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Patriarchy

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The term *patriarchy* refers to an organization, institution, or society in which power, social control, material
wealth, and high social status accrue predominantly to males rather than females. Patriarchy is one of the most enduring and pervasive of all social patterns. It appears in all eras, among all races, social institutions, and economic classes, and in virtually every known culture. Rising initially in early family and kinship structures, hierarchical patriarchal patterns are found today around the globe not only in family and kinship groups but also throughout the major social institutions, including language, family, economy, polity, religion, law, education, science, and medicine.

**Early Studies of Patriarchy**

Patriarchy derives fundamentally from early forms of family organization, and this theme was early explored by several noted scholars, including John Locke’s *The Two Treatises on Civil Government* (1690) and Sir Henry Maine’s *Ancient Law* (1861), *Early History of Institutions* (1875), and *Early Law and Custom* (1883). The most accessible and comprehensive survey of this early literature, together with a detailed explication of the origins of patriarchy, was provided in 1904 by George Elliott Howard in his massive study the *History of Matrimonial Institutions*. Howard, the founder of what he called “institutional history,” applied the interdisciplinary perspectives of history, sociology, jurisprudence, and feminism to unlock and describe the primitive manifestations of patriarchy, especially in England and the United States, including wife purchase, marriage contracts, property rights, and husband’s prerogatives in divorce. As a subsequent topic of theoretical discourse, patriarchy has been subjected to sophisticated analyses by leading scholars in the humanities and social sciences.

**Matriarchal Hypotheses**

Patriarchy is instructively contrasted with its mirror image, matriarchy, the rule of society by women rather than men. The Swiss scholar Johann Jacob Bachofen argued in *Das Mutterrecht* (1861) that patriarchy followed an earlier period of mother right, or gynocracy, wherein maternal lines of descent reigned supreme in all matters religious and political. Margaret Mead’s important findings on the malleability of human personality and socialization notwithstanding, the empirical documentation of early female-dominated societies is controversial and sketchy. Bachofen’s view that matriarchy was a universal precursor to patriarchy is at best a highly speculative conjecture. Nonetheless, hypotheses concerning the character and potential of full-fledged female-dominated societies have provided lively themes for imaginative theoretical debate and fictional exploration. Among the most perceptive of these is sociologist Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s two-part *Herland/Ourland* saga, published during 1915 to 1916. Gilman wrote in a popular voice and published her sociological observations in her own monthly journal, *The Forerunner*. In the instructive, imaginative, and often playful *Herland/Ourland* saga, Gilman vividly compared and contrasted her conclusions (based partly on theory and partly on direct sociological observation) about societies run by males in *Ourland* versus females in *Herland*. Gilman clearly saw many virtues in women’s values and condemned the destructive results of generations of male-dominated rule in the real world, but her primary deduction was that the highest and most progressive societies will someday combine the best of both worlds, with men and women ruling together in genuinely equitable partnership. Thus, for Gilman, it was not an either/or problem of matriarchy versus patriarchy, but rather a question of how men and women can share power together and build truly egalitarian relationships. This remains today a pragmatic goal for many feminists and political progressives.

For the present, while anthropologists, philosophers, and other scholars continue to debate the existence, extent, and effectiveness of early matriarchal societies, an important practical point is that various matriarchal practices are found today (i.e., in some naming conventions, female clans and secret societies, sororities, women’s clubs, women-owned businesses, etc.). In practical terms, important corollary research questions concern the extent to which patriarchal and matriarchal patterns can coexist, which patterns are ascendent, stagnant, or descending, to what degree these patterns can interpenetrate each other, and, finally, what is the empirical evidence of truly egalitarian and cooperative endeavors between men and women today.

