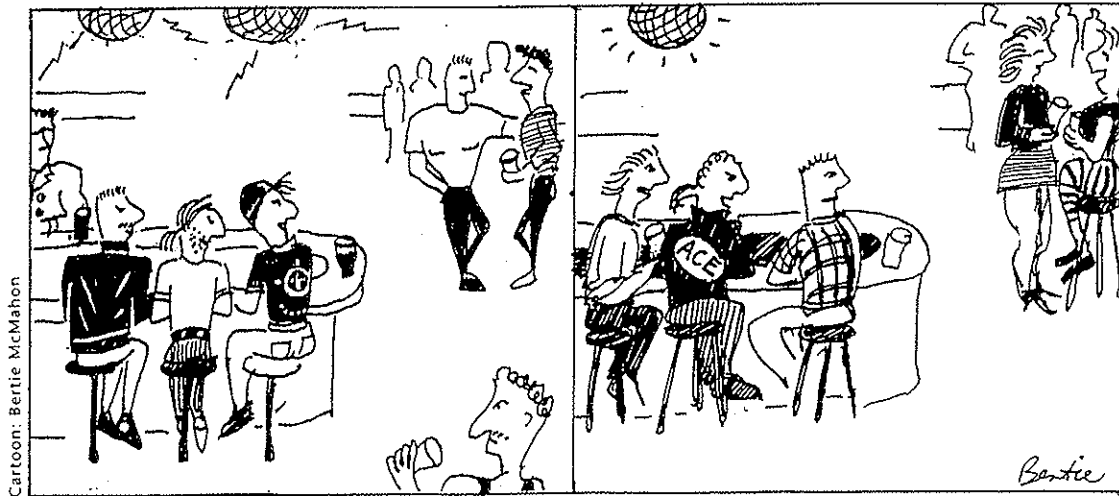


# Gay patriarchy

Gay men didn't escape male conditioning writes John David.  
It's high time we began to go further than just  
dreaming of a male-positive gay life.



A Gay Bar

A Straight Bar

The men in the "Gay Bar" may be treated as "equals" but there is no view of intimacy and genuine respect for that person.

**T**HE MALE touch football association shifted their grand final celebrations from their usual watering hole. They moved because the management put up a poster for an upcoming community celebration. Their grievance simply that the poster listed women before men, a crime in the circles these men move in. But this time it didn't happen in a working class tiled pub, nor in a yuppie bar. It happened in the Midnight Shift, a Sydney gay bar.

The men based their protest on the annual Sleaze Ball being advertised as a *lesbian and gay* costume ball. Until now, almost every recent homosexual event had been promoted as gay and lesbian, in-that-order. It had been a serious issue even a few years back to get the word 'lesbian' included in the title of Sydney's Mardi Gras, even though dykes had been performing, marching, supporting and organising equally throughout the event's history.

While some perceived the recent Sleaze poster as a point of lesbian and gay solidarity, others were polarised into feminist and misogynist stances.

The furore had finally allowed a deep infection to fester to the surface, at last visible and disgusting. Many of us who had looked to the gay community for support, nourishment and understanding were completely confused about how gay men, ourselves victims of horrible oppression through homophobia, could be so sexist.

At last the message that dykes had long been telling us was plain to see: patriarchy is insidious and in side us. Our gay culture is immersed in it. The bar scene is overwhelmingly male; women are not wanted; sexual desire is based on objectification; and men are competed for in a predatory way. The so called "Gay and Lesbian" organisations are in need of structured affirmative action in order to counter male control. The gay and lesbian community's newspapers and magazines are 80% male concerned, and the ads which use nauseating sexual objectification are from male businesses. The beats, like the bars, are about male ownership and competition based around sexual objectification.

How could gay men, who understand what oppression feels like, treat other men

dismissively and be so controlling in terms of organisations and meeting places?

## Men first

THE ANSWER is that gay men are *men* with the same conditioned patriarchal upbringing in the same coercive structures. As boys, the apprentice men, we are taught:

- to expect to be the rulers of the world;
- to view all people as objects and services (sex, work, leisure, nurturing);
- that men are competitors and there is no sympathy or celebration if you lose;
- that men cannot talk about their feelings or be intimate without sex;
- that there are immovable hierarchies of power and influence based on looks, money, class, education, employment.

Very young homosexual boys get the same conditioning as all boys. We avoid, just as straight boys do, the name calling and bashing "in case we're gay". Our general society, family, peers and educators see us only as boys, and to avoid the punishment of not being "normal" (read, patriarchal) we have to react as boys. Our dismissiveness and

disdain of women and girls becomes installed successfully.

But for us it is a matter of life and death to keep our homosexuality hidden. At puberty our objectification gets turned on to any sexual image and is not specific to images of girls. This is because patriarchal culture does not objectify men's bodies in the same way women's bodies are objectified. Yet the only model of closeness and intimacy we have is one of lust laced with patriarchy. It prevents us from simply loving. In such a world there can be no place for, nor any toleration of, women.

As gay teenagers, our hidden sexuality has to follow this pattern as well: on an open, social level we compete with men, take opportunities from each other, and fight each other. On a sexual level we have to conceal our desires. We have already been taught it is good to desire and objectify—it's just that we objectify men. For teenage boys coming into a sexual maturity where objectification is fact our only opportunities tend to be non-disclosed perving at teen idols, football stars, the man in the Sheridan sheets ad, and going

to the beats and the bars. Although there is a strong feeling of not totally belonging, we fulfil the conditioning enough to escape punishment and our sexual desire for men continues. A confusing time for most of us.

