race or other subordinate standing, but rarely if ever because they're men.

It is in this sense that patriarchies are male dominated even though most individual men may not *feel* dominant, especially in relation to other men. This is a crucial insight that rests on the fact that when we talk about societies, words like *privilege* and *oppression* describe relations between categories of people such as whites and people of color, lower and upper classes, or women and men. How privilege and oppression actually play out among individuals is another issue. Depending on other social factors such as race or class, individual men will vary in their access to male privilege. We can make a similar argument about women and the price they pay for belonging to a subordinate group. Upper-class women, for example, may be insulated to some degree from the oppressive effects of being women under patriarchy, such as discrimination in the workplace. Their class privilege, however, exists *in spite of* their subordinate standing as women, which they can never completely overcome, especially in relation to husbands.²⁸ No woman is immune, for example, to the cultural devaluing of women's bodies as sexual objects to be exploited in public and private life, or the ongoing threat of sexual and domestic violence. To a rapist, the most powerful woman in the land is first and foremost a woman—and this more than anything else culturally marks her as a potential victim.

Along with not seeing women as oppressed, we resist seeing men as a privileged oppressor group. This is especially true of men who are aware of their own suffering, who often argue that both men and women are oppressed

because of their gender and that neither oppresses the other. Undoubtedly men do suffer because of their participation in patriarchy, but it isn't because men are oppressed *as men*. For women, gender oppression is linked to a cultural devaluing of femaleness itself. Women are subordinated and treated as inferior because they are culturally defined as inferior *as women*. Men, however, do not suffer because maleness is a devalued, oppressed status in relation to some higher, more powerful one. Instead, to the extent that men suffer as men—and not because they're also gay or of color—it's because they belong to the dominant gender group in a system of gender oppression, which both privileges them and exacts a price in return.

A key to understanding this is that a group cannot oppress itself. A group can inflict injury on itself, and its members can suffer from their position in society. But if we say that a group can oppress or persecute *itself* we turn the concept of social oppression into a mere synonym for socially caused suffering, which it isn't.²⁹ Oppression is a social phenomenon that happens between different groups in a society. It is a system of social inequality through which one group is positioned to dominate and benefit from the exploitation and subordination of another. This means not only that a group cannot oppress itself, but also that it cannot be oppressed *by society*. Oppression is a relation that exists *between groups*, not between groups and society as a whole.

To understand oppression, then, we must distinguish it from suffering that has other social roots. Even the massive suffering inflicted on men through the horrors of war is not an oppression of men *as men*, because there is no system in which a group of non-men subordinates men and enforces and benefits from their suffering. The systems that control the machinery of war are themselves patriarchal, which makes it impossible for them to oppress men as men. Warfare *does* oppress people of color and the lower classes, who are often served up as cannon fodder by privileged classes whose interests war most often serves. Some 80 percent of all U.S. troops who served in Vietnam, for example, were from working- and lower-class backgrounds.³⁰ But this oppression is based on race and class, not gender. When Warren Farrell, a leading figure in the men's rights movement, argues that men are "disposable," he confuses male gender, which is privileged, with classes and races that are indeed regarded as disposable.³¹ If war made men truly disposable *as men*, we wouldn't find monuments and cemeteries in virtually every city and town in the United States dedicated to fallen soldiers (with no mention of their race or class), or endless retrospectives on the anniversary of every milestone in World War II.

Rather than devalue or degrade patriarchal manhood, warfare celebrates and affirms it. As I write this on the anniversary of D-Day and the Normandy

invasion, I can't help but feel the power of the honor and solemn mourning accorded the casualties of war, the deep respect opponents often feel for one another, and the countless monuments dedicated to men killed while trying to kill other men whose names, in turn, are inscribed on still more monuments.³² But these ritual remembrances do more than sanctify sacrifice and tragic loss, for they also sanctify war itself and the patriarchal institutions that promote it. Leaders whose misguided orders, blunders, and egomaniacal schemes bring death to tens of thousands, for example, earn not ridicule, disgust, and scorn but a curious historical immunity framed in images of noble tragedy and heroic masculine endeavor. In stark contrast to massive graveyards of honored dead, the memorials, the annual speeches and parades, there are no monuments to the millions of women and children caught in the slaughter and bombed, burned, starved, raped, and left homeless. An estimated nine out of ten wartime casualties are civilians, not soldiers, and these include a huge proportion of children and women.³³ During the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, it has been official military policy to *not* keep count of civilian deaths and injuries. And so, there are no great national cemeteries devoted to *them*. War, after all, is a man's thing.

Perhaps one of the deepest reasons for denying the reality of women's oppression is that we don't want to admit that a real basis for conflict exists between women and men. We don't want to admit it because, unlike other groups involved in oppressive systems of privilege, such as whites and people of color, females and males really need each other, if only as parents and children. This can make us reluctant to see how patriarchy puts us at odds regardless of what we want or how we feel about it. Who wants to consider the role of gender oppression in everyday married and family life? Who wants to know how dependent we are on patriarchy as a system, how deeply our thoughts, feelings, and behavior are embedded in it? Men resist seeing the oppression of their mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters because we've participated in it, benefited from it, and developed a vested interest in it. We resist seeing our fathers as members of a privileged oppressor group and may prefer to see them as hapless victims of women and unseen social forces in which male interests magically play no part. We resist, perhaps because in our fathers we see ourselves and because we're still trying to figure out why they didn't love us very well, or were never around, or were around but in the wrong ways. And we struggle to figure all that out in the hope that if we do, we might be able to have them after all and become something different ourselves.

Harder still is seeing our fathers linked to the oppression of our mothers, or our mothers' unavoidable participation in their own oppression, playing at being less than they are or giving themselves away in the name of perfect

motherhood or tolerating neglect and abuse. All of this we resist, because we couldn't help taking our mothers and fathers into ourselves and making them part of our deepest longings and most enduring expectations. And in the process we also drew into our deepest selves core elements from the patriarchal roots of gender privilege and oppression.

But, once again, we must remember that as deeply as the patriarchal tree shapes our lives, we are the leaves and not the roots, trunk, or branches. We're too easily blinded by the good/bad fallacy that says that only bad people can participate in and benefit from societies that produce bad consequences. We act as though patriarchy can be reduced to personality types, as if our participation shows we've failed as people. But like any social system, patriarchy can't be reduced to personal feelings, intentions, and motivations.

It's impossible, for example, to live in this world and not participate in industrial capitalism. We read about the sweatshops in Southeast Asia and the United States in which workers (mostly women and children) labor for little pay under appalling conditions, and we may feel anger at such cruelty and comfort ourselves that our good intentions somehow lift us above such things. But a quick look through our closets and the labels on our clothing will probably show otherwise, that yesterday's bargain was made in Thailand or Mexico and subsidized by the exploitation of those very same workers. This doesn't make us bad people, as if we had set out to do harm; but it does *involve* us in the social production of injustice and unnecessary suffering. In the same way, men don't have to feel cruel or malevolent toward women in order to participate in and benefit from patriarchy as a system. This is a crucial distinction that makes the difference between being stuck in a defensive moral paralysis and seeing how to participate in change.

There are many ways to avoid facing the world in ourselves and ourselves in the world. But it has to get done sooner or later, because any society that doesn't take seriously enough the critical process of creating alternatives to itself probably doesn't have much of a future. Change work is both frightening and exciting. It loosens the boundaries of our taken-for-granted reality, and when we feel lost we need to learn how to be "lost comfortably," like the mountain man who never got lost in spite of long periods when he didn't know how to get where he was going.³⁴

We can move toward a clearer and more critical awareness of what patriarchy is about, of what gets in the way of working to end it, and new ways for all of us—men in particular—to participate in its long evolutionary process of turning into something else. Patriarchy is our collective legacy, and there's nothing we can do about that or the condition in which we received it. But we can do a lot about what we pass on to those who follow us.

2

Patriarchy, the System: An It, Not a He, a Them, or an Us

“**W**hen you say patriarchy,” a man complained from the rear of the audience, “I know what you *really* mean—me!” A lot of people hear “men” whenever someone says “patriarchy,” so that criticism of male privilege and the oppression of women is taken to mean that all men—each and every one of them—are oppressive people. It’s enough to prompt many men to take it personally, bristling at what they often see as a way to make them feel guilty. And some women feel free to blame individual men for patriarchy simply because they’re men. Some of the time, men feel defensive because they identify with patriarchy and its values and don’t want to face the consequences these produce or the prospect of giving up male privilege. But defensiveness can also reflect a common confusion about the difference between patriarchy as a kind of society and the people who participate in it. If we’re ever going to work toward real change, it’s a confusion we’ll have to clear up.

To do this, we have to realize that we’re stuck in a model of social life that views everything as beginning and ending with individuals. Looking at things in this way, the tendency is to think that if bad things happen

in the world, it's only because there are bad people who have entered into some kind of conspiracy. Racism exists, then, because white people are racist bigots who hate members of racial and ethnic minorities and want to do them harm. The oppression of women happens because men want and like to dominate women and act out hostility toward them. There is poverty and class oppression because people in the upper classes are greedy, heartless, and cruel. The flip side of this individualistic model of guilt and blame is that race, gender, and class oppression are actually not oppression at all, but merely the sum of individual failings on the part of blacks, women, and the poor, who lack the right stuff to compete successfully with whites, men, and others who know how to make something of themselves.

What this kind of thinking ignores is that we are all participating in something larger than ourselves or any collection of us. On some level, most people are familiar with the idea that social life involves us in something larger than ourselves, but few seem to know what to do with that idea. Blaming everything on "the system" strikes a deep chord in many people.¹ But it also touches on a basic misunderstanding of social life, because blaming "the system" (presumably society) for our problems, doesn't take the next step to understanding what that might mean. What exactly *is* a system, for example, and how could it run our lives? Do *we* have anything to do with shaping *it*, and if so, how? How, for example, do we participate in patriarchy, and how does that link us to the consequences? How is what we think of as "normal" life related to male privilege, women's oppression, and the hierarchical, control-obsessed world in which everyone's lives are embedded?

Without asking such questions, we can't understand gender fully and we avoid taking responsibility either for ourselves or for patriarchy. Instead, "the system" serves as a vague, unarticulated catch-all, a dumping ground for social problems, a scapegoat that can never be held to account and that, for all the power we think it has, can't talk back or actually *do* anything.

A powerful example of this is found in the work of Sam Keen and Robert Bly, whose influential books on gender were part of the mythopoetic men's movement, which attracted a wide following, especially during the 1990s. Although younger readers probably won't have heard of it, the movement is still important to understand because it expresses views of gender inequality that are still widely used to reject feminism and defend male privilege.

Both Keen and Bly blame much of men's misery on industrialization and urbanization.² The solutions they offer, however, amount to little more than personal transformation and adaptation, not changing society itself. So, the system is invoked in contradictory ways. On the one hand, it's portrayed as a formidable source of all our woes, a great monster that "runs us all." On the other hand, it's ignored as a nebulous blob that we think we don't have to include in any solutions.

But we can't have it both ways. If society is a powerful force in social life, as it surely is, then we have to understand it and how we are connected to it. To do this, we have to change how we think about it, because how we think affects the kinds of questions we ask. The questions we ask in turn shape the kinds of answers and solutions we'll come up with.

If we see patriarchy as nothing more than men's and women's individual personalities, motivations, and behavior, for example, then it probably won't even occur to us to ask about larger contexts—such as institutions like the family, religion, and the economy—and how people's lives are shaped in relation to them. From this kind of individualistic perspective, we might ask why a particular man raped, harassed, or beat a woman. We wouldn't ask, however, what kind of society would promote persistent *patterns* of such behavior in everyday life, from wife-beating jokes to the routine inclusion of sexual coercion and violence in mainstream movies. We'd be quick to explain rape and battery as the acts of sick or angry men, but we'd rarely take seriously the question of what kind of society would produce so much male anger and pathology or direct it toward sexual violence rather than something else. We'd rarely ask how gender violence might serve other more "normalized" ends such as male control and domination. We might ask why a man would like pornography that objectifies, exploits, and promotes violence against women, or debate whether the Constitution protects an individual's right to produce and distribute it. But it'd be hard to stir up interest in asking what kind of society would give violent and degrading visions of women's bodies and human sexuality such a prominent and pervasive place in its culture to begin with.

In short, the tendency in this society is to ignore and take for granted what we can least afford to overlook in trying to understand and change the world. Rather than ask how social systems produce social problems such as men's violence against women, we obsess over legal debate and titillating but irrelevant case histories soon to become made-for-television movies. If the goal is to change the world, this won't help us. We need to see and deal with the social roots that generate and nurture the social problems that are reflected in and manifested through the behavior of individuals. We can't do this without realizing that we all participate in something larger than ourselves, something we didn't create but that we have the power to affect through the choices we make about *how* to participate.

Some readers have objected to "participate" as a way to describe women's relation to patriarchy. This is based on the idea that participation is something voluntary, freely chosen, entered into as equals, and it therefore makes little sense to suggest that women can participate in their own oppression. But that is not my meaning here, nor is it a necessary interpretation of the word. To *participate* is simply to have a *part* in what goes on, to do

something (or *not*) and to have the choice affect the consequences, regardless of whether it is conscious or unconscious, coerced or not. Of course, the *terms* of women's participation differ dramatically from those that shape men's, but it is participation, nonetheless.

This concept is similar to the participation of workers in the system of capitalism. They do not participate as equals to the capitalists who employ them or on terms they would choose if they could. Nevertheless, without them, capitalism cannot function as a system that oppresses them.

The importance of participation can be seen in the great variety of ways that women and working-class people respond to oppression—all the forms that fighting back or giving in can take. To argue that women or workers do not participate is to render them powerless and irrelevant to patriarchy's and capitalism's past and future, for it is only as participants that people can affect anything. Otherwise, women and workers would be like pieces of wood floating down a river which, as history makes clear, has never been the case.