**Hierarchical Patterns Within Patriarchies**

Empirically, patriarchal patterns are typically hierarchical, in which the head or chief male is awarded (or takes) the greatest powers and controls the most individual and communal assets. Men rarely share equally in the male prerogatives typical of patriarchal social structures.
Males who occupy lower levels in the hierarchy possess correspondingly less power and fewer worldly goods. A paradigm illustration of patriarchy is absolute kingship, in which a male king commands the total fealty of his subjects (both male and female), holds the power of life and death in his hands (as legislator, judge, jury, and executioner combined in one person), and rules with unchallenged authority. Traditional patriarchies are closely intertwined with family and kinship; thus, in hereditary patriarchies, the transfer of power from one patriarchal head, chief, or king conveys along specified kinship lines to a genealogically designated male heir. In less formally organized groups, the death of chief or king typically results in a power vacuum to be filled by the male who rises to the top position by virtue of physical prowess, simple seniority, convincing charisma, and/or astute political chicane (traditional accounts, albeit sometimes apocryphal, of the naming of a new "godfather" in organized crime families provide dramatic illustrations of this less structured process).

Modern and postmodern societies are replete with vestigial patriarchial structures in all of the major social institutions, including language, family, economy, government, religion, law, education, medicine, and science. In myriad specific instances, the control of societal, communal, and individual resources is now vested in very real and exceptionally effective patriarchal forms. The prime research question facing social investigators today is not so much whether patriarchy is a thing of the past, but rather the extent to which patriarchy survives, thrives, transforms, and replicates itself in pervasive, persistent, and consequential ways. In contemporary societies today, especially those given to the rhetoric of social progress, accelerated change, and women's liberation, it is often difficult for citizens (male and female) to fully comprehend the continuing existence and influence of patriarchal patterns of control, oppression, and repression. It is not the case, however, that men always get every piece of pie, but they usually get the bigger pieces and—to put it colloquially—they rarely do the baking.

**Patriarchy and Multiple Statuses**

Patriarchy combines in myriad ways with other social statuses, resulting in complex matrices of social strata, privilege, and prestige. The social pie is divided up along many dimensions, even if men still usually get the largest share. The standard sociological triad—sex, race, and class—is in practice crosscut with numerous additional status dimensions related to education, physical and mental disabilities, religion, employment history, legal troubles, marital status, sexual orientation, parenthood, citizenship, athleticism, politics, cultural standards of physical attractiveness, social manners, and the like. Each dimension can be conceptualized as having majority (i.e., positive) and minority (i.e., negative) status traits in the same way that sex (male vs. female), race (white vs. nonwhite), and class (upper vs. lower) have been traditionally defined. The terms positive and negative refer to culturally relevant criteria and evaluations made by the dominant groups, not to inherent defects or worthiness. Nonetheless, such evaluations are highly consequential.

The multidimensional reality of combined multiple minority and multiple majority statuses is reflected in the various characteristics of those who rise to the top, fall to the bottom, or float in the middle of powerful patriarchal structures. Persons holding a multitude of minority statuses face extraordinary challenges. Consider, for example, the hypothetical situation confronted by a female Hispanic who is undocumented, unemployed, penniless, unskilled and uneducated, physically disabled, lesbian, apolitical, graceless, overweight and unattractive, and speaks heavily accented English. Hers is an extreme case, and her challenges would be daunting. People in the midst of this evaluative matrix claim a mixture of majority and minority statuses. Take, for example, the comparative case of a heterosexual Anglo-Saxon male who graduated with an accounting degree from a small state college and holds a steady civil service job but also has a severe speech impediment and is grossly overweight, unmarried, and childless. He faces many serious challenges, but not so many as the Hispanic woman described above.

As multiple majority statuses accumulate and minority statuses decrease, what may be called the classic patriarchal paradigm emerges, the ideal candidate for the American presidency: male, white, upper-middle or upper class, Ivy League education, physical prowess, distinguished career, married with children, high church, outstanding civic service and military record, well-mannered, physically attractive, and so on. Given otherwise equally qualified candidates for leading positions, if one is male and the other female, the prizes still go overwhelmingly to the male candidates, and this pattern holds generally true not only in politics and the military but also in
business, law, religion, and medicine. In realms seemingly well outside the corridors of political and economic power, the multiple-majority male still generally trumps the otherwise equally qualified female when it comes to conducting the leading orchestras, directing the major art museums, and heading the most prestigious libraries. An important point here is that while a relatively small but extant number of upper-middle-class, middle-class, and working-class males can point to ever more numerous examples of women who outrank them or who have achieved greater career success, the vast majority of the key positions in the society remain solidly in the hands of males. This is part of the increasingly complex reality of contemporary patriarchal systems.

