

What is Patriarchy?

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The concept of Patriarchy itself is not a contribution of feminist theories. Many social scientists in the nineteenth century wrote about it as a more civilized or complex form of organization compared to the primitive matriarchies¹. Engels referred to it as the earliest system of domination establishing that Patriarchy is "the world historical defeat of the female sex."² In this sense, it is said that Patriarchy was a form of political organization that distributed power unequally between men and women to the detriment of women. The Royal Academy of the Spanish Language Dictionary defines Patriarchy as "*A primitive social organization in which authority is exercised by a male head of the family, extending this power even to distant relatives of the same lineage.*"

Feminist theories updated and expanded the understanding of Patriarchy in the second half of the twentieth century. In fact, the social sciences had left it behind precisely because it was considered only to apply to and characterize ancient civilizations. But for many feminists, Patriarchy is much more than civilizations that existed in the ancient past and goes beyond "*the unequal distribution of power between men and women in certain aspects of our societies*", as many dictionaries still define it. On the contrary, most forms of feminism characterize Patriarchy as a present day unjust social system that subordinates, discriminates or is oppressive to women. As Carole Pateman writes, "The patriarchal construction of the difference between masculinity and femininity is the political difference between freedom and subjection."³ For me, the concept of Patriarchy includes all the socio-political mechanisms, which I call Patriarchal Institutions, which reproduce and exert male dominance over women. Feminist theory typically characterizes Patriarchy as a social construction, which can be overcome by revealing and critically analyzing its manifestations⁴ and institutions.

Fixating on real and perceived biological differences between the two recognized sexes⁵, men justify their domination on the basis of an alleged biological inferiority of women. Both feminist and non feminist thinkers recognize that Patriarchy has its historical origins in the family, the leadership (legal and practical) of which is exercised

¹ There is now evidence that the matriarchies these scientists were talking about were not "matriarchies" in the strict sense of the word but matrilineal or matrifocal forms of social organization. While recognizing that there is considerable variation in the role that gender plays in human societies, there are no known human examples of strictly matriarchal cultures. There are a number of societies that have been shown to be matrilineal, matrifocal, matrilocal or gynocentric, especially among indigenous tribal groups. Some hunter-gatherer groups have been characterized as largely egalitarian.

² See Engels, Frederic, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884).

³ Pateman, Carole (1988). *The Sexual Contract*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 207.

⁴ See for example, Tickner, Ann J. (2001). "Patriarchy". *Routledge Encyclopedia of International Political Economy: Entries P-Z*. Taylor & Francis, pp. 1197-1198.

⁵ Most models of Patriarchy only recognize the existence of two distinct and dichotomous biological sexes.

by the father and is projected to the entire social order - an order that is maintained and reinforced by different mechanisms/institutions, among them the Institution of Male Solidarity. Through this institution, men as a social category, individually and collectively oppress all women as a social category, but also oppress women individually in different ways, appropriating women's reproductive and productive force and controlling their bodies, minds, sexuality and spirituality mainly through "peaceful" means such as the law and religion. However, often these peaceful means are reinforced through the use of physical, sexual, and/or psychological violence.

Combining all of these elements of Patriarchy, I define it as:

"Patriarchy is a form of mental, social, spiritual, economic and political organization/structuring of society produced by the gradual institutionalization of sex-based political relations created, maintained and reinforced by different institutions linked closely together to achieve consensus on the lesser value of women and their roles. These institutions interconnect not only with each other to strengthen the structures of domination of men over women, but also with other systems of exclusion, oppression and/or domination based on real or perceived differences between humans, creating States that respond only to the needs and interests of a few powerful men."

By "*gradual institutionalization*" I refer to a historical process that proves Patriarchy is not natural, has not always existed, and is not identical in all cultures and in all generations. This, in turn, means that although men have power over women in all institutions considered important in each society, it does not mean that women do not have any power or rights, influence or resources, nor does it mean that all women have or exert the same power. Moreover, as Patriarchy becomes more sophisticated, more women of specific groups are allowed access to certain institutions, although they are almost never the most powerful people within those institutions.

By "*sex-based political relations*", I mean, as explained so well by Kate Millet, that sexual and other relations between the two sexes recognized as such by Patriarchy, are political relations, through which men dominate women.

By "*consensus on the lesser value of women*", I refer to a tacit and subconscious agreement between each member of a community that women and everything relating to women is worth less than men and everything relating to men. We see this reflected in the Institution of Sexist Language, which establishes the feminine as "the other" and the male as the norm and that which represents or contains the feminine. By "consensus", I also make reference to an ideology and its expression in language that explicitly devalues women, assigning them, their roles, their work, their products and their social environment less worth and/or power than that assigned to men.