The something larger we all participate in is patriarchy, which is more than a collection of individuals (such as "men"). It is a system, which means it can't be reduced to the people who participate in it. If you go to work in a corporation, for example, you know the minute you walk in the door that you've entered "something" that shapes your experience and behavior, something that isn't just you and the other people you work with. You can feel yourself stepping into a set of relationships and shared understandings about who's who and what's supposed to happen and why, and all of this limits you in many ways. And when you leave at the end of the day you can feel yourself released from the constraints imposed by your participation in that system. You can feel the expectations drop away and your focus shift to other systems such as family or a neighborhood bar that shape your experience in different ways.

To understand a system like a corporation, we have to look at more than people like you, because all of you aren't the corporation, even though you make it run. If the corporation were just a collection of people, then whatever happened to the corporation would by definition also happen to them, and vice versa. But clearly this isn't so. A corporation can go bankrupt or cease to exist altogether without any of the people who work there going bankrupt or disappearing. Or everyone who works for a corporation could quit, but that wouldn't necessarily mean the end of the corporation, only the arrival of a new set of participants. We can't understand a system, then, just by looking at the people who participate in it, for it is something larger and has to be understood as such.

Even more so, we cannot understand the world and our lives in it without looking at the dynamic relationship between individual people and social systems. Nor can we understand the countless details—from sexual violence to patterns of conversation to unequal distributions of power—that make up the reality of male privilege and the oppression of women.

As the accompanying figure shows, this relationship has two parts. The arrow on the right side represents the idea that as we participate in social systems, we are shaped as individuals. Through the process of *socialization*, we learn how to participate in social life—from families, schools, religion, and the mass media, through the examples set by parents, peers, coaches, teachers, and public figures—a continuing stream of ideas and images of people and the world and who we are in relation to them.

Through all of this, we develop a sense of personal identity—including gender—and how this positions us in relation to other people, especially in terms of inequalities of power. As I grew up watching movies and television, for example, the message was clear that men are the most important people on the planet because they're the ones who supposedly do the most important things as defined by patriarchal culture. They're the strong ones who build, the heroes who fight the good fight, the geniuses, writers and artists, the bold leaders, and even the evil—but always interesting—villains. Even God is gendered male.

Among the many consequences of such messages is to encourage in men a sense of entitlement in relation to women—to be tended to and taken care of, deferred to and supported no matter how badly they behave. In the typical episode of the television sitcom, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, for example, Ray Barone routinely behaves toward his wife, Debra, in ways that are insensitive, sexist, adolescent, and downright stupid, but by the end of each half hour we always find out why she puts up with it year after year—for some reason that's never made clear, she just loves the guy.

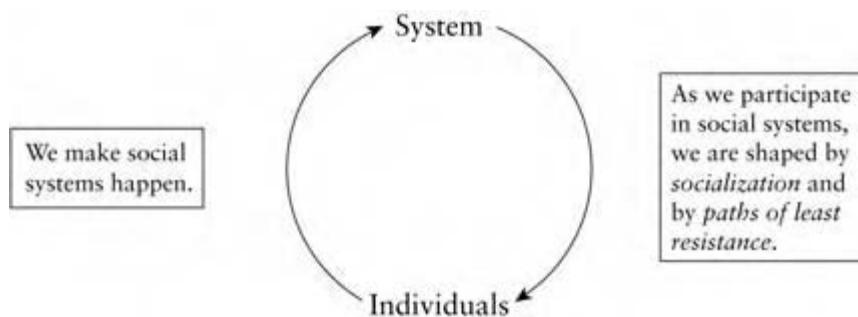


Fig. 2 Individuals and Systems

This sends the message that it's reasonable for a heterosexual man to expect to "have" an intelligent and beautiful woman who will love him and stay with him in spite of his behaving badly toward her a great deal of the time.

Invariably, some of what we learn through socialization turns out not to be true and then we may have to deal with that. I say "may" because powerful forces encourage us to keep ourselves in a state of denial, to rationalize what we've learned in order to keep it safe from scrutiny, if only to protect our sense of who we are and ensure our being accepted by other people, including family and friends. In the end, the default is to adopt the dominant version of reality and act as though it's the only one there is.

In addition to socialization, participation in social systems shapes our behavior through *paths of least resistance*, a concept that refers to the conscious and unconscious choices we make from one moment to the next. When a man hears other men tell sexist jokes, for example, there are many things he *could* do, but they vary in how much social resistance they're likely to provoke. He could laugh along with them, for example, or remain silent or ignore them or object. And, of course, there are millions of other things he could do—sing, dance, go to sleep, scratch his nose, and so on. Most of these possibilities won't even occur to him, which is one of the ways that social systems limit our options. But of those that do occur to him, usually one will risk less resistance than all the rest. The path of least resistance is to go along, and unless he's willing to deal with greater resistance, that's the choice he's most likely to make.

Our daily lives consist of an endless stream of such choices as we navigate among various possibilities in relation to the path of least resistance in each social situation. Most of the time, we make choices unconsciously without realizing what we're doing. It's just what seems most comfortable to us, most familiar, and safest. The more aware we are of what's going on, however, the more likely it is that we can make conscious, informed choices, and therein lies our potential to make a difference.

This brings us to the arrow on the left side of the figure, which represents the fact that human beings are the ones who make social systems happen. A classroom, for example, doesn't happen as a social system unless and until students and teachers come together and, through their choices from moment to moment, *make* it happen in one way or another. Because people make systems happen, then people can also make systems happen differently. And when systems happen differently, the consequences are different as well. In other words, when people step off the path of least resistance, they have the potential not simply to change other people, but to alter the way the system itself happens. Given that systems shape people's behavior, this kind

of change has enormous potential. When a man objects to a sexist joke, for example, it can shake other men's perception of what's socially acceptable and what's not so that the next time they're in this kind of situation, their perception of the social environment itself—not just of other people as individuals, whom they may or may not know personally—may shift in a new direction that makes old paths (such as telling sexist jokes) more difficult to choose because of the increased risk of social resistance.

The model in the figure represents a basic sociological view of the world at every level of human experience, from the global capitalist economy to sexual relationships. Patriarchy fits this model as a social system in which women and men participate. As such, it is more than a collection of women and men and can't be understood simply by understanding *them*. *We* are not patriarchy, no more than people who believe in Allah *are* Islam or Canadians *are* Canada. Patriarchy is a kind of society organized around certain kinds of social relationships and ideas that shape paths of least resistance. As individuals, we participate in it. Paradoxically, our participation both shapes our lives and gives us the opportunity to be part of changing or perpetuating it. But *we are not it*, which means patriarchy can exist without men having “oppressive personalities” or actively conspiring with one another to defend male privilege.

To demonstrate that gender privilege and oppression exist, we don't have to show that men are villains, that women are good-hearted victims, that women don't participate in their own oppression, or that men never oppose it. If a society is oppressive, then people who grow up and live in it will tend to accept, identify with, and participate in it as “normal” and unremarkable life. That's the path of least resistance in any system. It's hard not to follow it, given how we depend on society and its rewards and punishments that hinge on going along with the status quo. When privilege and oppression are woven into the fabric of everyday life, we don't need to go out of our way to be overtly oppressive for a system of privilege to produce oppressive consequences, for, as Edmund Burke tells us, evil requires only that good people do nothing.

“The System”

In general, a system is any collection of interrelated parts or elements that we can think of as a whole. A car engine, for example, is a collection of parts that fit together in certain ways to produce a “whole” that is identified by a culture as serving a particular purpose. A language is also a collection of parts—letters of the alphabet, words, punctuation marks, and rules of

grammar and syntax—that fit together in certain ways to form something we can identify as a whole. And societies include a variety of interrelated aspects that we can think of as a whole. All of these are systems that differ in what they include and how those elements are organized.

The crucial thing to understand about patriarchy or any other social system is that it's something people participate in. It's an arrangement of shared understandings and relationships that connect people to one another and something larger than themselves. In some ways, we're like players who participate in a game. Monopoly, for example, consists of a set of ideas about things such as the meaning of property and rent, the value of competition and accumulating wealth, and various rules about rolling dice, moving around a board, buying, selling, and developing property, collecting rents, winning, and losing. It has positions—player, banker, and so on—that people occupy. It has material elements such as the board, houses and hotels, dice, property deeds, money, and “pieces” that represent each player's movements on the board. As such, the game is something we can think of as a social system whose elements cohere with a unity and wholeness that distinguish it from other games and from non-games.³ Most important, we can describe it as a system without ever talking about the personal characteristics or motivations of the individual people who actually play it at any given moment.

If we watch people play Monopoly, we notice certain routine patterns of feeling and behavior that reflect paths of least resistance inherent in the game itself. If someone lands on a property I own, for example, I collect the rent (if I happen to notice); and if they can't pay, I take their assets and force them from the game. The game encourages me to feel good about this, not necessarily because *I'm* greedy and merciless, but because the game is about winning, and this is what winning consists of in Monopoly. Since everyone else is also trying to win by driving me out of the game, each step I take toward winning protects me and alleviates some anxiety about landing on a property whose rent *I* can't pay.

Because these patterns are shaped by the game far more than by the individual players, we can find ourselves behaving in ways that might seem disturbing in other situations. When I'm not playing Monopoly, I behave quite differently, even though I'm still the same person. This is why I don't play Monopoly anymore—I don't like the way it encourages me to feel and behave in the name of “fun,” especially toward people I care about. The reason we behave differently outside the game doesn't lie in our personalities but in the *game's* paths of least resistance, which define certain behavior and values as appropriate and expected. When we see ourselves as Monopoly players, we feel limited by the rules and goals the game defines, and experience it as something external to us and beyond our control.

It's important to note how rarely it occurs to people to simply change the rules. The relationships, terms, and goals that organize the game aren't presented to us as ours to judge or alter. The more attached we feel to the game and the more closely we identify ourselves as players, the more likely we are to feel helpless in relation to it. If you're about to drive someone into bankruptcy, you can excuse yourself by saying, "I've got to take your money, those are the rules," but only if you ignore the fact that you could choose not to play or could suggest a change in the rules. Then again, if you can't imagine life without the game, you won't see many alternatives to doing what's expected.

If we try to explain patterns of social behavior only in terms of individual people's personalities and motives—people do greedy things, for example, because they *are* greedy—then we ignore how behavior is shaped by paths of least resistance found in the systems people participate in. The "profit motive" associated with capitalism, for example, is typically seen as a psychological motive that explains capitalism as a system: Capitalism exists because there are people who want to make a profit. But this puts the cart before the horse by avoiding the question of where wanting to make a profit comes from in the first place. We need to ask what kind of world makes such wants possible and encourages people to organize their lives around them, for although we may pursue profit as we play Monopoly or participate in real-world capitalism, the psychological profit motive doesn't originate with us. We aren't born with it. It doesn't exist in many cultures and was unknown for most of human history. The profit motive is a historically developed aspect of market systems in general and capitalism in particular that shapes the values, behavior, and personal motives of those who participate in it.

To argue that managers lay off workers, for example, simply because managers are heartless or cruel ignores the fact that success under capitalism often depends on this kind of competitive, profit-maximizing, "heartless" behavior. Most managers probably know in their hearts that the practice of routinely discarding people in the name of profit and expedience is hurtful and unfair. This is why they feel so bad about having to be the ones to carry it out, and protect their feelings by inventing euphemisms such as "downsizing" and "outplacement." And yet they participate in a system that produces these cruel results anyway, not because of cruel personalities or malice toward workers, but because a capitalist system makes this a path of least resistance and exacts real costs from those who stray from it.

To use the game analogy, it's a mistake to assume that we can understand players' behavior without paying attention to the game they're playing. We create even more trouble by thinking we can understand the *game* without ever looking at it as something more than what goes on inside the people

who play it. One way to see this is to realize that systems often work in ways that don't reflect people's experience and motivations. If we try to explain warfare, for example, by looking at what soldiers actually do and the consequences that result, we might attribute war to some human tendency to be aggressive and slaughter one another, to some "natural" brutality. But if we look for such tendencies in the participants themselves, the soldiers, we won't find much, for account after account shows that the typical soldier is motivated by anything but aggressive, bloodthirsty impulses to kill, maim, and destroy.

Most soldiers are simply following paths of least resistance. They want nothing more than to do what they think is expected of them—especially to live up to cultural images of what it means to be patriotic and a man—and to get themselves and their friends safely home. Many are there because they couldn't find any other way to make a living or wanted job training or a subsidized college education and never imagined they'd wind up in combat. Or they get caught up in a wave of nationalism that sends them off to fight for things they dimly perceive and barely understand. Once in battle, their aggressive behavior is more often than not a defensive reaction to fear created by confronting other men who feel compelled to kill them so *they* can do what's expected of them and get home safely.⁴

If we look to the personal motivations of national leaders to explain war, we won't do much better. Leaders often seem to feel caught in webs of obligations, contingencies, and alternatives they didn't create and cannot control, and feel compelled to commit armies to war in spite of personal misgivings over the probable result. During the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, for example, U.S. President John F. Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. The evidence suggests that both felt trapped between what they saw as the imperatives of national interest and the terror that things might get beyond their control and result in nuclear holocaust. Surely their personal motivations pale beside the incalculable horror of what their actions might have caused.⁵

In spite of all the good reasons to not use individual models to explain social life, doing so constitutes a path of least resistance because personal experience and motivation are what we know best. As a result, we tend to see something like patriarchy as the result of poor socialization through which men learn to act dominant and masculine and women learn to act subordinate and feminine. While there is certainly some truth to this, it doesn't work as an explanation of patterns like privilege and oppression. It's no better than trying to explain war as simply the result of training men to be warlike, without looking at economic systems that equip armies at huge profits and political systems that organize and hurl armies at one another.