Objective and Subjective Forms of Patriarchy

Patriarchy in its most entrenched, overt, and traditionally oppressive form is readily evident to careful observers. Objective patriarchy is empirically demonstrable by the ratio of men to women who occupy the most well-paid, most prestigious, and most consequential decision-making positions in a society. A society has a fundamentally patriarchal pattern when its presidents, governors, directors, chief executive officers, judges, generals, high-ranking elected officials, chairpersons, key advisors, board members, and the like are either solely or predominantly male. Ostensibly, the pace of social change in given societies, so far as objective patriarchal patterns are concerned, is indicated by charting temporal shifts in the ratio of males to females who hold key institutional positions. Within the government of the United States, for example, the president, the vice president, the secretary of defense, the chief justice of the Supreme Court, and holders of numerous other crucial offices have been men throughout the more than 200-year history of the country. This objectively verifiable pattern presents a classic object lesson in enduring patriarchy. From a purely quantitative perspective, a further 200 years of placing only women in the key positions of the U.S. government would be required before reaching equity in the ratio of males to females who have occupied these positions over time. The occasional future election or sporadic appointment of women to the top government positions will at best indicate potential for dismantling what remains at root a deeply entrenched pattern and should not be mistaken as a sign that patriarchy has been supplanted or significantly weakened within the governmental institutions of the United States in any fundamental or revolutionary sense.

Beyond polity per se, the objective approach to patriarchal patterns can be further applied to examinations of the distribution and control of power, privilege, and prestige throughout the other major institutional structures of society today: linguistic, familial, legal, economic, educational, scientific, medical, and religious. The complexity of such studies, especially over time and when making international comparisons, becomes quickly more challenging and is sometimes intractable. Objective data are frequently unavailable, especially in the economically poorest regions of the world. Additional complications arise when exploring patriarchal patterns in private versus public organizations. Many of the most important and consequential societal decisions are made in secret sessions, behind closed doors through which even the most persistent researcher cannot go. When private entities elect to restrict their personnel records, veil their organizational charts, and seal their internal documents and memoranda, the evidence required to demonstrate the existence of objective patriarchal structures remains largely unavailable to outsiders.

Beyond the visible façade of patriarchal edifices such as the presidency of the United States, the intricacies and subtleties of objective patriarchal structures also deserve analysis, especially when documenting changes in patterns over time. In situations where women have reached something approaching parity with men in previously male-dominated fields, the apparent victory for women is often pyrrhic—too often symbolic rather than substantive. The field of medicine in the U.S. is a case in point. Medicine was traditionally a man’s profession, but women now account for half of all medical students. Objectively, one might ask, has medicine ceased to exhibit a patriarchal pattern? Ostensibly, yes, but the deeper answer is negative. While it is true that women are entering the medical profession in equal numbers with men, they do not enter the same medical specialties. Men generally gravitate to the high-paying, highly competitive specialties, such as neurosurgery, whereas women tend to specialize in lower-paying, less prestigious specialties of gynecology and family practice. These differences translate into continuing patriarchal patterns that can be documented when looking at hospital directorships, deanships at medical research hospitals, and the editorships of the most prestigious
medical journals. Yes, women have been admitted to the medical profession, but men continue to dominate and control the field, albeit now in less obvious and more subtle ways.

The aggressive pursuit of power, prestige, and financial reward in capitalist as well as socialist societies is an enduring competition dominated by men, especially in the world’s wealthiest and most influential nation-states. When a field of play becomes less lucrative or provides ever more limited opportunities for advancement, the most competitive men typically abandon the field to women and their less competitive male colleagues and go elsewhere to advance their careers. This may well be the ultimate future of medicine, as physicians become mere employees of massive hospital systems run not by doctors but by businessmen. The feminization of the U.S. teaching profession provides an instructive example, in that the average salary for teachers—in what was once an all-male profession—is now lowest in the grade schools, where women predominate, but highest among tenured university professors, where men still outnumber women by large margins. And among professors, as in medicine, men tend to predominate in precisely those scholarly disciplines offering the highest remuneration, and generally, men occupy the most powerful and instrumental university administrative positions. As tenure and other professorial perquisites disappear, the increased feminization of higher education becomes ever more likely. The mirror image of feminization is playing out in the field of nursing, traditionally an all-female occupation. As men enter nursing in larger numbers, salaries are increasing, the professional scope of nursing duties is widening, and male nurses are rising to take a disproportionate share of the top administrative positions open to nurses.

