

Source text

# Patriarchy

The philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah once asked why some people feel the need to believe in a more equal past to picture a more equal future.

Many of us look at the stranglehold that gender-based oppression has on our societies and wonder if there was a time when men didn't have this much power, when femininity and masculinity didn't mean what they do now. When we search for powerful women in ancient history, when we try to identify precedents for equality in the distant past, perhaps we also betray our longing for an alternative in a world in which we fear there may be none.

Patriarchy—giving all power and authority to the father—can sometimes seem like a vast conspiracy stretching into deep time. The word itself has become devastatingly monolithic, encompassing all the ways in which the world's women, girls, and nonbinary people are abused and unfairly treated, from domestic violence and rape to the gender pay gap and moral double standards. The sheer scale of it feels out of our control. But how old and how universal is it really?

Historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, and feminists have been fascinated by this question—and as a science journalist, I've been preoccupied with it for years. In 1973 sociologist Steven Goldberg published *The Inevitability of Patriarchy*, a book arguing that fundamental biological differences between men and women run so deep that in every iteration of human society, a patriarchal system would always win out. Whichever way the pie was cut, men—in his view naturally more powerful and aggressive—would end up with the bigger slice.

The problem with this is, male domination isn't universal. There are many matrilineal societies—organized through mothers rather than fathers, with name and property passed from mother to daughter—around the world. In some regions, matrilineal traditions are thought to date back thousands of years.

For decades Western scholars have invented theories to explain why these societies exist. Some claim that matriliney survives only among hunter-gatherers or simple agriculturists, not in large-scale societies. Others say it works best when men are often away at war, leaving women in charge at home. Still others argue that matriliney ends as soon as people start keeping cattle, because men want to control these resources—linking patriarchy to property and land.

Always, though, matrilineal societies are framed as unusual cases, “beset by special strains, as fragile and rare, possibly even doomed to extinction,” as Washington State University anthropologist Linda Stone puts it. In academic circles, the problem is known as the matrilineal puzzle. Patriliney, on the other hand, is seen to need no explanation. It just is.

In 2019 researchers at Vanderbilt University attempted to solve this puzzle, analyzing matrilineal communities to see if they did have anything in common. Globally 590 societies were known to be traditionally patrilineal, 362 were bilateral, meaning they acknowledged descent through both parents, and another 160 were recognized as matrilineal. Biologist Nicole Creanza, who worked on the research, says the team tested popular theories about matriliney like those above—but none held true in every case.

One factor that did seem to affect a society's move away from matriliney, says Creanza, was “when populations had property, not in terms of land but movable, transmissible wealth, where if your offspring inherited this thing that you have, they would be potentially better off.” But even this wasn't consistent. Each society was just too complicated to reduce to simple factors, be they biological, environmental, or anything

else. “As far in as you can zoom,” she says, “you can find more and more complexity.” (In the 16th century B.C., three queens led Egypt against Hyksos invaders and won.)

Anthropologists insist there are no female-led matriarchies, if by matriarchy we mean the direct opposite of patriarchy. In his 1680 text *Patriarcha*, the English political theorist Sir Robert Filmer defined patriarchy as the natural rule of a father over his family and a king over his state. But what we usually see in matrilineal societies is women and men sharing power. Even if significant authority lies with brothers or uncles, it’s often authority that depends upon circumstances, or diffuse power more than absolute.

What characterizes matrilineal societies, as Stone has written, is “considerable variation” in “authority, power, and influence among both males and females.” There would have been even more variation in the past. In prehistory, social norms were constantly moving. What can appear from one point of view to be an instability resolving itself—a shift from matriliney to patriliney, for instance—may from another point of view be a move from one relatively stable state to another, Creanza explains.

Everywhere, people have always pushed for their societies to be structured differently, for the oppressed to have more freedoms or privileges. “Anyone, given half a chance, will prefer equality and justice to inequality and injustice,” writes political theorist Anne Phillips. “Subservience does not, on the whole, come naturally to people.”

Sociologist Goldberg’s argument was that if a pattern of behavior is universal, it probably has a biological basis, and that given how little political power women have, they must feel themselves to be naturally subordinate. But as Phillips explains, nowhere do women defer to men without struggle. For centuries, from the United States to Iran, they’ve fought for more rights and privileges. Viewed this way, we might ask why matrilineal societies are still thought of as unusually unstable. Globally, impassioned movements for gender equality—sometimes tipping into violent protest—indicate that

patriarchy is not as stable as it seems either. Perhaps the real matrilineal puzzle isn't the existence of some female-focused societies but the bizarre preponderance of male-focused ones.

“I consider the oppression of women to be a system,” sociologist Christine Delphy says. “An institution which exists today cannot be explained by the simple fact that it existed in the past...even if this past is recent.”

If we resign ourselves to accepting our lot as part of who we are by nature, we give up on understanding how it might have come about. When we settle the case for patriarchy on something as simple as biological difference, even though the evidence points to a reality that's far more complex and contingent, we lose the capacity to recognize just how fragile it might be. We stop asking how inequality works or the ways in which it is being reinvented.

The most dangerous part of any form of human oppression is that it can make people believe that there are no alternatives. We see this in the old fallacies of race, caste, and class. The question for any theory of male domination is why this one form of inequality should be treated as the exception.