It's like trying to understand what happens during Monopoly games without ever talking about the game itself and the kind of society in which it would exist. Of course, soldiers and Monopoly players do what they do because they've learned the rules, but this doesn't tell us much about the rules themselves and why they exist to be learned in the first place. Socialization is merely a process, a mechanism for training people to participate in social systems. Although it tells us how people learn to participate, it doesn't illuminate the systems themselves. As such, it can tell us something about the *how* of a system like patriarchy, but very little about the *what* and the *why*.

Without some sense of how systems work and how people participate in them, we can't do much about either. Robert Bly and others in the mythopoeic men's movement, for example, want to change cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity. They want men to become "spiritual warriors" in touch with the "deep masculine," who feel good about themselves as men and who don't need to rely on coercion and violence. And they want the "old men"—the fathers—to initiate the young men into this new way of being. However, because the concept of a patriarchal system has no place in Bly's analysis, changing cultural definitions will have no affect on that system. In other words, masculinity will be transformed without confronting the control-driven system of patriarchal power relations and male competition and all the ways they are embedded in social institutions.

Where, then, will we find these old men who are prepared to give up their male privilege and adopt, promote, and welcome young men into ways of seeing men (and women) that contradict the prevailing patriarchal order that gives those same old men the most to lose? And where will we find young men willing to follow their lead? Quite simply, we won't, except among a relative few who adopt "new masculinities" as personal styles. These new masculinities, however, are generally reserved for ritual observances among the like-minded and otherwise kept from public view, or, as seems to be the case in the "new men's movement," they turn out to be not so new after all.⁶

Either way, the individualistic model offers little hope of changing patriarchy because patriarchy is more than how people think, feel, and behave. As such, patriarchy isn't simply about the psychic wounding of sons by their fathers, or the dangers and failures of heterosexual intimacy, or boys' feelings about their mothers, or how men treat women and one another. It *includes* all of these by producing them as symptoms that help perpetuate the system, but these aren't what patriarchy *is*. It is a way of organizing social life through which such wounding, failure, and mistreatment can occur. If fathers neglect their sons, it is because fathers move in a world that makes pursuit of goals other than deeply committed fatherhood a path of least resistance.⁷ If heterosexual intimacy is prone to fail, it is because patriarchy is organized

in ways that set women and men fundamentally at odds with one another in spite of all the good reasons they otherwise have to get along and thrive together. And men's use of coercion and violence against women is a pervasive pattern only because force and violence are supported in patriarchal society, because women are designated as desirable and legitimate objects of male control, and because in a society organized around control, force and violence *work*.

We can't find a way out of patriarchy or imagine something different without a clear sense of what patriarchy is and what it's got to do with us. Thus far, the alternative has been to reduce our understanding of gender to an intellectual gumbo of personal problems, tendencies, and motivations. Presumably, these will be solved through education, better communication skills, consciousness raising, "heroic journeys," and other forms of individual transformation. Since this isn't how social systems actually change, the result is widespread frustration and cycles of blame and denial, which is precisely where most people in this society seem to have been for many years.

We need to see more clearly what patriarchy is about as a system. This includes cultural ideas about men and women, the web of relationships that structure social life, and the unequal distribution of power, rewards and resources that underlies privilege and oppression. We need to see new ways to participate by forging alternative paths of least resistance; for the system doesn't simply "run us" like hapless puppets. It may be larger than us, it may not *be* us, but it doesn't happen except *through* us. And that's where we have power to do something about it and about ourselves in relation to it.

Patriarchy

The key to understanding any system is to identify its various aspects and how they're arranged to form a whole. To understand a language, for example, we have to learn its alphabet, vocabulary, and rules for combining words into meaningful phrases and sentences. With a social system such as patriarchy, it's more complicated because there are many different aspects, and it is often difficult to see just how they're connected.

Patriarchy's defining elements are its male-dominated, male-identified, male-centered, and control-obsessed character, but this is just the beginning. At its core, patriarchy is based in part on a set of symbols and ideas that make up a culture embodied by everything from the content of everyday conversation to literature and film. Patriarchal culture includes ideas about the nature of things, including women, men, and humanity, with manhood

and masculinity most closely associated with being human and womanhood and femininity relegated to the marginal position of “other.” It’s about how social life is and how it’s supposed to be, about what’s expected of people and about how they feel. It’s about standards of feminine beauty and masculine toughness, images of feminine vulnerability and masculine protectiveness, of older men coupled with younger women, of elderly women alone. It’s about defining women and men as opposites, about the “naturalness” of male aggression, competition, and dominance and of female caring, cooperation, and subordination. It’s about the valuing of masculinity and maleness and the devaluing of femininity and femaleness. It’s about the primary importance of a husband’s career and the secondary status of a wife’s, about child care as a priority in women’s lives and its secondary importance in men’s. It’s about the social acceptability of anger, rage, and toughness in men but not in women, and of caring, tenderness, and vulnerability in women but not in men.

Above all, patriarchal culture is about the core value of control and domination in almost every area of human existence. From the expression of emotion to economics to the natural environment, gaining and exercising control is a continuing goal. Because of this, the concept of power takes on a narrow definition in terms of “power over”—the ability to control others, events, resources, or one’s self in spite of resistance—rather than alternatives such as the ability to cooperate, to give freely of oneself, or to feel and act in harmony with nature.⁸ To have power over and to be prepared to use it are culturally defined as good and desirable (and characteristically “masculine”), and to lack such power or to be reluctant to use it is seen as weak if not contemptible (and characteristically “feminine”). This is a major reason that patriarchies with the means to do so are often so quick to go to war. Studies of the (mostly) men who formulate U.S. military strategy, for example, show that it is almost impossible to lose standing by advocating an excessive use of force in international relations (such as the U.S. response to terrorism and the 2003 invasion of Iraq). But anyone—especially a man—who advocates restraint in the use of force, runs the serious risk of being perceived as less than manly and, therefore, lacking credibility.⁹

The main use of any culture is to provide symbols and ideas out of which to construct a sense of what is real. As such, language mirrors social reality in sometimes startling ways. In contemporary usage, for example, the words *crone*, *witch*, *bitch*, and *virgin* describe women as threatening, evil, or heterosexually inexperienced and thus incomplete. In prepatriarchal times, however, these words evoked far different images.¹⁰ The crone was the old woman whose life experience gave her insight, wisdom, respect, and the power to enrich people’s lives. The witch was the wise-woman healer, the knower of herbs, the midwife, the link joining body, spirit, and Earth.

The bitch was Artemis-Diana, goddess of the hunt, most often associated with the dogs who accompanied her. And the virgin was merely a woman who was unattached, unclaimed, and unowned by any man and therefore independent and autonomous. Notice how each word has been transformed from a positive cultural image of female power, independence, and dignity to an insult or a shadow of its former self so that few words remain to identify women in ways both positive and powerful.

Going deeper into patriarchal culture, we find a complex web of ideas that define reality and what's considered good and desirable. To see the world through patriarchal eyes is to believe that women and men are profoundly different in their basic natures, that hierarchy is the only alternative to chaos, and that men were made in the image of a masculine God with whom they enjoy a special relationship. It is to take as obvious the idea that there are two and only two distinct genders; that patriarchal heterosexuality is "natural" and same-sex attraction is not; that because men neither bear nor breast-feed children, they cannot feel a compelling bodily connection to them; that on some level every woman, whether heterosexual or lesbian, wants a "real man" who knows how to "take charge of things," including her; that females can't be trusted, especially when they're menstruating or accusing men of sexual abuse. In spite of all the media hype to the contrary, to embrace patriarchy still is to believe that mothers should stay home and that fathers should work outside the home, regardless of men's and women's actual abilities or needs.¹¹ It is to buy into the notion that women are weak and men are strong, that women and children need men to support and protect them, all in spite of the fact that in many ways men are not the physically stronger sex, that women perform a huge share of hard physical labor in many societies (often larger than men's), that women's physical endurance tends to be greater than men's over the long haul, that women tend to be more capable of enduring pain and emotional stress.¹² And yet, as Elizabeth Janeway notes, such evidence means little in the face of a patriarchal culture that dictates how things *ought* to be and, like all cultural mythology, "will not be argued down by facts. It may seem to be making straightforward statements, but actually these conceal another mood, the imperative. Myth exists in a state of tension. It is not really describing a situation, but trying by means of this description *to bring about* what it declares to exist."¹³

To live in a patriarchal culture is to learn what's expected of men and women—to learn the rules that regulate punishment and reward based on how individuals behave and appear. These rules range from laws that require men to fight in wars not of their own choosing to customary expectations that mothers will provide child care. Or that when a woman shows sexual interest in a man or merely smiles or acts friendly, she gives up her right to say

no and to control her own body. And to live under patriarchy is to take into ourselves ways of feeling—the hostile contempt for femaleness that forms the core of misogyny and presumptions of male superiority, the ridicule men direct at other men who show signs of vulnerability or weakness, or the fear and insecurity that every woman must deal with when she exercises the right to move freely in the world, especially at night and by herself in public places.

Such ideas make up the symbolic sea we swim in and the air we breathe. They are the primary well from which springs how we think about ourselves, other people, and the world. As such, they provide a taken-for-granted everyday reality, the setting for our interactions with other people that continually fashion and refashion a sense of what the world is about and who we are in relation to it. This doesn't mean that the ideas underlying patriarchy determine what we think, feel, and do, but it does mean they define what we'll have to deal with as we participate in it.

The prominent place of misogyny in patriarchal culture, for example, doesn't mean that every man and woman consciously hates all things female. But it does mean that to the extent that we don't feel such hatred, it's *in spite of* paths of least resistance contained in our culture. Complete freedom from such feelings and judgments is all but impossible. It is certainly possible for heterosexual men to love women without mentally fragmenting them into breasts, buttocks, genitals, and other variously desirable parts. It is possible for women to feel good about their bodies, to not judge themselves as being too fat, to not abuse themselves to one degree or another in pursuit of impossible male-identified standards of beauty and sexual attractiveness. All of this is possible, but to live in patriarchy is to breathe in misogynist images of women as objectified sexual property valued primarily for their usefulness to men. This finds its way into everyone who grows up breathing and swimming in it, and once inside of us it remains, however unaware of it we may be. So, when we hear or express sexist jokes and other forms of misogyny, we may not recognize it, and even if we do, we may say nothing rather than risk other people thinking we're "too sensitive" or, especially in the case of men, "not one of the guys." In either case, we are involved, if only by our silence.

The symbols and ideas that make up patriarchal culture are important to understand because they have such powerful effects on the structure of social life. By *structure*, I mean the ways privilege and oppression are organized through social relationships and unequal distributions of power, rewards, opportunities, and resources. This appears in countless patterns of everyday life in family and work, religion and politics, community and education. It is found in family divisions of labor that exempt fathers from most domestic

work even when both parents work outside the home and in the concentration of women in lower-level pink-collar jobs and male predominance almost everywhere else. It is in the unequal distribution of income and all that goes with it, from access to health care to the availability of leisure time. It is in patterns of male violence and harassment that can turn a simple walk in the park or a typical day at work or a lovers' quarrel into a life-threatening nightmare. More than anything, the structure of patriarchy is found in the unequal distribution of power that makes male privilege possible, in patterns of male dominance in every facet of human life, from everyday conversation to global politics. By its nature, patriarchy puts issues of power, dominance, and control at the center of human existence, not only in relationships between men and women, but among men as they compete and struggle to gain status, maintain control, and protect themselves from what other men might do to them.

To understand patriarchy, we have to identify its cultural elements and see how they are related to the structure of social life. We must see, for example, how cultural ideas that identify women primarily as mothers and men primarily as breadwinners support patterns in which women do most domestic work at home and are discriminated against in hiring, pay, and promotions at work. But to do anything with such an understanding, we also must see what patriarchy has to do with us as individuals—how it shapes us and how we shape *it*.

The System in Us in the System

One way to see how people connect with systems is to think of us as occupying social positions that locate us in relation to people in other positions. We connect to families, for example, through positions such as “mother,” “daughter,” and “cousin”; to economic systems through positions such as “vice president,” “secretary,” or “unemployed”; to political systems through positions such as “citizen,” “registered voter,” and “mayor”; to religious systems through positions such as “believer” and “clergy.” How we perceive the people who occupy such positions and what we expect of them depend on cultural ideas—such as the belief that mothers are naturally better than fathers at child care. Such ideas are powerful because we use them to construct a sense of who we and other people are. When a woman marries, for example, how people (including her) perceive and think about her changes as cultural ideas about what it means to be a wife come into play—ideas about how wives feel about their husbands, what's most important to wives, what's expected of them, and what they may expect of others.

From this perspective, *who* we and other people think we are has a lot to do with *where* we are in relation to social systems and all the positions we occupy in them. We wouldn't exist as social beings if it weren't for our participation in one social system or another. It's hard to imagine just who we'd be and what our existence would consist of if we took away all our connections to the symbols, ideas, and relationships that make up social systems. Take away language and all that it allows us to imagine and think, starting with our names. Take away all the positions that we occupy and the roles that go with them—from daughter and son to occupation and nationality—and with these all the complex ways our lives are connected to other people. Not much would be left over that we'd recognize as ourselves.¹⁴

We can think of a society as a network of interconnected systems within systems, each made up of social positions and their relations to one another. To say, then, that I'm white, male, college educated, nondisabled, and a writer, sociologist, U.S. citizen, heterosexual, middle-aged, husband, father, grandfather, brother, and son identifies me in relation to positions which are themselves related to positions in various social systems, from the entire world to the family of my birth. In another sense, the day-to-day reality of a society only exists through what people actually do as they participate in it. Patriarchal culture, for example, places a high value on control and maleness. By themselves, these are just abstractions. But when men and women actually talk and men interrupt women more than women interrupt men, or men ignore topics introduced by women in favor of their own or in other ways control conversation,¹⁵ or when men use their authority to harass women in the workplace, then the reality of patriarchy as a kind of society and people's sense of themselves as female and male within it actually happen in a concrete way.