By "*patriarchal institutions*", I refer to the set of mechanisms, practices, beliefs, myths and relationships organizing relatively stable patterns of human activity with respect to the distribution of resources, the reproduction of individuals, and the type of societal structures within a given Patriarchy. These institutions are closely linked with one another, creating, maintaining and transmitting inequality from generation to generation. Most sociologists recognize as institutions such social structures as governments, the family, human languages, universities, hospitals, business corporations, and legal systems. I prefer to rename these recognized institutions with more appropriate names such as the Institution of Androcentric Law, the Institution of Misogynist Religion or of Sexist Language, of Malestream Media or Malecentered Science, etc. But I also like to make visible other institutions which patriarchal sociology does not recognize as such, like the Institution of Male Solidarity, of History with Capital H, of Erotic Violence, of Woman-Blaming Myths, of Maleheteronormativity, of Dichotomous Sexual Beings, etc. Many feminists, while not speaking of institutions *per se*, argue that Patriarchy exists not only in the family but in all structures that allow for control over women, their work and reproductive force. I call these structures patriarchal institutions, because aside from being mechanisms for the perpetuation of Patriarchy, they are also a set of beliefs, practices, myths, relationships, etc. which make sure that Patriarchy is invisible even to those women which suffer the most exclusion or at the most, make sure it is perceived as natural or simply as the way things are and always will be for women.

I borrow the idea of the "Institution of Male Solidarity" from Celia Amorós, although she does not call it this and speaks instead of a brotherhood among men that takes place in the constitution of modern Patriarchy. The Costa Rican composer/singer Guadalupe Urbina refers to this institution as "the Knighthood of Mutual Praise". Marcela Lagarde, Angela Miles, Carole Pateman and many other feminists also believe that men create interdependence and solidarity among themselves, which enables them to dominate women. This does not mean that there is no hierarchy among men.

The "appropriation of women's reproductive force" and the control of their bodies and their sexuality comes from radical feminism. For example, Shulamith Firestone discusses how human reproduction, which happens in women's bodies, is legally appropriated and controlled by men and is used to benefit men or to keep women at the mercy of men. Lidia Falcón considers women as a social and economic class, insisting that it is the father and/or husband who enforce the appropriation. Many feminists, such as Maria Meis and others, have spoken of the productive relationship between husband and wife in the modern nuclear family, which is similar to the relationship between a supervisor and a subordinate in the workplace. This subordination occurs in the private space of family because whatever the husband's produces enters the market (the

privileged area of capitalist Patriarchy), while the wife's production is not. In this way, all of the wife's work in the non-privileged private space of the nuclear family is invisibilized .

Some aspects, elements or characteristics of modern Patriarchy are the following:

1. Patriarchy had a beginning and therefore can have an end. Even if we still do not know how exactly it came into being we do know it came about after millenniums of different more egalitarian human organizing. The earliest forms of Patriarchy only began at the most 6 millenniums ago.
2. We also know that there are different models of Patriarchy at different times and in different cultures and places but the lower value given to women and their roles as compared to men and their roles remains constant in all models. In other words, Patriarchy co-exists with very different forms of government and socio religious political organizing such as empires, kingdoms, theocracies, republics, democracies, etc. and can co-exist very well with capitalism, socialism, etc. However, due to the globalization of neoliberal capitalism, almost all existing Patriarchies today can be categorized as capitalist Patriarchies.
3. In all known Patriarchy negative meanings are attributed to women and their activities through symbols and myths (not always explicitly expressed). These symbols and myths are different in different cultures but within each culture they attribute negative meanings to women or the feminine.
4. Patriarchy is made up of structures or institutions that exclude women from participation in, or contact with, spaces of higher power, or what are believed to be the spaces of greatest power economically, politically, culturally and religiously.
5. Despite the above, women are not treated identically in Patriarchy, nor are all women excluded in the same way from spaces of power. In fact this different treatment is a mechanism by which the lack of solidarity and competitiveness among women is promoted. This lack of solidarity and competitiveness among women sometimes escalate to outright contempt for each other, thus ensuring their loyalty to men and male values.
6. Patriarchy is produced by and at the same time promotes, a mindset based on dichotomous, hierarchical and sexualized thinking. This mindset divides

reality into two dichotomous categories placing all of perceived reality either into things and acts associated with nature or things and acts produced by culture. Furthermore, everything placed within the category "culture" is overvalued while everything associated with nature is undervalued. By situating men and the masculine under the higher category of culture, and woman and the feminine under the less valued category of nature, "man" and masculinity become the parameter, model or paradigm of humanity, while the subordination of women is justified based on their alleged inferior "natural roles".

7. In Patriarchy, gender roles and stereotypes may be different in each social class, age and culture but through the mechanisms, structures and institutions mentioned previously, it makes these roles and stereotypes seem natural and universal.
8. In any given Patriarchy all men will not enjoy the same privileges or have the same power. Indeed, the experience of domination of men over women historically served for some men to extend that domination over other groups of men, installing a hierarchy among men that is more or less the same in every culture or region today. The male at the top of the patriarchal hierarchy has great economic power; is an adult and almost always able-bodied; possesses a well-defined, masculine gender identity and a well-defined heterosexual identity, adding a few more features by region. For example, in Latin America, for a man to be at the top of the patriarchal hierarchy, that man has to be white and Christian, in addition to the other characteristics shared with Patriarchy's counterparts across regions.
9. Across Patriarchy's different models, women are exposed to different degrees and types of violence, some common to all and others specific to each cultural, religious or economic model adopted by the Patriarchy.
10. Patriarchy was the first structure of domination, subordination and exclusion which is recognized as such by History with a capital H (recognized patriarchal history) and still remains a basic system of domination. Ironically, while being the most powerful and enduring system of inequality, it is hardly ever perceived as such even by women themselves. In fact, precisely because the invisibilization of Patriarchy is one of its institutions, even some feminists deny its existence.