Images of objective patriarchal patterns are further subject to media manipulation, such that casual observers of the social scene are well advised to question the veracity and objectivity of images portrayed in movies, novels, and television comedies and dramas and conveyed in newspapers, magazines, televised news, and the Internet. While notable exceptions do exist, it remains the case that the influential motion picture studios, major publishing houses, television networks, and large newspapers in the United States are run predominantly by men. The underlying pattern of control is decidedly patriarchal, even if the images presented sometimes promote the illusion that male privileges and prerogatives are in sharp and unrecoverable decline now that the world has entered the 21st century. Positive images of independent, capable, and instrumental women are undoubtedly inspiring models, but thoughtful critics admonish consumers to avoid mistaking self-affirming images, however inviting and attractive, for the hard institutional realities of the lived world.

The operation and persistence of patriarchal privilege is open to objective scrutiny, but the data required for comprehensive study are often unavailable, are frequently veiled in secrecy and privatization, and are subject to significant temporal shifts in the institutional locations of the most lucrative hierarchical competitions. Media laments and progressive fictions to the contrary, the objective patterns of patriarchy show few, if any, signs of socially significant or culturally meaningful erosion, especially in the more aggressive and industrially advanced countries of the world.

Compared with the objective, overtly oppressive aspects of patriarchy, the internalized, repressive dimensions of patriarchy are more subjective. The internalization of patriarchal beliefs (for example, the idea that men make better leaders, are the most stalwart, make the best soldiers, etc.) is relatively straightforward where men are concerned, because such beliefs generally serve their collective interests. On the other hand, the internalization, legitimation, and perpetuation of the same set of ideas by women contributes significantly to the maintenance and persistence of objective patriarchal patterns, to the overall detriment of women’s collective interests, and in this sense is clearly repressive. A woman who recently reported, “I really think it’s gentlemanly when a man lights my cigarette” and then reflects—as an afterthought—that she doesn’t actually smoke, illustrates the subjective, internalized side of patriarchy that is passed unwittingly from woman to woman and mother to daughter, not to mention from man to man, father to son, and mother to son. Internalized visions of patriarchy as the proper order of things influence decisions made by men and women in the marketplace, voting booth, courts, schools, and boardrooms and in countless homes, businesses, and bureaucratic offices. It is unlikely that overt, visible patriarchal patterns will change without significant shifts in consciousness on the part of women who have internalized the ideologies and worldviews that support the objective patterns of patriarchy.
Conclusion

Patriarchy is a pervasive and enduring coercive social pattern wherein men hold all or most of the key decision-making positions in virtually every society around the globe. Power, privilege, and prestige are typically distributed in patriarchal systems along hierarchical lines, resulting in competitions between men for the very top positions. While it is often possible for some women to achieve higher positions than some men in patriarchal systems, the rise of a few women to positions in the upper echelons of power is commonly more symbolic than consequential for the society as a whole. The objective dimensions of patriarchal organization in any given society can be mapped by carefully observing the gender composition of the command and leadership positions in a nation’s highest courts, elected offices, largest businesses, prestigious law firms, leading universities, and top military units. The subjective aspects of patriarchy (that is, the extent to which women internalize the “rightness” of patriarchal dominance) are more difficult to study but are nonetheless real and consequential. There is no inherent reason why patriarchy should continue to prevail, except that males have traditionally worked to retain the perquisites of power for themselves. Patriarchy, as a widespread pattern, appears safe from significant social or political challenges in the near term and will most likely survive well into the foreseeable future.

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See also Economy: History of Women’s Participation; Family, Organization of; Feminization of Labor; Gilman, Charlotte Perkins; Glass Ceiling; Masculinity Studies; Matrilineal Systems; Privilege, Male

Further Readings


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