In this sense, like all social systems, patriarchy exists only through people's lives. Through this dynamic relationship, patriarchy's various aspects are there for us to see over and over again. This has two important implications for how we understand patriarchy. First, to some extent people experience patriarchy as external to them. But this doesn't mean that it's a distinct and separate thing, like a house in which we live. Instead, by participating in patriarchy we are *of* patriarchy and it is *of* us. Both exist *through* the other and neither can exist without the other. Second, patriarchy isn't static. It's an ongoing *process* that's continuously shaped and reshaped. Since the thing we're participating in is patriarchal, we tend to behave in ways that create a patriarchal world from one moment to the next. But we have some freedom to break the rules and construct everyday life in different ways, which means that the paths we choose to follow can do as much to change patriarchy as they can to perpetuate it.

We're involved in patriarchy and its consequences because we occupy social positions in it, which is all it takes. Because patriarchy is, by definition, a system of inequality organized around gender categories, we can no more avoid being involved in it than we can avoid being female or male. *All* men and *all* women are therefore involved in this oppressive system, and none of us can control *whether* we participate, only *how*. As Harry Brod argues, this is especially important in relation to men and male privilege:

We need to be clear that there is no such thing as giving up one's privilege to be "outside" the system. One is always *in* the system. The only question is whether one is part of the system in a way which challenges or strengthens the status quo. Privilege is not something I *take* and which I therefore have the option of *not* taking. It is something that society *gives* me, and unless I change the institutions which give it to me, they will continue to give it, and I will continue to *have* it, however noble and egalitarian my intentions.¹⁶

Because privilege is conferred by social systems, people don't have to *feel* privileged in order to *be* privileged. When I do presentations, for example, I usually come away feeling pretty good about what happened and, therefore, about myself. If anyone were to ask me to explain why things went so well, I'd probably mention my ability, my years of experience in public speaking, the quality of my ideas, and so on, as well as the interest and contributions of the audience. The last thing that would occur to me, however, would be that my success was aided by my gender, that if I'd performed in exactly the same way but was perceived to be a woman, research shows quite clearly that I'd have been taken less seriously, evaluated less positively, and have less of my success attributed to my own efforts and ability. The difference between the two outcomes is a measure of male privilege, and there is little I can do to get rid of it, because its authority doesn't rest in me but in society itself, especially in cultural images of gender. The audience doesn't know it is conferring male privilege on me, and I may not be aware that I'm receiving it. But the privilege is there, nonetheless. That all this may feel "natural" and nonprivileged only deepens the system's hold on all who participate in it.

A Case in Point: Rethinking Gender Violence

It's a sociological truism that problems produced by social systems can't be solved without changing systems, but one would never know it to judge from most discussions of how to cure what ails us. No matter how liberals and

conservatives approach a problem like poverty, for example, the focus always comes around to changing individuals but not systems, which amounts to an agreement to perpetuate the status quo. Conservatives blame the poor, leaving it to them to pull themselves together, adopt the right values, and work harder. Liberals turn to government for the answer, but this shouldn't be mistaken for systemic change. Liberals use government programs to change individuals—poor people—by giving them money, job training, food stamps, or health care rather than trying to change how society generates poverty in the first place.

The industrial capitalist economic system allows a small portion of the population to appropriate most of the income and wealth created each year through people's labor—as anyone can see from readily available sources. In the United States, the richest 10 percent controls roughly 80 percent of all the wealth, including 87 percent of the cash and more than 90 percent of business assets, stocks, and bonds. The wealthiest 20 percent controls half of annual income, leaving the “bottom” 80 percent to compete over the rest.¹⁷ When most of the population is left to fight over half the income and a fifth of the wealth, it's inevitable that large numbers of people will wind up with too little or just barely enough to live a decent life no matter how hard they work, including huge numbers of “working poor” who have full-time jobs. In the end, both liberal and conservative solutions call on individuals to work harder and compete more effectively, but the predictable result is that tomorrow's losers will simply be better educated and harder working than today's. What neither side dares to hint is that a system organized to produce such gross inequality might need to be changed.

As with poverty, so too with patriarchy. Instead of focusing on patriarchy as a system and understanding people's relation to it, most discussions psychologize and individualize gender issues and concentrate on education, self-help workshops, psychotherapy, and other programs for individual change. This may make some people happier, better adjusted, or more successful, but without a critical awareness of patriarchy as a system, there's little reason to push beyond personal change. Men, for example, are often motivated to avoid accusations of sexism, and once they've achieved a socially acceptable level of interpersonal sensitivity, they may enjoy some sense of relief and relative safety from criticism, if not a certain smugness in relation to men who still don't “get it” (even here, the patriarchal game continues). And, having found a safe haven, they are unlikely to risk making anyone, including themselves, uncomfortable by digging deeper into questions about what patriarchy is, how it works, and why and how it needs to be changed. The same can be said of women who manage to rise to the top of their occupations; for, having achieved acceptance by the patriarchal system,

they risk losing power, rewards, and recognition if they then challenge that same system. As a result, they often serve patriarchal interests by accusing feminists who focus on patriarchy of “playing victim” instead of working to succeed as individuals.

We must focus on patriarchy as a system, but this doesn’t mean we should ignore individuals, only that we include them as participants in a larger system rather than treat them as the beginning and end of everything. Consider, for example, the problem of male violence and harassment against women. Between one quarter and one half of American women can expect to suffer some form of sexual violence during their lives, and women are equally likely to be physically abused in other ways, especially by men close to them. Battering by intimates has become the most frequent cause of injury to women, occurring in some states more often than mugging, car accidents, and sexual assault combined. Sexual harassment is pervasive in the workplace, with the proportion of women who say they’ve been harassed ranging from just under one half to more than three quarters, depending on the occupation. Men’s violence against women is so widespread that the United Nations declared it to be “the most pervasive form of human rights abuse.”¹⁸

With the exception of some feminist analyses¹⁹ (which rarely receive mass media coverage), most discussions of gender violence and harassment focus on questions about individuals rather than patriarchy. What kind of men rape and harass? What kind of personality problems do they have? What were their childhoods like? And what bad experiences did they have with women, especially their mothers? This last reason is especially popular, but it makes sense only if we ignore questions about how individuals and their experience are connected to social systems.

Why, for example, should bad experiences with members of a particular group lead to a lifetime of prejudice, hatred, and violence against them? Having a bad experience with someone who wears glasses is unlikely to cause antipathy toward people who wear glasses, but people often say their prejudice against groups such as blacks, women, or Jews is based on a few bad experiences during their younger years. The difference between people who wear glasses, on the one hand, and Jews, blacks, and women on the other is that the latter are all regarded and treated as a devalued subordinate group in a racist, anti-Semitic, sexist society, while the former are not. What turns a bad individual experience into a pattern of prejudicial, discriminatory, and violent behavior is a social environment that encourages and supports just that sort of generalization. It does this by presenting such groups in a way that makes it easy to attribute bad experiences with individuals to their stereotypical group characteristics. So if an individual Jew treats a non-Jew badly, the latter is culturally supported in attributing the bad treatment to

Jewishness itself rather than, say, to that individual's personality or mood. The same dynamic occurs with all subordinate groups, including people of color and women. Without such cultural linkages, people would interpret unpleasant incidents with individuals as no more than that, and the particular social characteristics of the other person would take on no special *social* significance. But when such linkages are provided as paths of least resistance, it's all too easy to seize upon devalued characteristics and generalize to them from what is otherwise an isolated individual experience.

Individual psychology and experience are of course important keys to understanding social life. By themselves, however, they can't possibly explain social *patterns* such as prejudice, discrimination, and violence inflicted by members of one group against another. It's like trying to explain the pervasive lynching of blacks in the post-Civil War South by analyzing the personalities of individuals who took part while ignoring how the long history of white privilege and racial oppression shaped white people's perceptions, expectations, and judgments of what they thought they could do to people of color. It's as if we don't need to consider the racist social environment in which lynchers acted, that gave whites something to gain by oppressing blacks and keeping them in a state of intimidation and fear, that defined blacks as suitable targets for hostility and violence and made it clear that whites who tortured and murdered blacks would go unpunished. It would seem almost silly to suggest that this pattern of lynching occurred simply because one community after another just happened to have some number of people whose troubled personalities led to racial hatred and violence. And it would seem equally silly to suggest that we could stop lynching by identifying troubled individuals and trying to change them—through re-education and psychotherapy, perhaps—rather than focusing on a social system that promoted and protected their behavior.

And yet that's precisely what we've done in relation to men's violence against women. There is a phenomenal amount of public resistance to the idea that such patterns could involve anything more than individual misbehavior and psychopathology. Several years ago, for example, I testified before a state commission charged with finding ways to stop violence against women. I asked the commission to consider that (1) the vast majority of violence against women is perpetrated by men; (2) this takes place in a society that is clearly male dominated, male identified, and male centered; and (3) we need to understand how these two are connected, how the patriarchal character of the society contributes to patterns of violence by members of the gender-dominant group against members of the gender-subordinate group. This generated considerable interest and I was invited to meet with a subcommittee responsible for public education and awareness.

My argument was fine, they said, but what could be done with it? I suggested a first step that was both simple and radical: Become perhaps the first governmental body in the United States to acknowledge openly that men's violence against women is widespread, that we live in a patriarchal society, and that we need to devote serious resources to studying how those two are connected. This was greeted with a nervous murmur that circled the room, for apparently even to acknowledge that patriarchy both exists and is problematic is a risky thing to do. Needless to say, patriarchy remained safely invisible in the commission's final report. In other such groups, the response has been similar—clear recognition of the scope of the problem but an unwillingness to come out and speak the plain truth. "It'll make a lot of men angry," goes a typical response, which, of course, is probably true. But the alternative is to go along as we have, shielding the system by pretending problems like violence aren't about systems, only about individuals who have somehow gone astray.

Like lynching, men's violence against women is something that individual men do and for which they can and should be held accountable. But it's *more* than that, and this means we have to pursue its causes in a broader and deeper way. In addition to being something that individual men do, violence against women is also a pattern of behavior that reflects the oppressive patriarchal relationships that exist between men and women as dominant and subordinate groups in society as a whole. Individuals don't behave in a vacuum—everything about us takes shape in relation to social contexts larger than ourselves. As such, our perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and behavior are neither self-contained nor simply "out there" in society. Rather, they emerge through and reflect our *participation* in patriarchal society. If we ignore this, then we perpetuate the status quo by focusing on the individual *manifestations* of social forces while ignoring the social forces themselves. And that is one reason why an individualistic approach serves patriarchal and other status quo interests so well.

To understand violence against women as both a social and a psychological problem, we have to ask what kind of society would provide fertile ground for it to take root and flourish as a recurring pattern of behavior. Decades of research have established a clear link between pervasive sexual violence against women and a patriarchal environment in which control and dominance are highly valued in men.²⁰ Under patriarchy, for example, "normal" heterosexuality is male identified and male centered, emphasizing men's access to women and equating "real" sex with intercourse, a practice that's far more conducive to men's pleasure than women's.²¹ Such a system encourages men to value women primarily in terms of their ability to meet men's needs and desires and to support men's self-images as potent and in

control.²² The huge pornography industry, for example, exists primarily to provide men with female images available for them to appropriate and incorporate into masturbatory fantasies. As a result, men's use of coercion and violence to control women sexually and their use of women as objects on which to act out feelings of rage, shame, frustration, or fear are commonplace, not only in behavior, but as popular themes in literature, films, and other mass media. In other words, given the values promoted by patriarchal culture, men resort to violence against women because it *works*.²³

None of this can be divorced from a society organized around male privilege and oppressive relations between men and women as groups. To the degree that violence, control, domination, objectification, and sexuality are bound up with one another under patriarchy, we need to look at how patriarchal culture defines normal sexuality. What we take for granted as "natural" sexuality is not. It is and always has been socially constructed, and the context in which this occurs as well as what goes into it are profoundly bound up with the culture and structure of patriarchal systems.²⁴ This means that although sexual violence certainly involves how some men feel and behave, it goes beyond this to include patterns that are rooted in patriarchy as a whole. Specific acts of violence directed at women *because* they are women are related to the social oppression of women as a group, just as specific acts of violence directed against blacks *because* they are black are related to the existence of racial oppression in society as a whole. This means that men's violence against women involves *everyone* who participates in the life of patriarchal society, *even though only a minority of individuals may actually do it or be directly victimized by it*.

The challenge for individuals—men in particular—is to figure out what it means to be involved in patriarchy and, therefore, to also be involved in consequences such as sexual violence. When Susan Brownmiller writes, in *Against Our Will*, that rape "is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear,"²⁵ many men feel offended by what they think is an accusation that all men are rapists. Regardless of what Brownmiller actually means, men wouldn't react so defensively if they realized that "involvement" in a system like patriarchy doesn't necessarily reflect their personal motives and behavior. Regardless of whether I, as an individual man, rape anyone, I am connected to the pattern of violence through which other men do. I am connected if only because I participate in a society that encourages the sexual domination, objectification, and exploitation of women, all of which normalize and support sexual violence as a pattern of behavior.

Whether I personally encourage or support this behavior is beside the point. That women, for example, will tend to fear and therefore defer to

me simply because they identify me as a man, or that they'll seek me out for protection against other men, or that they'll curtail their freedom of movement in ways that are unnecessary for me, all affect me, regardless of how I think, feel, or behave. In such a world, being able to walk freely about at night or look people in the eye and smile when you pass them on the street or dress as you please becomes a privilege precisely because it is denied to some and allowed to others, and the privilege exists regardless of whether men experience it as such.²⁶ That I don't rape women doesn't mean I'm not involved in a patriarchal society that promotes both male privilege and men's violence as a means to control women.