Translation

## 父权制

哲学家康威·安东尼·阿皮亚曾问，为什么有些人觉得，只有有了更平等的过去，才能描绘更平等的未来？

我们对待社会性别不平等的束缚时，常会思考，历史上是否存在过某个时期，男性权利不如今日这般显著，而男性气质和女性气质各自的内核也与今日不同。当我们找寻历史上的强大女性，追寻过的去平等先例时，这或许也暗含我们的某种期待，期待一种我们担心其实并不存在的可能。

父权制意味着，父亲拥有权势和力量，有时它看起来像是一场盘亘时间长河的巨大阴谋。这个词本身带有压倒一切的专制意味，它蕴含了女性、女孩和非二元性别人士在世界上所遭受的不公和虐待，涉及家庭暴力、强奸、性别薪酬差异，以及男女所面临的不同道德标准等方方面面。这种差异非常广泛，其规模之大超乎掌控。那么，父权制度究竟存在了多长时间，又有多普遍呢？

历史学家、人类学家、考古学家以及女性主义者都对这个问题深感兴趣，作为一名科学记者，我自己也长久地思考过这个问题。1973年，社会学家史蒂文·戈德伯格出版了《父权的必然性》，他认为男性和女性之间的生物学差异根深蒂固，无论人类社会如何更迭，父权制永远会占上风。他的观点是，不论利益蛋糕如何被切割，由于男性天生的强力和侵略气质，他们将永远获得更大的一块。

然而，这个论点存在问题，因为男性主导并不普遍。在世界范围，有许多母系氏族社会，即社会由母亲而不是父亲组织，女儿继承母亲的名字和财产。某些地区的母系氏族历史可追溯数千年。

几十年来，西方学者试图用各种理论解释这种社会现象的成因。有些理论认为，母系氏族社会只存在于简单的农业社会或狩猎采集社会中，在大规模社会组织中并不常见。另一些认为，当男性因战争而外出，留下女性管家，这种社会形态才最为有效。还有理论说，一旦人们开始蓄养牲畜，母系氏族社会就会结束，因为男性总是渴望掌控所有资源，这种理论将父系社会与土地和财产联系在一起。

然而无论如何，母系社会总是被视作不常见的特例。正如华盛顿州立大学的人类学家琳达·斯通所说：“它承受了许多压力，脆弱又珍稀，甚至它的消亡是注定的”在学术界，这个问题被称为“母系氏族难题”。父系氏族则似乎不需要解释，它就是如此。

2019年，范德堡大学的研究人员试图解开这个难题，他们分析了母系社群，寻找共同特点。全球有590个传统意义上的父系社会，362个双边社会，即承认双亲血统的社会，还有160个被认为是母系社会。从事这方面研究的生物学家妮可·克兰萨称，他们的团队测试了所有主流理论，但没有一条理论适用于所有情况。

克兰萨认为，似乎确有一个因素阻碍母系社会的行程，若人们拥有可流动、可交换的财产而非固定的土地，他们的后代更有可能继承遗产，然后离开。但即使这条规律也不能完全自洽。每个社会都过于复杂，无法简单地归因于生物、环境或任何其他任何因素。你越将镜头放大，仔细观察，就越能窥见其中复杂。

人类学家坚称，如果将母系氏族社会简单定义为父系氏族的反面，那这样的社会是不存在的。在英国政治理论家罗伯特·菲尔默于1680年发表的文章《父权论》里，父权社会被定义为一种自然规律，父亲掌管家庭，而国王则统治国家。然而，在母系社会中，男性和女性更多是共同执掌权力。即使兄弟或叔伯拥有重要的权威，这种权威也通常依具体情况而变化，换句话说，相对于绝对权力而言，它更为分散。

正如斯通所叙，男性和女性之间的主权、权利和影响等多种因素共同塑造了男性和女性社会。在过去，这种差异更加明显。史前时期的社会规范不断发展和变化。克兰萨认为，对于同一现象，母系氏族转变为父系氏族可以有两种解释：一种是不稳定状态自行消亡，另一种是两种相对稳定状态之间的互相切换。

在世界各地，人们一直努力为被压迫者争取自由和权利，以此重塑他们的社会。政治学家安妮·菲利普斯写道：“任何人，但凡有一点机会，都会选择平等和公正，而不是不公和偏见。”总体来看，没有人天生卑微。

社会学家高德伯格认为，如果某种行为模式非常普遍，它大概是有生物学基础，这就解释了为什么女性在政治中很难有一席之地，她们肯定觉得自己天生就该顺从。但正如菲利普斯所言，世上没有一个地方的女性未经历斗争就屈服。几个世纪以来，从美国到伊朗，女性一直为争取权利和受到公正对待而奋斗。从这个角度，我们可能要问为什么母系氏族仍然被视作不稳定的例外。全球范围内，平权运动激情澎湃，有时甚至演变为暴力抗争，这也表明父权社会不似表面那样稳固。也许母系社会真正的谜团不在于为什么一些社会以女性为中心，而是为什么男性主导的社会占据绝对的优势。

“我把这种对女性的压迫看作一种系统，”社会学家克里斯汀·德尔菲说。“一个制度存在的原因，不能仅仅是因为它在过去存在过……即使这个过去就是不久之前。”

如果我们只是默许，我们的处境是与生俱来的一部分，那我们就放弃了理解造成这种处境的原因。当我们简单地将父权社会归因于生物上的差异，忽略了它更为复杂、更为充满偶然性的证据，我们就无法真正了解它的不堪一击。我们不再去探索不平等背后的机制，探索它是如何被再创造而来的。

不论何种压迫，最危险的地方都在于，它可能使人们相信，除此之外再无选择。在种族、种姓和阶级的旧有谬论中我们都看到这一点。对于任何男性主导的理论，

我们应该问的问题是，为什么这种不公，该被视为例外。