Now older, as homosexual men, we have a personal history of being systematically targeted and oppressed. We have struggled for acceptance among our own people and many of us have given up hope of being accepted in the wider world. In order to survive we have had to react cleverly and ingeniously. In most cases the survival tactic has been less conscious—we just settled for the place that felt least uncomfortable.

## Acting oppressor

SOME GAY MEN take on the form of the oppressor: we act "straight", build up our muscles, act tough and intimidate. Others exaggerate their "effeminate" behaviour and play for the gay sub-culture a role similar to that of women in wider society, but still from the safety of being male. You will find the highly organised, workaholic, "out" social organisers organising the gay support groups. Still others embrace a "victim-status": locked in a pattern of "how bad the world has been to us". None of these identities allow gay men the space to look at our own contribution, unintentional as it may be, to patriarchal values.

Most of these roles are unsustainable in themselves. Play them out in the wider homophobic world and you are likely to get killed, or at least feel that the death blow is just around the next street corner. However, by forming sub-groups and seeking out environments which allow our disclosure, we put ourselves in positive situations where our behaviour can be affirmed and acknowledged. This is a great thing and has much to offer us. For many gay men this has meant the move to suburbs with high gay populations where we can feel safe, be out, belong and be sure to find other men in our "scene". The down side is that our

behaviour is rarely questioned. It is like the relief of acceptance-at-last overrides any intention of fully healing from our brutal male conditioning. We know what oppression looks like. Who would want to go back?

So, we end up with a very scared sub-community, comprised mostly of men. Scared that it might all collapse. Feeling deep inside how unsustainable it is. Pockets, sometimes suburbs, of people who share a similar oppression. We cling to the wider context of male conditioning. The (gay male) bars, the (gay male) media, (gay male) workplaces, (gay male) services and (gay male) recreational areas feed the system and become points of reference for the web that is patriarchy.

Gay liberation itself is immersed in traditional masculinity. Community events such as Mardi Gras with its "good looking boys" on the floats, and muscle bound blokes on the front pages of gay magazines (they know what sells!) signify a movement that is male and about wanting power—the patriarchal way.

## Living dreams

FOR GAY MEN, it has been a great relief for us to find somewhere where we don't have to fear homophobia and its violent effects. No one should ever blame us for wanting that. But recent lessons have shown us that we are not even completely secure in our own suburbs. It is difficult for me to criticise the glimpse of heaven on earth for which I have been longing. Yet to move closer to living our violence-free dream, we must look inwards and dismantle the distasteful, competitive and hierarchical parts of our collective masculinities, and choose to embrace women as a necessary and desirable part of our culture.

Our workplaces must be challenged so there is equal

representation, and access to services and recreation for women must be ensured. Other serious issues such as rape and domestic violence, as well as the problems of alcoholism and drug abuse need to be treated openly within our community. Our people are damaged and dying.

In our gay relationships we have to reach for intimacy, not sexual objectification. Our friendships need to be given a special status—not all our relationships need to be sexual to be fulfilling or important.

As individuals it is desperately hard keeping up appearances. It is hard to feel supported when you have had to resort to drugs or escapist fantasy to numb out the pain. It is desperately hurtful

to see our brothers acting as competitors, objects, conquests, conquerors, predators, unfeeling, hopeful emancipators, victims, or cynical enjoyers of the system. The coercion, the rewards and punishments which have forced us into those roles should be decried. Our criticism of patriarchy must be

heard above our fearful and tired voices crying for survival in a world in which we are actually quite safe. We will have to fight for this. Our unwitting compliance in male dominance must be questioned and worked through on an individual basis.

## Poofter power

MANY POOFTERS have criticised, rebelled, sought other alternatives or dismissed the "scene". The nature of the homophobic patriarchy has made many men critical of oppressive systems generally. Many men have felt that there is something fundamentally wrong, and have begun to vote with their feet. Many who have had their sexism challenged by dykes and other poofsters have responded positively (and mostly with relief). At the same time, many poofsters are rejected as they avoid and dismiss the

"scene". They are lost to a community which should treasure them.

Men critical of traditional masculinity and the equally restrictive gay "scene" have formed or joined movements and organisations that challenge directly. Groups such as SMART, Slim Men Are Real Treats, and FUCQH (pronounced "fuck you"), Fat Ugly Cheap Queens from Hell, challenge objectification of gay men with manifestos that "inject slim, slender and seductive into the gay lexicon", as an example. The Queer Movement, a coalitionist response to gay male oppression, directly criticises the under-representation of dykes in community organisations and events. We should also count our many good allies among straight men and women. There is support.

## Most of all

I AM looking forward to a time when our liberation is focused on creating for ourselves the opportunities to express the effects of our conditioning, to work it through and support others. Our fear needs to be expelled, released emotionally, at last gone forever. Working in this way amongst ourselves we can evict our particular gay oppression: the cumulative effect of a sexuality denied, the violence, the discrimination. Working with straight men will remind us how every boy is threatened with anti-gay violence and taunting. Each of us, gay and straight, has feared the gay witch hunts of the schoolyard.

I want a world where homosexual men can come out free from the patriarchy in both the homosexual and heterosexual worlds. Let's face up to our sexism, forget about blaming each other, and get on with enhancing our lives. All of a sudden there would be no difference between a het world and a homo world. Yeah!! ●

John David is a beautiful gay man from Wollongong who has refused to give up on his dreams. He sends his love to Nick, John, Bertie, Cameron and Michael for help with this article.