If we think about problems like violence in a way that appreciates both the power of systems and the importance of our role in them, the choice we face becomes clearer. The choice isn't about whether to be involved in privilege and oppression. It isn't about accepting blame for a system we didn't create. Nor is it about whether to make ourselves better people so that we can consider ourselves above and beyond sexism as a social problem. The choice is how to participate in this system differently so that we can help to change not only ourselves, but the world that shapes our lives and is, in turn, shaped by them. Ultimately, the choice is about empowering ourselves to take our share of responsibility for the patriarchal legacy that we've all inherited.

If you're already starting to wonder what people can do in order to take responsibility, or if you start feeling that way as you read on, feel free to turn to Chapter 10 which is devoted entirely to that question.

3

Why Patriarchy?

Patriarchy is full of paradox, not least of which is the mere fact that it exists at all. Consider this: In union, female and male bring new life into the world. They live and work together to make families and communities. They trace their deepest time–space sense of who they are and where they came from through ties of blood and marriage that join them as children, parents, siblings, or life partners who bring with them some of the profoundest needs for intimacy, belonging, and caring that humans beings can have. And yet here we are, stuck in patriarchy, surrounded by privilege and oppression, fundamentally at odds. Obviously, something powerful is going on and has been for a long time. What kind of social engine could create and sustain such an oppressive system in the face of all the good reasons against it? In short, why patriarchy?

The answer that first occurs to many people is that patriarchy is rooted in some natural order of things, reflecting “essential” differences between women and men based on biology or genetics (which is why such arguments are called “essentialist”).¹ Men tend to be physically stronger than women, for example, which might explain their dominance. Or men must protect pregnant or lactating women from wild beasts and other men, and female dependency requires men to be in charge. Or men are naturally predisposed to dominance, and patriarchy simply *is* men and what they do to one another

and to women. In other words, patriarchy comes down to guys just being guys.

If we take such arguments seriously, it's hard not to conclude that male privilege and oppression are simply part of what we are as a species. This will appeal to anyone who wants to perpetuate patriarchy or who wants to blame men for it. For people like me, who sometimes feel overwhelmed by men's violence, it is also hard to resist the idea that there's something fundamentally wrong with maleness itself. Unfortunately, though, essentialism offers little hope short of changing human nature, getting rid of men, or finding a way for women and men to live completely apart (which won't do anything about the awful things many men do to one another).² Given this, it makes little sense to embrace essentialism unless there's solid evidence to support it. But there isn't. Essentialism requires us to ignore much of what we know about psychology, biology, genetics, history, and how social life actually works. We have to be willing to reduce incredibly complex patterns of social life not just to biology and genetics, but to the even thinner slice of human life that defines sex, a position that gets little support even from biologists, including sociobiologists like E. O. Wilson.³ And if we believe in evolution, essentialism backs us into the corner of arguing that privilege and oppression are actually a *positive* adaptation, that societies organized in this way will thrive more than those that aren't.

Essentialism also implies that patriarchy is the only system that's ever been, since what makes something "essential" is its universal and inescapable nature. Some things, of course, are essentially human, such as small children's period of dependence on adults to feed, protect, and care for them. When it comes to patriarchy, however, all kinds of evidence from anthropology, archaeology, and history point to anything but a universal natural order. There is, for example, a lot of archaeological evidence from pre-patriarchal times that dates back to about seven thousand years ago, when goddess imagery held a central place throughout modern-day Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.⁴ We also know that the status of women varies a great deal among pre-industrial tribal societies. In many cases, for example, kinship is traced through women, women are neither subordinated nor oppressed, misogyny and sexual violence are unheard of, and women control property and have political authority.⁵ Since essentialism assumes that all humans share the same human "essence," it falls apart in the face of such striking and widespread variations.

The best reason to pass up essentialism may be that it doesn't fit with what we know about gender. Essentialism, for example, can't account for the enormous variability we find *among* women and *among* men, or for the similarities between men and women in similar situations.⁶ On various measures

of mental ability, men differ as much from other men as they do from women; and men and women placed in the same situation, such as having sole responsibility for child care, tend to respond in ways that are far more similar than different.⁷ Essentialism also can't explain why so much coercion is needed to keep patriarchy going. If male privilege is rooted in some male essence, for example, then why do so many men experience such pain, confusion, ambivalence, and resistance during their training for patriarchal manhood and their lives as adult men?⁸ And if women's essence is to be subordinate, how do we explain their long history of resisting oppression and learning to undermine and counteract male dominance?⁹

In spite of its appeal, essentialism doesn't hold up as a way to understand patriarchy. The alternative takes us into the deep root structures of social forces powerful enough to drive patriarchy in spite of all the good reasons against it. And it takes us deep into ourselves, where the terms of life under patriarchy often seem to permeate to the core of who we are.

Missing Links: Control, Fear, and Men

Perhaps more than anything else, what drives patriarchy as a system—what fuels competition, aggression, and oppression—is a dynamic relationship between control and fear.¹⁰ Patriarchy encourages men to seek security, status, and other rewards through control, to fear other men's ability to control and harm them, and to identify being in control as both their best defense against loss and humiliation and the surest route to what they need and desire. In this sense, although we usually think of patriarchy in terms of women and men, it is more about what goes on *among men*. The oppression of women is certainly an important part of patriarchy, but, paradoxically, it may not be the *point* of patriarchy.

Why does control have such cosmic importance under patriarchy? One possibility is that control may be inherently so terrific that men just can't resist organizing their lives around it. In other words, men control because they *can*. But this puts us back in the arms of dead-end essentialism and up against the fact that the more people try to control other people and themselves, the more miserable they seem to be. And the idea that what men might get through control, such as wealth or prestige, is inherently so appealing that they would participate routinely in the oppression of their mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives isn't much better. For that to be true, we would first have to explain how control and its rewards could possibly outweigh the horrendous consequences of oppression, especially involving groups as intimately involved as women and men are. A common explanation is, "That's

the way people (men) are. They'll always compete for wealth, power, and prestige." But that's the kind of circular reasoning that essentialism so often gets us into: Men are that way because that's the way men are.

An essentialist approach also ignores the prominent role that fear plays in most men's lives. Unlike control, fear may be one of the most powerful and primal of all human motivations, more deeply rooted than greed, desire, lust, or even love. Nothing matches fear's potential to twist us out of shape, to drive us to abandon everything we otherwise hold dear, to oppress and do violence to one another—fear of death, of loss, of pain, of shame or rejection. And the most powerfully oppressive systems are organized in ways that promote fear. What patriarchy accomplishes is to make men fear what other men might do to us—how control might be turned on us to do us harm and deprive us of what matters most to us. This encourages men to feel afraid of being ridiculed and deprived of recognition as real men.¹¹ We're afraid men will use economic power to take away jobs or hold us back or make our work lives miserable. We're afraid they'll beat us up or kill us if we're unlucky enough to provoke the wrong one. We're afraid they'll wage war against us, destroy our communities and homes, beat, torture, rape, and kill those we love. In short, patriarchy encourages men to fear all the things that other men might do to exert control and thereby protect and enhance their standing as real men in relation to other men.

Women, of course, have many reasons to fear men, but this isn't what shapes and defines patriarchy as a way of life. Men's fear of other men is crucial because *patriarchy is driven by how men both cause and respond to it*. Because patriarchy is organized around male-identified control, men's path of least resistance is to protect themselves by increasing their own sense of control, and patriarchy provides many ways to do that. For some, it's holding their own in aggressive male banter, whatever their particular group's version of "doing the dozens"¹² happens to be. Or keeping their feelings to themselves rather than being vulnerable at the wrong moment to someone looking for an advantage. Or learning to win an argument, always having an answer, and never admitting they're wrong. They learn early on not to play with girls unless it's in the back seats of cars, and may go out of their way to avoid the appearance that women can control them. They may pump iron, talk and follow sports, study boxing and martial arts, learn to use guns, play football or hockey or rugby. In all these ways they may try to cope with their own fear and at the same time inspire it in others, all the while maintaining an underlying commitment to men, what men do, and the system of privilege that binds them together.

Men's participation in patriarchy tends to lock them in an endless pursuit of and defense against control, for *under patriarchy, control is both the*

source of and the only solution offered for their fear. The more invested a man is in the control–fear spiral, the worse he feels when he doesn’t feel in control. And so on some level he’s always on the lookout for opportunities to renew his sense of control while protecting himself from providing that same kind of opportunity for others, especially men. As each man pursues control as a way to defend and advance himself, he fuels the very same response in *other* men. This dynamic has provided patriarchy with an escalating driving force for thousands of years.

Men pay an enormous price for participating in patriarchy. The more in control men try to be, for example, the less secure they feel. They may not know it because they’re so busy trying to be in control, but the more they organize their lives around being in control, the more tied they are to the fear of *not* being in control. As Marilyn French put it, “A religion of power is a religion of fear, and . . . those who worship power are the most terrified creatures on the earth.”¹³ Dig beneath the surface appearance of “great men,” and you’ll often find deep insecurity, fear, and a chronic need to prove themselves to other men. As president of the United States, for example, one of the most powerful positions on Earth, George H. W. Bush was obsessed that people might think he was a “wimp.” Before him, President Lyndon Johnson continued the Vietnam War in part because he was afraid of being considered “less than manly” if he didn’t.¹⁴ Rather than making men feel safe, great power makes them need still greater control to protect themselves from still more powerful men locked into the same cycle. To make matters worse, control itself is a fleeting, momentary experience, not a natural, stable state. And so, as Marilyn French and Simone Weil argue, control is always on the edge of slipping away or falling apart:

Power is not what we think it is. Power is not substantial; not even when it takes substantive form. The money you hold in your hand can be devalued overnight. . . . A title can be removed at the next board meeting. . . . A huge military establishment can disintegrate in a few days . . . a huge economic structure can collapse in a few weeks.¹⁵

All power is unstable. . . . There is never power, but only a race for power. . . . Power is, by definition, only a means . . . but power seeking, owing to its essential incapacity to seize ahold of its object, rules out all consideration of an end, and finally comes . . . to take the place of all ends.¹⁶

The religion of fear and control also blocks men’s need for human connection by redefining intimacy. Men are encouraged to see everything and

everyone as other, and to look on every situation in terms of how it might enhance or threaten their sense of control. Every opportunity for control, however, can also be an occasion for a failure of control, a fact that can inject issues of control and power into the most unlikely situations. Intimacy is lost as a chance to be open and vulnerable on the way to a deeper connection. Sexual intimacy in particular can go from pleasure in a safe place to a male performance laced with worry about whether the penis—that notorious and willful “other” that so often balks at men’s efforts at control—will “perform” as it’s supposed to. Dictionaries typically define impotence as a man’s *inability to achieve or sustain an erection*, as if an erection were something a man *did* and not something he experienced, like sweating or having his heart beat rapidly or feeling happy. The more preoccupied with control men are, the more lovers recede as full people with feelings, thoughts, will, and soul, and become vehicles for bolstering manhood and relieving anxiety. And even though a woman’s opinion of a man’s sexual “performance” may seem to be what matters, her words of reassurance are rarely enough, for it’s always a patriarchal male gaze that’s looking at him over her shoulder and judging him.

Patriarchy is grounded in a Great Lie that the answer to life’s needs is disconnection, competition, and control rather than connection, sharing, and cooperation. The Great Lie separates men from what they need most by encouraging them to be autonomous and disconnected when in fact human existence is fundamentally relational. What is a “me” without a “you,” a “mother” without a “child,” a “teacher” without a “student”? Who are we if not our ties to other people—“I *am* . . . a father, a husband, a worker, a friend, a son, a brother”?¹⁷ But patriarchal culture turns the truth inside out, and “self-made man” goes from oxymoron to cultural ideal. And somewhere between the need for human connection and the imperative to control, the two merge, and a sense of control becomes the closest many men ever come to feeling connected with anything, including themselves.

Patriarchy as a Men’s Problem

Patriarchy is usually portrayed as something that’s primarily between women and men. At first blush this makes a lot of sense given that “male” and “female” define each other and that women occupy an oppressed position in relation to male privilege. Paradoxically, however, the cycle of control and fear that drives patriarchy has more to do with relations among men than with women, for it is men who control men’s standing *as men*. With few exceptions, men look to other men—not women—to affirm their manhood,

whether as coaches, friends, teammates, co-workers, sports figures, fathers, or mentors.

This contradicts the conventional wisdom that women hold the key to heterosexual men's sense of manhood. It's true that men often use women to show they measure up—especially by controlling women sexually—but the standards that are used are men's, not women's. Men also may try to impress women as “real men” in order to start and keep relationships with them, to control them, or to get sexual access and personal care. This isn't enough to prove they're real men, however. For affirmation of that, they have to go to a larger male-identified world—from the local bar to sports to work—which is also where they're most vulnerable to other men. Whether in locker rooms or the heat of political campaigns, when a man is accused of being a “wimp” or of otherwise failing to measure up, it almost always comes from another man. And when a man suspects *himself* of being less than a real man, he judges himself through a patriarchal male gaze, not from a woman's perspective.

Although men often use women as scapegoats for their bad feelings about themselves, women's role in this is indirect at most. If other men reject a man's claim to “real man” standing, how his wife or mother sees him usually makes little difference, and if women's opinions *do* matter to him, his manhood becomes all the more suspect to other men.¹⁸ Women's marginal importance in the manhood question is plain to see in the risks men take to prove themselves in spite of objections from wives, mothers, and other women who find them just fine the way they are. The record books are full of men who seize upon *anything*—from throwing Frisbees to extreme sports to being the first to get somewhere or discover something—as a way to create competitive arenas in which they can jockey for position and prove themselves among men.¹⁹ If a man must choose between men's and women's views of what makes a real man, he'll choose men's views most of the time. “A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do,” is typically spoken by a man to a woman (often as he goes off to do something with other men). And just what it is he's got to do is determined by men and patriarchy, not by women. It isn't up to women to decide what a real man is. Her role is to reassure men that they meet the standards of a male-identified patriarchal culture.

