

Patriarchy: What It Is and Why Some Men Question It

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Patriarchy – is a hierarchical system based on the oppression of women by men. Its prime value is male supremacy.

Male supremacy – means that males are naturally superior to females, and socially and sexually.

Male Superiority – means that male ways of talking, thinking and acting are generally held to be better than female ways of talking, thinking and acting. Under patriarchy, no distinction is made between what is male and what is masculine, or between what is female and what is feminine. Males are superior whether they are 'masculine' or not, but even to talk like this is non-patriarchal.

Female values, intuitions and feelings are often thought to be as good or better than male ones under patriarchy, but values, intuitions and feelings are thought to be peripheral or unimportant.

In general the things which men usually do are more highly prized than the things which women usually do. They are thought to be more interesting and noteworthy, and worth more in money terms. This is maintained even when the jobs are apparently the same – for example, cooking is interesting when men do it, uninteresting when women do it.

Supremacy values – are never talked about under patriarchy, but the essential basic assumption is that all things must be divided into superior and inferior, and general supremacy given to what is superior.

This is a method of control, and it is thought to be the only method of control which is stable and natural. If it is not clear at any point who or what is superior, a competition will reveal the truth. Thus the basic way of deciding things under patriarchy is by a power struggle. Physical coercion is there all the time under patriarchy, sometimes overt and sometimes covert. Violence is normal and natural, where it proves to be necessary.

This also enters into sexuality. 'Fucking' means both intercourse and exploitation/ assault. Rape is the end logic of male sexuality under patriarchy. This is not because of the nasty fantasies of individual men, but about the way in which a particular set of nasty fantasies is socially approved and underwritten, so that they regularly get translated into action.

It is the social relation of domination which is most consistently boosted by the patriarchal culture. Wealth gives the power to dominate, status gives the power to dominate; masculinity gives the power to dominate. So wealth, status and masculinity are all highly approved. If any of these fail, violence may be substituted.

Psychic celibacy – means that in order not to have the supremacy values shaken or questioned in any way, men have to keep women mentally and emotionally at arms' length. The simplest way of doing this is not to listen to women at all. They can be distanced by putting them down, or by putting them up on a pedestal, but however it is done, women become objects, non-equal, manipulated and distanced. Men usually don't know they are doing this, and find it very hard to change, even when

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it is pointed out; its origins go far back into childhood. Boys learn that when they grow up, they are supposed to be *not* like their mothers.

Male qualities under patriarchy – are prized when they bespeak supremacy and superiority, as for example self-confidence, independence, coolness, loud clear speaking voice, ability to win in argument, close contact with other powerful figures, successful appearance, ability to get things done, impatience with limitations, ability to stand up for own opinions, leadership qualities, and so on. If women adopt these qualities, they become more highly prized and more highly paid, but they also get disliked and put down for being unfeminine.

Female qualities under patriarchy – are valued to the extent that they bespeak satisfaction with a service and support role, as for example being tender, gentle, loving, supportive, loyal, of appropriate appearance (not too beautiful and not too ugly, not too well dressed and not too dowdy, etc.), a good home manager, a good supplier of sexual services, a good nurse in sickness, a good child minder and educator, etc., etc. Women who exhibit these qualities are thought to be feminine in the best possible sense, but are not highly prized except by their owners, and are not highly paid – most often they are not paid at all.

Master and slave – is the basic social relationship under patriarchy. Housework and childcare are regarded as suitable work for slaves. Any repetitive and boring work is turned over sooner or later to women, and so is any work regarded as of low status. This also works

the other way round: if women come out as superior on any skill or quality, then that skill or quality is devalued and considered to be of no real account. The only way a slave can attain status is through the success of her master.

The patripsych – (pronounced PAY-tri-syke) is the structure within the mind of each person brought up in a patriarchal system, which keeps the system in place. Its deepest roots are unconscious. If we distinguish between male chauvinism (relatively superficial and not really so very hard to change), sexism (rather deeper attitudes which are harder to change) and patriarchy (the deepest and hardest to get at basic assumptions and feelings), then the patripsych is at the base of patriarchy in the mind and the heart of the individual, whether male or female. It works like an 'internal object' in clinical terminology. It is the patripsych which makes us feel very uneasy and uncertain when we are being successful in overcoming patriarchy, and makes us sabotage our own efforts. It is very much like the 'emotional plague' which Wilhelm Reich talked about, and like the 'pig parent' which Hogie Wyckoff talks about. It is hard to change in therapy, because it gets reinforced a thousand times a day; co-operative action may be necessary, as well as individual and group therapy.

Why should men try to break down patriarchy? If it is a system where men are supreme, why should they question it? Surely they will want to hang on to their goodies? The fact is that there are a lot of disadvantages of patriarchy for men, and a lot of advantages to be gained from changing it.

- A. The expectations laid on men are heavy and often don't fit the individual. The attempt to live up to these expectations causes mental and physical stress in those for whom they don't fit, and even in some of those they do seem to fit. Look again at the list of male qualities, and what it would be like to try to live up to all of them; it's a heavy burden.
- B. The objections of women to inferior status are very intimate and direct, and very hard for men to take. They need to take some action to cope with this new situation. It may seem cynical to quote this as a reason, but in fact it is a very powerful one. Most of the men who are now in men's politics trying to change themselves and patriarchy were driven there by the women they were living with.
- C. The norms of patriarchy are most effective when least

talked about. Now that they are being questioned by social science and women's literature, they are weaker and do not give the same support. A new set of values is needed, both for men and women. Men just can't rely on the old values, even if they wanted to.

