



## Patriarchy

by Andrew Matzner

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Patriarchy, literally "the rule of the fathers," describes a social system in which men hold positions of power and women are oppressed. Patriarchal cultures, which have been dominant throughout the world over the past several thousand years, can take many forms. However, a common characteristic is a hierarchical ordering of nature and society that is control-based, privileging masculinity while devaluing femininity. A strict binary gender system and a strong emphasis on procreative sex has had negative consequences for people who identify as lesbian, gay, or transgendered.

### **Pre-Patriarchy**

Although the evidence is sketchy, it does appear that civilizations have existed in which social relations between men and women were based on an egalitarian model. Scholars such as Riane Eisler, Merlin Stone, and Marija Gimbutas have used archaeological findings to argue for the prevalence of pre-patriarchal societies, which were distinguished by goddess worship, reverence for nature, and appreciation of women.

In these "matriarchal" cultures, there was a lack of understanding of the connection between sexual intercourse and pregnancy, and thus the role of the male in procreation was apparently unknown. Rather than having kinship relations defined by paternity, descent was traced solely through the mother.

Extrapolating from data collected by anthropologists about "primitive peoples" in the contemporary world, some researchers have made inferences about sexuality and gender in matriarchal societies, claiming that both homosexuality and transgenderism commonly occurred and were accepted behaviors and identities in such cultures.

### **The Patriarchal Paradigm Shift**

According to Friedrich Engels, patriarchal societies began to emerge approximately nine thousand years ago with the development of agriculture. Besides learning how to grow crops, people came to realize how reproduction occurred, not only in plants, but also in animals and humans. This led to a move from nomadic lives in small groups to larger, permanent farming settlements, and introduced the idea of private property--which then led to the creation of social classes and inter-class exploitation.

Societies slowly moved towards a patriarchal model that emphasized *control*. First, there was a need to control the natural environment for planting and harvesting purposes. Second, it was necessary to control the breeding of domesticated animals for labor and food. And third, men's understanding of their part in reproduction lessened their reverence for women and instigated their desire to measure descent through--and thereby control--the male line.

These factors led to a worldview that ordered the world into unequal binaries, with men holding positions of power over women.

When matriarchal goddess religions gave way to the concept of a sole male god, attitudes towards sexuality stiffened. As Engels notes, patriarchal "civilization" is based on the power men have to pass on their private property (that is, wealth) to their children. In order to guarantee paternity, men needed to take control of the household and regulate their wives' sexuality.

In contrast to pre-patriarchal goddess religions, in the Judaeo-Christian traditions bodily pleasure became de-emphasized, while sexuality and non-normative gender expression were restricted. For example, in Mosaic law cross-dressing and non-procreative sex such as homosexuality were proscribed.

Early slave-based empires, such as Greece and Rome, were governed by men who devalued women; the association of homosexuality and transgenderism with femininity ensured that some "unproductive" expressions of sexuality and gender suffered social opprobrium. While pederastic relations were institutionalized in ancient Greece, adult men who assumed a passive role in sex with other males were often ridiculed.

With the rise of feudal societies in Europe after the Roman Empire crumbled, the Roman Catholic Church came to gain enormous power. Although there are debates regarding the presence of sanctioned homosexual unions between clergy, it does seem clear that the Medieval Church took severe action against those among the general public who violated sex and gender roles.

The Industrial Revolution instigated the rise of capitalism and the development of mass market economies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As labor moved from the land to urban factories, men's power became tied up in the wages they were able to earn as workers away from the home. The strength of the home and church became weakened, as institutions such as industry, science, schools, and government became loci of power in society and bolstered male dominance.

### **Implications for Sexuality**

As Allan Johnson notes, patriarchal society is "male-dominated, male-centered, and male-identified." Besides variables such as race, age, and social class, the control model also hierarchically organizes gender and sexuality.

Regardless of the form a patriarchal society takes, control-oriented culture valorizes and normalizes the heterosexual male, who is viewed as the human standard against which all else (that is, non-humans such as women and homosexuals) is measured. This normative system of sexuality is enforced by conceptualizing men as either "real" or deviant. "Real men" are sexually attracted to "real women," who are expected to bear and raise children and take care of the home, hence the sanctity (and legal binding) of marriage.

Because neither gay men nor lesbians contribute to the patriarchal structure of the family (which serves to [re]create new workers for the paid and unpaid labor force), they are considered counter-productive to industrial society and hence are stigmatized. Thus, homophobic prejudice and discrimination are direct results of the patriarchal mindset.

Institutions such as the church, state and national laws, the media, education, and biological and psychological theories all serve to instill and maintain this heterosexist social ideology. Social control over expressions of sexuality and gender is also maintained through violence, either actual or threatened.

According to the patriarchal perspective, gender refers to the rules that govern the behaviors and roles of men and women. "Real men" and "real women" are expected to act in predictable ways that are assumed to be biologically determined. Of course, genetics are not left to chance, and both men and women are socialized from birth into their appropriate gender roles.

By conceptualizing men and women as inhabiting mutually exclusive categories, patriarchal society is able

to organize itself along gendered lines--men and women each have their proper places, and society runs smoothly because the rules of gender are followed. Conversely, by calling these supposedly natural (and therefore inevitable and fixed) sex/gender categories into question, transgendered people challenge one of the very foundational ideas supporting the structure of patriarchy. Accordingly, transgenderism is stigmatized in this type of society.

Antagonism towards homosexuality and transgenderism is not a timeless, natural phenomenon, but rather a post-matriarchal social construction born out of male domination.

It is believed that patriarchal beliefs emerged from the desire of men to be absolutely certain of the paternity of children, for inheritance purposes. This led to hostility against "non-normative" forms of sexual and gendered behavior. Ironically, however, it has been in these late stages of hyper-capitalism that struggles to end gay, lesbian, and transgender oppression have been more powerful and effective than at any other time during patriarchal history.

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