When a woman does question or attack a man's masculinity, the terms of the attack and the power behind it are based on men's standards of patriarchal manhood. She's not going to attack his manhood, for example, by telling him he isn't caring enough. When she uses what are culturally defined as *women's* terms—“You're not sensitive, nurturing, open, or vulnerable and you're *too* controlling”—the attack has much less weight and produces far less effect. But when women don't play along—when they criticize or

question or merely lose enthusiasm for affirming patriarchal manhood—they risk the wrath of men, who may feel undermined, abandoned, and even betrayed. Men may not like being criticized for failing to measure up to “women’s” ideas of what men should be, but it’s nothing compared to how angry and violent men can be toward women who dare to use “men’s” weapons against them by questioning their manhood.

In the patriarchal cycle of control and fear, no man is safe from challenges to his real-man standing, which is why even the rich and powerful can be so quick to defend themselves. In his analysis of John F. Kennedy’s presidency, for example, David Halberstam argues that Kennedy initiated U.S. involvement in the Vietnamese civil war in part because he failed to appear sufficiently tough and manly at his 1961 Vienna summit meeting with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. Khrushchev challenged Kennedy from the start, and Kennedy, surprised, responded in kind only toward the end. Upon returning home, he felt the need for an opportunity to right the impression he’d made and remove any doubts about his manhood. “If he [Khrushchev] thinks I’m inexperienced and have no guts,” Kennedy told *New York Times* reporter James Reston, “. . . we won’t get anywhere with him. So we have to act . . . and Vietnam looks like the place.”²⁰ And so the horror of U.S. involvement in Vietnam turned on a political system organized in part around men’s ability to impress one another with their standing as real men. And this no doubt played a prominent role in the tortured progress of that war and the stubborn refusal of all sides to compromise or admit defeat.

In addition to what Kennedy’s dilemma says about patriarchal politics, it also challenges the stereotype that macho displays of manhood are largely confined to lower- and working-class subcultures. The roots of men proving their manhood run deep in the upper classes, from President George W. Bush taunting and daring Iraqi guerrillas to “bring it on” and attack U.S. troops to the enthusiastic stampede of Britain’s elite to the killing fields of World War I to the sexually compulsive behavior of Bill Clinton and John Kennedy to the San Francisco Bohemian Grove retreats where captains of business and government gather to make deals, mock women in cross-dressing skits, and otherwise relax in the comfort of male privilege.²¹ Men, of course, aren’t born to this. They must be trained and given ongoing incentives.

In the early 1960s, for example, I was a middle-class first-year student at an all-male Ivy League college, a training ground for the sons of the elite. Among my classmates’ fathers were prominent figures in business, government, and the professions, who fully expected their sons to follow in their footsteps. In late fall, dorm residents who’d been accepted to fraternities prepared for “sink night,” a time to celebrate their newfound “brotherhood” by getting very drunk. Before they went off, they warned freshmen not to

lock our doors when we went to bed because they intended to pay us a visit later on and didn't expect to be stopped by a locked door. We didn't know what was coming, but there was no mistaking the dense familiar weight of men's potential for violence.

When they returned that night, screaming drunk, they went from door to door, rousting us from our beds and herding us into the hall. They lined us up and ordered us to drop our pants. Then one held a metal ruler and another a *Playboy* magazine opened to the centerfold picture, and the two went down the line, thrusting the picture in our faces, screaming "Get it up!" and resting our penises on the ruler. The others paced up and down the hall behind them, yelling, screaming, and laughing, thickening the air with a mixture of alcohol and held violence. None of us protested, and of course none of us "measured up." We weren't supposed to (any man who'd managed an erection would have become a legend on the spot). That, after all, was the point: to submit to the humiliation, to mirror (like women) men's power to control and terrorize in what we later learned was a rite of passage known as "the peter meter."

For them, perhaps, it was a passage to a fraternal bond forged in their shared power over the "others." For us, it was a grant of immunity from having to submit again, at least in this place, to these men, in this way. But our lack of outrage and the general absence of talk about it afterward suggest we got something else as well. As outrageous as the peter meter was, it touched a core of patriarchal truth about men, power, and violence that, as men, we found repellant and yet ultimately acceptable. The truth is, we, too, got a piece of real-man standing that night, for by deadening and controlling ourselves in the face of an assault, we showed that we had the right stuff. Had anyone protested, he wouldn't have been seen as the more manly for his courage. More likely, he'd have been called a sissy, a pussy, a little mama's boy who couldn't take it. And so we both lost and gained during our late-night dip in the patriarchal paradox of men competing and bonding at the same time.²²

What about Women?

In one sense, women, like all else under patriarchy, are something for men to control. The consequences of this are enormous because of the damage it does to women's lives, but controlling women is neither the point of patriarchy nor the engine that drives it. This means that women's place is more complicated than it might seem, especially in relation to competition among men.²³

This works in several ways. First, heterosexual men are encouraged to use women as badges of success to protect and enhance their standing in the

eyes of other men. People routinely compliment a man married to a beautiful woman, for example, not because he had a hand in making her beautiful but because he has proprietary rights of access to her. In contrast, people are much less likely to compliment a man whose wife is financially successful—especially if she earns more than he does—because this threatens rather than enhances his status as a real man.

Men's use of women as badges of success is a prime example of how men can compete and ally with one another at the same time.²⁴ On the one hand, they may compete over who has the highest standing and is therefore least vulnerable to other men's control, as when they vie for a specific woman or use women in general as a way to keep score on their manhood. A man who lacks enthusiasm for pursuing women may have his masculinity questioned, if not attacked, especially by being "accused" of being gay. In this sense, "getting laid" is more than a badge of success. It's also a safe-conduct pass through perpetually hostile territory.

At the same time that men may compete with one another, they're also encouraged to bond around a common view of women as objects to be competed for, possessed, and used. When men tell sexist jokes, for example, or banter about women's bodies, they usually can count on other men to go along (if only in silence), for a man who objects risks becoming an outcast. Even if the joke is directed at his wife or lover, he's likely to choose his tie to men over loyalty to her by letting it pass with a shrug and perhaps a good-natured smile that leaves intact his standing as one of the guys.

In this sense, the competitive dynamic of patriarchal heterosexuality brings men together and promotes feelings of solidarity by acting out the values of control and male domination. This is partly why there is so much male violence against gay men: Since gays don't use women in this way, their sexual orientation challenges not so much heterosexuality per se but *male solidarity* around the key role of control and domination in *patriarchal* heterosexuality.²⁵ John Stoltenberg argues that violence against gays also protects male solidarity by protecting men from sexual aggression at the hands of other men:

Imagine this country without homophobia: There would be a woman raped every three minutes and a man raped every three minutes. Homophobia keeps that statistic at a manageable level. The system is not fool-proof. It breaks down, for instance, in prison and in childhood—when men and boys are often subject to the same sexual terrorism that women live with almost all the time. But for the most part homophobia serves male supremacy by keeping males who act like real men safe from sexual assault.²⁶

A second part that women play in men's struggle for control is to support the idea that men and women are fundamentally different, because this gives men a clear and unambiguous turf—masculinity—on which to pursue control in competition with one another.²⁷ Women do this primarily by supporting (or at least not challenging) femininity as a valid view of who women are and how they're supposed to be. The idea that male sexuality is inherently aggressive, predatory, and heterosexual, for example, defines a common ground for men in relation to both women and other men. To protect this, it's important that women *not* be sexually aggressive or predatory because this would challenge the idea of a unique male sexuality as a basis for male solidarity, competition, and dominance.

When women challenge stereotypically feminine ways of acting, it makes it harder for men to see themselves clearly as men. This muddles men's relationships with women and their standing as real men under patriarchy. In the film *Fatal Attraction*, for example, the villain embodied a predatory, violent female sexuality that sent shock waves through audiences across the country. The history of film includes legions of obsessive, murderous men, but with the appearance of the first such woman there was a rush to analyze and explain how such a thing could happen. Perhaps her greatest transgression was to trespass on male turf by violating the strictures of cultural femininity. How fitting, then, that everything should be "set right" when her lover's wife—who embodied all the feminine virtues of good mother, faithful wife, and constrained sexuality—killed the madwoman who'd invaded the sanctity of this "normal" patriarchal household.

In a third sense, a woman's place is to support the key patriarchal illusion that men are independent and autonomous. An unemployed wife who sees herself as dependent, for example, props up images of male independence that mask men's considerable dependence on women for emotional support, physical comfort, and a broad range of practical services. On the average, for example, men tend to have a much harder time adjusting to the loss of a spouse than women do, especially at older ages. And the standard model for a career still assumes a wife at home to perform support work, putting any man (or woman) who doesn't have one at a disadvantage.²⁸

The illusion of male independence and female dependence is amplified whenever men complain about the burdens of the provider role. In fact, however, most husbands would have it no other way, because for all its demands, the provider role brings with it power and status and exempts men from domestic work such as cleaning and child care. As a result, many men feel threatened when their wives earn as much or more than they do. They cling to the idea that earning a living is a man's responsibility that anchors male gender identity, and that women are little more than helpers in

that role²⁹ if not “little women” waiting for a man to bring home the bacon. This arrangement, however, was created largely by working- and middle-class white men who fought for the “family wage” in the early 1900s. This enabled them to support their families by themselves and justified keeping wives at home, where they would be financially dependent and available to provide personal services.³⁰

You might think that such arrangements are a thing of the past, that with so many married women working outside the home, the provider role is no longer male-identified. But the superficial appearance of gender equity and balance masks a continuing imbalance that’s revealed when we consider how men and women would be affected by leaving paid employment. If the woman in a two-earner household were to give up her job, it might create hardships and negative feelings, but these probably wouldn’t include making her feel less than a real woman. But for a man to give up his job, he’d have to contend with far more serious threats to his sense of himself as a real man, and both women and men know it. This is why, when someone in a marriage has to leave paid employment—to take care of children or ailing relatives, for example—it is generally understood that it will be the woman, regardless of who earns more.³¹

A fourth aspect of women’s place is to help contain men’s resentment over being controlled by *other men* so that it doesn’t overpower the male solidarity that is essential to patriarchy. Most men are dominated by other men, especially at work, and yet judge their manhood by how much control they have in their own lives. It’s a standard against which they’re bound to fall short. If they rebel against other men—as when workers go on strike—the risks can be huge and the gains short-lived. A safer alternative is compensation in the form of social support to control and feel superior to women. This provides both individual men and patriarchy with a safety valve for the frustration and rage that might otherwise be directed toward other men and at far greater risk to both individuals and the system as a whole. No matter what other men do to a man or how deeply they control his life, he can always feel culturally superior to women and entitled to take out his anger and frustration on them.³²

In this way, men are allowed to dominate women as compensation for their being subordinated to other men because of social class, race, or other forms of inequality. Ironically, however, their dominance of women supports the same principles of control that enable other men to subordinate them, a contradiction that is typical of systems of privilege. Men may buy into this so long as they can, in turn, enjoy the dominance that comes with applying those principles to women. The use of such compensation to stabilize

systems also works with race and class inequality where one oppression is used to compensate for another. Working-class people, for example, can always look down on people receiving welfare, just as lower-class whites can feel superior to people of color. The playing off of one oppression against another helps explain why overt prejudice is most common among the most disadvantaged groups—because these are the people most in need of some kind of compensation.³³

Related to men's use of women as compensation is the expectation that women will take care of men who have been damaged by other men. When he comes home from work, her role is to greet and take care of him, whether or not she's been at work all day herself. On a deeper level, she is supposed to make him feel whole again, to restore what he loses through his disconnected pursuit of control, to calm his fears—all, of course, without requiring him to face the very things about himself and patriarchy that produce the damage in the first place. When women fail to “make it better”—and they are bound to fail eventually—they are also supposed to be there to accept the blame and receive men's disappointment, pain, and rage. Men who feel unloved, incomplete, disconnected, battered, humiliated, frightened, and anxious routinely blame women for not supporting or loving them enough. It's a responsibility women are encouraged to accept, which is one reason so many victims of domestic violence stay with the men who abuse them.³⁴

Misogyny

These days, even the slightest criticism of men or male dominance can prompt accusations of “man hating” or “male bashing.” But only feminists seem to care about the woman hating that's been around for thousands of years as part of everyday life under patriarchy.³⁵

The cultural expression of *misogyny*—the hatred (*mis-*) of femaleness (*gyny*)—takes many forms.³⁶ It's found in ancient and modern beliefs that women are inherently evil and a primary cause of human misery—products of what the Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras called the “evil principle which created chaos, darkness, and woman.”³⁷ There is misogyny in pornography that portrays women as willing victims of exploitation and abuse, in jokes about everything from mothers-in-law to the slapping around or “good fuck” that some women supposedly “need.” Misogyny shaped the historical transformation of ancient wise-women healers into modern-day images of witches who roast and eat children. It has been the basis for the torture and murder of millions of women from the

witch hunts of the Middle Ages to Serb terrorism in Bosnia. It is reflected in the everyday reality of sexual coercion, abuse, violence, and harassment, in the mass media display of women's bodies as objects existing primarily to please men and satisfy the male gaze, in cultural ideals of slenderness that turn women against their own bodies and inspire self-hatred and denial, and in the steady stream of sensationalized and sexualized mass media "entertainment" in which men terrorize, torture, rape, and murder women.³⁸

Not to be overlooked is the insulting of males with names that link them to females—sissy (sister), girl, son of a bitch, mama's boy. Notice, however, that the worst way to insult a woman isn't to call her a man or a "daddy's girl." It's to *still* call her a woman but by names that highlight or maligns femaleness itself—bitch, whore, pussy, cunt.³⁹ The use of such words as insults is made even worse by the fact that prior to patriarchy, many had neutral or positive meanings for women. A "whore" was a lover of either sex, "bitch" was associated with the pre-Christian goddess of the hunt, Artemis-Diana, and "cunt" derives from several sources, including the goddesses Cunti and Kunda, the universal sources of life.⁴⁰

It's difficult to accept the idea that in the midst of wanting, needing, and loving women, men are involved—if only as sons in relation to mothers—in a system that makes misogynist feelings, thoughts, and behavior paths of least resistance. Most men would probably deny this affects them in any way. Often the most sexist men are among the first to say how much they love women. But there's no escaping misogyny, because it isn't a personality flaw. It's part of patriarchal culture. We're like fish swimming in a sea laced with it, and we can't breathe without passing it through our gills.⁴¹ Misogyny infuses into our cells and becomes part of who we are because by the time we know enough to reject it, it's too late. As with everything else in a culture, some people are exposed to more of it than others, but to suppose that anyone escapes untouched is both wishful and disempowering. It's wishful because it goes against what we know about socialization and the power of culture to shape reality. It's disempowering because if we believe that misogyny doesn't involve us, we won't feel compelled to do anything about it.