- D. When men start behaving differently, in the sense of being themselves rather than playing the stereotyped male role, it feels so much better that they want to continue to follow it up in spite of all the difficulties. They actually experience the old way as having oppressed them personally, and want to change it further.
- E. Relating to women who are not playing the old games is so much more satisfying that it becomes more and more impossible to go back to the old type of one-up one-down relationship. It is like a whole person relating to a whole person, and not a mask relating to a mask. One doesn't want a system which continually tries to put the mask back on again.
- F. Relating to men who are not playing the old games is so marvellously different. Instead of competing and trying to get one-up all the time, one gets and gives warmth and support. Instead of having to keep one's body rigid and unyielding, one can relax and get close to other men – hugging them, kissing them, sitting with one's arm around someone.... This doesn't happen all the time, but just to know that it is possible, that it can be done, is such a relief. One doesn't want a system which makes this impossible, by continually telling one to stay cool and get ahead.
- G. A game which results in having one winner and many losers is called 'a win/lose game'. This is the only kind of game which is really valued under patriarchy. A game which has many winners and no losers is called 'a win/win game' – thus, my trust in you helps you to trust me; my openness with you helps you to be more open with me; if you give information to me, you enjoy giving it and I enjoy getting it – even Scrabble can be turned into a win/win game by aiming for the highest joint score possible. Win/win games feel good for all those involved; win/lose games feel good for the winner and bad for all the losers. Once one has experienced the satisfaction of win/win games, one doesn't want to go back to win/lose games.

There are plenty more reasons why men can want to question the system of patriarchy – Warren Farrell gives a list of 21 of them – but it is clear that there are some very real positive and negative incentives for men to change it.

Questioning patriarchy – is done in men's groups, for the most part. It is much harder to work on such problems in a mixed group, and those men and women who try to do this will need their own support groups in any case, so men's groups are inevitable. What can men do in such groups? It seems that separate men's groups can be quite effective for a number of purposes:

- * Diminishing competitive reactions and expanding affectionate responses between men
- * Developing the ability to listen and avoid interrupting others
- * Playing up values, intuition and feelings, and playing down talking, thinking and acting
- * Admitting to weakness and unpleasantness, and pursuing them for self-understanding and personal change
- * Working through outward self-confidence and inward self-blame to real self-acceptance
- * Dealing with the patripsych
- * Learning to give in relationships with others, rather than expecting always to be given to
- * Learning how to give emotional support
- * Learning about our bodies, and the ways we are cut off, and cut off ourselves from them
- * Learning about touch and relaxation, losing our self-consciousness
- * Learning the difference between self-criticism and self-put-down
- * Learning how not to get seduced into win/lose games, and how to set up more win/win situations

Men who have been in such groups find it more possible to relate to women and the women's movement in constructive and complementary ways, instead of the old patterns. They find it harder and harder to put up with patriarchy.

It has been found that those men's groups seem to be most effective in producing change which are able to work at the unconscious level as well as at the conscious level. This is because many of our most rigid patterns of habitual action were set up a long time ago, as part of our general defences against our feelings about parents, teachers, etc., and then repressed from consciousness. If we don't deal with these things by genuinely releasing them, the best we can do is set up another set of controls on top of the first set of controls – which takes much more energy, and is also much less effective.

But therapy is not enough on its own, either. We need a support system if we are to survive and build up a

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non-patriarchal society. That is why men's groups are so important. Without them, we should be going to women again for support, and so reinforcing patriarchal patterns all over again. Men have to give each other support in their efforts to question patriarchy, both in themselves and in the structures of society. And social change needs organized effort. When we know better how to give each other support in non-patriarchal ways, we will be better able to give the women's movement support in non-patriarchal ways, too.

Instead of patriarchy – what we want seems to be described as an androgynous or gynandrous society. Any human being needs to have the ability to be active and passive, assertive and receptive, instrumental and expressive, tough and tender, strong and vulnerable, independent and sociable – there is nothing necessarily mutually exclusive about these pairs of qualities. People actually do have all these qualities, but the patriarchal myth is that they don't, and at the moment the myth wins every time. In an androgynous society, each person would be able to express their own personal qualities in their own personal way, and not be expected to live up to some image of what they were supposed to look like.

And of course this means changes in organizations and the ways in which they are set up. Moving on from patriarchy is not just an individual matter, or a national or international matter – the details have to be worked through at the level of ordinary common-or-garden organizations like firms, schools and fire stations. Organizations need to be more flexible, less hierarchical. They need to introduce more power sharing, better communications and more win/win games. And this is happening to some extent, because it turns out that

organizations need to change in that direction for other reasons anyway. In what is technically called a 'turbulent environment' (one where the rules are changing as well as the particular moves in the game), organizations have to be more flexible just to survive at all. Patriarchy, in the sense of a strict dominance hierarchy, is breaking down there, too.

This paper is mainly written for men. Women may find it much too brusque and curt, much too cool about the hideousness of patriarchy. But men are different from women. We have been made so, deeply and effectively and repetitively. We don't change easily or fast. Not many of us want to change; and those who do, find unexpected resistances coming up in them as they start to do so. The best we can do is open up the area, keep it open, refuse to stop working on it when the going gets tough; that way, we at least have a chance of learning something, getting it better next time.

If you, the reader, are a man or a woman, and you'd like to give me some feedback on your reactions, I'd like to have them, so that I can learn more and do better next time. This is the third time I have re-written this, and I don't suppose it will be the last.

It seems to me that this is the political struggle of our time, and I don't know how to spend my time better than by trying to understand what needs to be done and how to change it. ☹