Misogyny plays a complex role in patriarchy. It fuels men's sense of superiority, justifies male aggression against women, and works to keep women on the defensive and in their place. Misogyny is especially powerful in encouraging women to hate their own femaleness, an example of internalized oppression. The more women internalize misogynist images and attitudes, the harder it is to challenge male privilege or patriarchy as a system. In fact, women won't tend to see patriarchy as even problematic since the essence of self-hatred is to focus on the self as the sole cause of misery, including the self-hatred.

In another sense, patriarchy promotes the hatred of women as a reaction to men's fear of women. Why should men fear women? Because every system of privilege depends to some degree on subordinate groups going along with their own subordination. The other side of this, however, is the potential to undermine and rebel by not going along. This makes privilege inherently unstable, which makes dominant groups vulnerable. Throughout the slaveholding South, for example, white people's fear of slave revolts was woven into the fabric of everyday life and caused many a restless night. And I suspect that much of the discomfort that whites typically feel around blacks today, especially black men, also reflects a fear that the potential for challenge and rebellion is never far from the surface.⁴² In a patriarchal system the fear for men is that women will stop playing the complex role that allows patriarchy to continue, or may even go so far as to challenge male privilege directly. Women's potential to disrupt patriarchy and make men vulnerable is why it's so easy for women to make men feel foolish or emasculated through the mildest humor that focuses on maleness and hints at women's power to stop going along with the status quo. Making fun of men, however, is just the tip of the iceberg of what women can do to disturb the patriarchal order, and on some level most men know this and have reason to feel threatened by it.

In more subtle ways, misogyny arises out of a system that offers women to men as a form of compensation. Because patriarchy limits men's emotional and spiritual lives, and because men rarely risk being vulnerable with other men, they often look to women as a way to ease the resulting sense of emptiness, meaninglessness, and disconnection. However, the patriarchal expectation that "real men" are autonomous and independent sets men up to both want and resent women at the same time. This is made all the worse by the fact that women can't possibly give men what they want, since autonomy and independence are illusions. Caught in this bind, men could face the truth of the system that put them there in the first place. They could look at patriarchy and how their position in it creates this dilemma. The path of least resistance, however, is to resent and blame women for what men lack, by accusing women of not being loving or sexual enough, of being manipulative, withholding, selfish bitches who deserve to be punished.⁴³

In a related sense, misogyny can reflect male envy of the human qualities patriarchy encourages men to devalue and deny in themselves as they avoid association with anything remotely female. Under patriarchy, women are viewed as trustees of all that makes a rich emotional life possible—of empathy and sympathy, vulnerability and openness to connection, caring and nurturing, sensitivity and compassion, emotional attention and expressiveness—all of which tend to be driven out of men's lives by the cycle of control and fear. On some level, men know the value of what they don't have and see

women as privileged for being able to hold on to it. As a result, women live a double bind: The patriarchal ideology that supports male privilege and women's oppression devalues the human qualities associated with being female, yet it also sets men up to envy and resent women for being able to weave those same qualities into their lives.⁴⁴

Finally, misogyny can be seen as a cultural result of men's potential to feel guilty about women's oppression. Rather than encourage men to feel guilty, patriarchal culture projects negative judgments about men onto women. When men do feel guilty, they can blame women for making them feel this way: "If you weren't there reminding me of how oppressed women are, then I wouldn't have to feel bad about myself as a member of the group that benefits from it." Anger and resentment play this kind of role in many systems of privilege. When middle-class people encounter the homeless on the street, for example, it's not uncommon for them to feel angry simply for being reminded of their privilege and their potential to feel guilty about it. It's easier to hate the messenger than it is to take some responsibility for doing something about the reality behind the message.

As a mainstay of patriarchal culture, misogyny embodies some of the most contradictory and disturbing aspects of male privilege. When love and need are bound up with fear, envy, resentment, and the obsession with control, the result is an explosive mixture that can twist our sense of ourselves and one another beyond recognition. If misogyny were merely a problem of bad personal attitudes, it would be relatively easy to deal with. But its close connection to the cycle of control and fear that makes patriarchy work will make it part of human life as long as patriarchy continues.

The Look of Modern Patriarchy

Over its long history, patriarchy has changed dramatically in some ways and very little in others. As societies have developed new forms of control and domination, systems of privilege have changed in order to make use of them. Under European feudalism, for example, class privilege depended on military force, control over land, and traditional obligations between nobles and peasants. With industrial capitalism, however, class is based primarily on control over complex organizations such as corporations, government, universities and the mass media. In similar ways, patriarchy has shifted from one base of power to another in response to social change. This hasn't happened in a uniform way since no single patriarchal model applies to all societies, but it has always involved some mix of the core qualities that define patriarchy as male dominated, male identified, and male centered.

In pre-industrial patriarchies, the main objects of control are land and women's reproductive potential. Since families produce most of the wealth, male privilege is based primarily on men's authority as husbands and fathers and their title to land and other property. To the extent that pre-industrial societies have institutions outside the family—such as separate religious, medical, military, or state institutions—men dominate these as well.

This is how it was in most patriarchies until industrial capitalism began to revolutionize social life several centuries ago. The most dramatic change was to shift production away from agriculture and the land and into urban factories. This made land less valuable as a source of wealth and power, lowered the economic value of children and their labor, and drew increasing numbers of men and women into wage labor in a money-driven economy. As a result, men could no longer use the family as a basis of privilege because the family no longer had a central place in economic production. A great deal of work was still done in families, but it wasn't done for money. Since power revolved increasingly around money and wealth was valued in terms of money, family work couldn't be used as a basis for privilege.

Male privilege now depended on controlling capital or earning the money that families needed to purchase goods and services in an exploding market economy. Men moved quickly to appropriate this for themselves. Since children's contribution to industrial labor quickly lost its economic value as production became more complex, their worth became something figured primarily in emotional terms. This encouraged fathers to lose interest in children and limited women's lives ever more narrowly to child care.⁴⁵ As a result, child custody no longer went automatically to fathers, but more typically to mothers.⁴⁶ In some ways, the position of the father lost so much of its traditional authority under industrial capitalism that, technically speaking, the gender system was no longer patriarchal but androcratic, based on male (*andro-*) rather than father (*patri-*) dominance.

As industrial capitalism transformed patriarchy, it also profoundly affected women. Before industrialization, there wasn't much that women couldn't and didn't do, and husbands and wives depended on one another for survival.⁴⁷ Industrial capitalism changed all of that, however. Individuals now could survive on their own by earning wages, which broke the age-old bond of mutual dependence between women and men. The work women did at home was marginalized and devalued because it didn't involve an exchange of money,⁴⁸ and without earnings of their own, middle-class women who stayed home became what may have been the first major group of productive yet economically dependent women in human history.⁴⁹ As a result, women confronted the novel choice of whether to depend on men or make

their way as second-class, unwelcome workers in the new patriarchal world of work where wealth, power, dignity, and prestige were distributed.

Industrial capitalism was shrinking the family's sphere of influence and shifting the focus of power outward to rapidly growing institutions such as the state, science, industry, and schools. These institutions grew out of a new way of thinking that emphasized the power of the human intellect to understand and ultimately control all it could imagine. Both natural scientists and early sociologists believed the world was governed by social and natural laws that, once understood, would enable *men* to exercise revolutionary degrees of control over themselves and their environments. "Man's place in the physical universe," a Nobel laureate declared not so long ago, "is to be its master . . . to be its king through the power he alone possesses—the Principle of Intelligence."⁵⁰ This kind of thinking carried the evolution of patriarchy through a quantum leap that expanded dramatically the cultural importance attached to the idea of control as an organizing principle of social life on every level, from self to society to the entire natural world. For most people, patriarchy went from being a relatively simple family system to something much larger and more complex as the tools and settings for practicing the religion of power multiplied.

The rapid rise of science, technology, politics, and other forms of control also changed how people thought about and justified male dominance. As Arthur Brittan put it,

Instead of the religious justification of gender differences, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries these differences were beginning to be explained in a new way. Previously, they had been codified in philosophical and political doctrines. They had a rationale legitimated by God, by reason and by the nascent political authority. But, from this time onward, differences were not decreed by the church, but by "science" and its *spokesmen*, the "discoverers" of the essential nature of men and women. Since all human beings are subject to the laws of nature, they could be "worked on" and manipulated like other "natural" objects. Where the church had demanded that women obey men because God willed it, the new science argued that women were inferior because they were made this way.⁵¹

It's important to realize that much of this change reshaped how men competed with one another for power and control. Under the European feudalism that preceded industrial capitalism, for example, power struggles revolved around the military, the landed aristocracy, the church, and the fledgling state—all of which were patriarchal. Capitalism developed as a

revolt against feudalism by a new patriarchal middle class of entrepreneurs who wanted the freedom to compete in markets. The landed aristocracy stood in their way, which made for conflict and sometimes violent revolution. None of this, however, ended the religion of power. It merely changed the terms of the struggle to control over markets rather than control over land and peasants, and later to control over production, labor, and the environment. The social landscape was transformed, but the major players were still men, and the new social systems were still thoroughly patriarchal.

We can lose sight of patriarchy in all of this social upheaval and transformation if we overlook the fact that industrial capitalism was male dominated, male centered, and male identified and sprang from and embodied the core patriarchal valuing of control. Writers such as Robert Bly and Sam Keen, for example, have a lot to say about the evils of industrialization but don't mention its connection to patriarchy.⁵² What changed the world wasn't mere capitalist industrialization, but *patriarchal* capitalist industrialization. The same can be said of the socialist alternatives that developed in response to capitalism, such as in the Soviet Union and China, that for all their progressive reforms, in many ways represented little more than a new form of competition between patriarchal systems. As Hazel Henderson put it, capitalism and socialism have merely been two contenders in the struggle over what form industrialization would take.⁵³

The Mystery of How We Got Here

Whenever I speak about patriarchy, someone always asks where it came from in the first place. The question usually comes from a man, and I suspect he's saying, "If I'm going to give up the essentialist idea that patriarchy is universal and inevitable, I want something to put in its place." If patriarchy isn't hard-wired into the species, then it had to *start* for some reason. The problem is that what we know as history doesn't reach back very far and can't tell us what we want to know without a lot of speculation mixed in. That won't stop us from wondering about where patriarchy came from, however, because this huge hole in our understanding nags for something to fill it up. And we need some reason to hope that something better is possible, which we can't have if we settle for essentialist explanations. What, after all, is the point of trying to change something that's inevitable?

Another reason to look at the question of where patriarchy came from is that whatever model we use to explain what drives patriarchy now is more credible if it fits with a plausible argument about where it came from in the first place. If we're right about patriarchy as it *is*, we should be able to extend

our understanding back in time and see a connection between how it is now and how it most likely *was*. This won't *prove* anything, for the forces that bring a social system into being aren't necessarily the same as those that keep it going. But if one framework can make sense of patriarchy's past *and* its present, we can quiet some nagging questions that distract us from doing something about it.

What, then, do we know about nonpatriarchal societies, and how do we know it?⁵⁴ Some evidence comes from anthropological and historical studies of tribal societies, from the !Kung in Africa to Native American tribes to the New Guinea Arapesh.⁵⁵ From these we know of numerous societies in which women have not been devalued or subordinated but have, in fact, played prominent roles in social life. Matrilineal and matrilocal societies⁵⁶ have been quite common and have often included substantial female control over land and other property. Although every known society divides some tasks by gender, there is often a great deal of overlap, and in either case men's and women's work are valued equally. Sexual violence and the treatment of women as property are almost unknown in these societies, and historically have increased only with advances in male dominance.⁵⁷

When we consider the rich store of archaeological evidence from prehistoric civilizations such as ancient Crete, it's difficult to deny that something other than patriarchy existed as recently as seven thousand years ago.⁵⁸ Artifacts dating to before that time, for example, suggest the existence of Middle Eastern societies in which women and men were equally well regarded. Women's graves were as centrally located and richly appointed with statues and other artifacts as those of men. In addition, the accumulation of statuary from ancient sites shows far more female than male figures. These consist mostly of women with prominent breasts, belly, and vagina, suggesting a clear focus on women's role in renewing life. Only in later periods of emerging male dominance do artistic themes shift away from women and begin to portray phallic images. Evidence also suggests that organized warfare was rare if not unknown. Excavations in ancient Crete, for example, find no evidence of fortifications in the prepatriarchal period.

It's reasonable to argue from such evidence that for most of humanity's 250,000 years on Earth, social life has not been organized around control and domination. It is also reasonable to argue that male dominance and the oppression of women are relatively recent. Not only has women's work been regarded as central to social life, but on a deeper level, the belief that women could create life seems to have placed female imagery at the core of religious traditions.⁵⁹ The abundant goddess imagery found in archaeological digs, for example, suggests that prepatriarchal societies were organized around a world view centered on the idea of the female as a symbolic link between

humanity and the flow of nature from which all life comes. As Miriam Johnson notes, this doesn't mean that men were marginalized or subordinated, only that there was reverence for cultural *principles* associated with femaleness:

Matrifocality [a cultural focus on mothers] . . . does not refer to domestic maternal dominance so much as it does to the relative cultural prestige of the *image* of mother, a role that is culturally elaborated and valued. . . . It is not the absence of males (males may be quite present) but the centrality of women as mothers and sisters that makes a society matrifocal, and this matrifocal emphasis is accompanied by a minimum of differentiation between women and men.⁶⁰

Nonetheless, we're so used to the patriarchal obsession with control that it's hard to imagine that a society might exist without a dominant group. From a narrow patriarchal perspective, the logical assumption is that if the world was ever nonpatriarchal, it must have been matriarchal, especially if femaleness was valued and even revered.

Once we accept the idea that something came before patriarchy and that valuing women and gender equality was one of its core aspects, then we have to deal with the question of what happened to turn all of this into a system based on control, privilege, and gender oppression. What social engine could be powerful enough to break down bonds of equality between women and men? What could create new forms of family life in which women and children became men's property? How could kinship systems organized around mothers and their blood relatives become male identified?⁶¹ Why would systems of cooperation and peaceful coexistence give way to systems of competition and warfare?

Although we can never answer such questions once and for all, Riane Eisler, Elizabeth Fisher, Marilyn French, Gerda Lerner, and others have made a good case that certain social conditions played an important part.⁶² The first was the discovery of how to grow crops, which took place some nine thousand years ago. As using plows to cultivate fields replaced small-garden horticulture, societies could produce a surplus of goods. This, in turn, made it possible for some people to accumulate wealth at the expense of others. This didn't *cause* inequality, since sharing is as much a possibility as hoarding. Surpluses were, however, a precondition that made inequality *possible*.⁶³ Perhaps even more important, agriculture introduced the *idea* of control into many human cultures as people settled into more permanent communities and discovered they could affect their environment through such practices as clearing forests and cultivating the soil. Some degree of

control has probably always been part of human life, but never before had the concept of control emerged so forcefully as part of culture, or been so conducive to seeing the rest of the natural world as a nonhuman “other” to be controlled.⁶⁴

This changing relationship of humans to nature was related to the discovery, some nine thousand to eleven thousand years ago, of how reproduction worked in both plant and animal species, and the resulting domestication of goats, cattle, and other animals. Elizabeth Fisher believes this helped lay the groundwork for patriarchy in several ways. First, it transformed a relatively equal and balanced relation between humans and other animals into one of control and dominance. When hunters killed wild animals for food, they had reason to see them as creatures of equal standing in the nature of things whose deaths warranted appreciation, often in the form of ritual honoring. The lives of domesticated animals, however, are from the start dominated and controlled by people, their entire existence subordinated to human needs and ends.

Second, when animals were bred for slaughter or work, reproduction took on an economic value it didn't have before.⁶⁵ From this it was a short leap to the idea that human reproduction also has economic value, especially given how much labor was needed to cultivate large fields. This, in turn, created an incentive to control women's reproductive potential, for the more children a man had, the more workers there were to produce surplus goods, which men invariably controlled.

Third, domesticating animals created an emotional dilemma around nurturing and caring for animals with the intention of slaughtering them later.⁶⁶ Short of letting the animals live, the only way people could resolve the tension was to distance themselves from both the nurturing and the killing, to see nature as a separate and alien exploitable resource, an object of control and domination, even an adversary—all of which more advanced patriarchies have done to greater and greater degrees.

Fisher believes the split between humanity and the rest of nature sowed the seeds for a more general and profound disconnection in social life. It did this by providing a model for control and domination based on the distinction between self and other, an “us” and a “them.” Instead of seeing all life as an undifferentiated whole, the stage was now set for dividing the world into the controllers and the controlled. This was crucial to the development of patriarchy, especially given how an understanding of reproduction must have undermined the cultural reverence for women's reproductive powers. If reproduction wasn't a matter of female magic and could be controlled like anything else, then women's special connection to the universal life force was lost and men could put themselves at the center of things. Knowledge

that men played a role in reproduction, for example, opened the door to the belief that men, not women, are the source of life—men who plant their seed in the passive, fertile fields of women's wombs.

Fisher's arguments fit quite well with observations that the first known patriarchies were nomadic herding societies (the first to depend on raising livestock) and that male privilege and women's oppression reach their height in advanced agrarian societies that depended heavily on both human labor and animal breeding.⁶⁷ As Riane Eisler reads the evidence, aggressive herding tribes from the northern reaches of Eurasia swept down on goddess civilizations such as that at Crete and converted them by force to the patriarchal model.⁶⁸ In this we can see various factors coming together to set the stage for the emergence of patriarchy: surplus production and the possibility of inequality, development of control as a human potential and cultural ideal, an economic value placed on reproduction and the ability to control it, and the potential for competition among tribes for grazing land, water, and other resources. But the puzzle still has missing pieces, for although these conditions made patriarchy *possible*, they aren't the social engine we're looking for.

The problem is that just because control and oppression became possible, it doesn't follow that they had to take over social life, just as people don't necessarily do something just because they can, whether it be hoarding wealth, killing disobedient children, or conquering neighbors. It might seem that conflict and aggression among nomadic tribes or expanding settlements were inevitable,⁶⁹ since these are ways to deal with conditions of scarcity. But cooperation, compromise, and sharing are even more effective solutions to the problem of scarcity, especially in the long run. Being able to produce a surplus makes it possible for some to hoard at the expense of others, but surpluses also can be used to create leisure and plenty for all.

But isn't it human nature to hoard, compete, and aggress? Of course it is, but compromise, cooperation, and compassion are also part of human nature, although under patriarchy they are culturally associated with women and devalued as not fitting the male-identified standard of "human nature." If a society is organized around one set of human capabilities rather than another, human nature won't tell us why. The answer lies in the social forces that shaped it in this way.⁷⁰

All of which brings us back to the nagging question of what could be powerful enough to move humanity toward male privilege and the oppression of women. This is where we need to connect what we know about the present with what is reasonable to suppose about the past. What both have in common is the patriarchal cycle of fear and control. Modern patriarchy is driven by the dynamic between control and fear, of men seeking status and security through control, fearing other men's control over them, and seeing

still more control as the only solution. And if we look at our reasonable speculations about the past, it is more than credible to suppose that this same dynamic provided the key to the origins and evolution of patriarchy. Just as men are at the center of this powerful cycle now, so too were they at the center when that cycle emerged thousands of years ago.

But why would men be the ones at the center of the fear-control whirlwind? For men to be at the center, they had to be more likely than women to embrace the emerging cultural idea of control and to run with it. For this to happen, they had to be more likely to experience themselves and others in a disconnected way. There is no reason to believe that men did not feel a strong connection to the nature-centered goddess cultures of their societies. But there are good reasons to believe that men's connection was weaker than women's and that this left them more open to the cycle of control and fear and the religion of power that patriarchy embodied.

Men's connection to the creation of new life is invisible—they must imagine how intercourse produces a child rather than feel it in their own bodies—and prepatriarchal cultures lacked even the abstract knowledge of how reproduction works. Nor do men bleed in monthly cycles in tune with the moon. As a result, men have fewer reminders of the body and its relation to natural rhythms of birth, renewal, and death. This makes it easier to live as though it were possible to stand apart from such rhythms, and this is the first step to rising above, transcending, and ultimately trying to control the self and everything else as “other.” None of this means that men can't feel deeply connected to nature and the body, or that women can't feel disconnected and separate. But it does mean that men are more open to feeling this way and more vulnerable to being drawn into the cycle of control and fear that became the driving force behind patriarchy.

Because pursuing control goes hand in hand with disconnection from the object of control, it is reasonable to suppose that as the *idea* of control emerged as a natural part of cultural evolution, men were more likely than women to see it as something to develop and exploit. Women's lives, of course, also involved the idea of control—over children, for example, or gardens, or materials involved in producing goods and services that have always met a huge portion of human needs. But women have more to overcome in order to develop a sense of disconnection, and for this reason they would be less likely to pursue control to its extremes. This would fall to men, and the result would be patriarchy.

At first, the idea of control was most likely applied to the simple mechanics of altering the environment by making things and growing food. It was only a matter of time, however, before the potential to control other people became apparent. Women and children may have been the first human

objects of this new potential as husbands and fathers looked for ways to enhance their resources and standing in relation to other men. But why would men do this, given all the good reasons not to? How could the idea of control be powerful enough to reorder a world rooted in connection, unity, and equality? Why couldn't the powerful and complex bonds that joined people together in prepatriarchal societies withstand the allure of control?

I believe the answer lies in the same dynamic that drives patriarchy today. It seems reasonable to suppose that as populations grew and nomadic societies moved about in search of food, they must have gotten in one another's way. If men were most open to the idea of control as a solution to such problems, then they must have learned to fear what other men might do to them as well as women and children in their societies. It wouldn't take much to realize how control could be used to do harm, to take away liberty and the means of survival. It's here that men find themselves caught in a cycle, for the same reliance on control that created the fear in the first place can also be seen as an effective response to it. And so the path of least resistance was for men to respond to their fear of other men by increasing their own ability to control and dominate, gradually making this a central focus of social life. As Marilyn French observes, once this dynamic is set in motion, it forms the basis for an escalating spiral of control and fear. The result is an extended patriarchal history marked not only by the accomplishments that control makes possible, but also by domination, warfare, and oppression, all of which are male-dominated, male-identified, male-centered pursuits that revolve around affirming, protecting, and enhancing men's standing and security in relation to other men.

This dynamic also encourages men to incorporate into their core sense of self the ability to always be in control and to invest themselves in the appearance of being in control as a way to present themselves to others. This becomes a valued and sought-after zone of safety and comfort, even though its ultimate effect is to undermine both. It does so by provoking fear in others (who then seek to defend themselves through a still more-convincing demonstration of control) and because, like every illusion, it carries with it the potential to come crashing down with devastating effect. So, the patriarchal obsession with control is no testament to the inherent appeal of control, but rather springs from being trapped in the dynamic relationship between fear and control that seems to offer no way out.

Maybe it all happened this way and maybe it didn't. But the inability to prove where patriarchy came from won't stop people from reaching their own conclusions about it. The argument that patriarchy is rooted in a cycle of fear, control, and domination is no less plausible than alternative explanations, and far more plausible than many. It also has the advantage of

providing continuity between what we can reasonably know and speculate about the past and how patriarchy works today. This gives us a more solid and hopeful base to push off from as we work toward change. After all, if control and domination are inherently so appealing to men that they'd oppress half the human race in pursuit of them, then working for change may be a hopeless war against men's "nature." But what if patriarchy is rooted in men's paradoxical fixation on control, fear, competition, and solidarity with other men? Then the way is open to changing not men per se, but the patriarchal system and its paths of least resistance, which we can see as only one of many possible forms that the natural human potential for control can take.

The Journey Out

There are many reasons to deny patriarchy its future. There is the obvious one of ending the injustice and unnecessary suffering that constitute women's oppression—their exclusion from equal power and participation in social life, the pervasive misogyny and violence directed against them, and the denial of the fullness of their independence, autonomy, sexuality, spirituality, and dignity as human beings. Obvious reasons also include the damage men suffer for their participation in patriarchy—damage to their emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being, to their relationships with children, women, and other men, and to their sense of themselves as people. Although such goals get the most attention, they are just a beginning, because patriarchy isn't simply about relationships between women and men. It encompasses an entire world organized around principles of control, male domination, male identification, and male centeredness.

Patriarchy's roots are also the roots of most human misery and injustice, including race, class, and ethnic oppression and the destruction of the natural environment.⁷² The spiral of control and fear underlies a worldwide reliance on militarism and toughness to solve problems and resolve disputes, from Vietnam to Bosnia to terrorism to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Patriarchal nation states and militant movements arm themselves to the teeth and develop rigid hierarchies to control their own people and "defend" themselves as the potential victims of other patriarchal entities. The "others" are locked in the same cycle, presenting themselves as victims of unfair claims, unjustified aggression, outrageous insult, and so on and on. In this sense, the war/terror system is a self-perpetuating and self-justifying cycle of control and fear supported by the illusion that there are bad guys and good guys, with everyone laying claim to the latter. When each side defines the other as its opposite,

they mask what each has in common, which is the underlying basis for their use of violence as a means of control. Beneath the good guy/bad guy mask is a system controlled by a deadly patriarchal cycle in which control as a response to fear simply causes more fear.

The religion of power drives patriarchy onward in politics, in religion, in economics, in the smallest details of personal life. Even as the world seems to move toward political democracy, for example, economic power is increasingly concentrated under global capitalism to a degree that may soon dwarf the resources of all but the most powerful nation-states.⁷³ Capitalists are driven by the fear of failing at competition, on the one hand, and on the other, by their ongoing struggle to control and dominate labor and markets in order to maximize profit and survive. Greed isn't the problem, and a "kinder, gentler capitalism"—a kinder, gentler cycle of control and fear—isn't the solution.⁷⁴ Even in quasi-socialist societies like Sweden, patriarchy is alive and well, although in a somewhat muted form.⁷⁵ We're running scared most of the time. While politicians and corporate managers struggle in vain for some semblance of control over events, bookstore shelves bulge with self-help guides telling us that the answer to our problems lies in learning to have more control—over the body, mind, spirit, love, sex, death, taxes, stress, memory, bosses, spouses, children. None of this obsession with control works—for individuals or societies—for still more control won't free us from the patriarchal obsession with control.

The depth of brutishness we see today in the world isn't what human life needs to be about. Even in the jungle, the human idea of the "law of the jungle" doesn't apply. We're living in a jungle of our own making, and the journey out begins with seeing how it operates and what it does to us, how we participate in it and how we might choose differently. For this, we need new ways to think about ourselves and the world, and the path to these revisits some old familiar territory—which is where we go next.