

ourselves “healing” the imagined “split” with inventions like “androgyny” and workshops on how to appreciate our masculine and feminine “sides.”⁴¹ But this just fixes our attention on the cultural fiction that feminine and masculine sides even exist, while the perpetuation of patriarchy continues undisturbed by questions about how it works and the inequality and oppression it produces.

Perhaps the most distracting and misleading thing about the obsession with femininity, masculinity, and gender roles is that it makes us think that patriarchy is just about us and our personalities. But social oppression could never survive on a base as flimsy and variable as that. It takes something a lot bigger and more powerful than us to make oppression work, and to understand that we have to look at patriarchy not as a collection of individuals, but as a system we participate in.

4

Patriarchy, the System: An It, Not a He, a Them, or an Us

“**W**hen you say patriarchy,” a man complained from the rear of the audience, “I know what you *really* mean—me!” A lot of people hear “men” whenever someone says “patriarchy,” so that criticism of gender oppression is taken to mean that all men—each and every one of them—are oppressive people. Not surprisingly, many men take it personally if someone merely mentions patriarchy or the oppression of women, bristling at what they often see as a way to make them feel guilty. And some women feel free to blame individual men for patriarchy simply because they’re men. Some of the time, men feel defensive because they identify with patriarchy and its values and don’t want to face the consequences these produce or the prospect of giving up male privilege. But defensiveness more often reflects a common confusion about the difference between patriarchy as a kind of society and the people who participate in it. If we’re ever going to work toward real change, it’s a confusion we’ll have to clear up.

To do this, we have to realize that we’re stuck in a model of social life that views everything as beginning and ending with individuals. Looking at things in this way, we tend to think that if evil exists in the world, it’s only because there are evil people who have entered into an evil conspiracy. Racism exists, for example, simply because white people are racist bigots who hate members of racial and ethnic minorities and want to do them harm. There is gender oppression because men want and like to dominate women and act out hostility toward them. There is poverty and class op-

pression because people in the upper classes are greedy, heartless, and cruel. The flip side of this individualistic model of guilt and blame is that race, gender, and class oppression are actually not oppression at all, but merely the sum of individual failings on the part of blacks, women, and the poor, who lack the right stuff to compete successfully with whites, men, and others who know how to make something of themselves.

What this kind of thinking ignores is that we are all participating in something larger than ourselves or any collection of us. On some level, most people are familiar with the idea that social life involves us in something larger than ourselves, but few seem to know what to do with that idea. When Sam Keen laments that "THE SYSTEM is running us all,"¹ he strikes a deep chord in many people. But he also touches on a basic misunderstanding of social life, because having blamed "the system" (presumably society) for our problems, he doesn't take the next step to understand what that might mean. What exactly *is* a system, for example, and how could it run us? Do *we* have anything to do with shaping *it*, and if so, how? How, for example, do we participate in patriarchy, and how does that link us to the consequences it produces? How is what we think of as "normal" life related to male dominance, women's oppression, and the hierarchical, control-obsessed world in which they, and our lives, are embedded?

Without asking such questions we can't understand gender fully and we avoid taking responsibility either for ourselves or for patriarchy. Instead, "the system" serves as a vague, unarticulated catch-all, a dumping ground for social problems, a scapegoat that can never be held to account and that, for all the power we think it has, can't talk back or actually *do* anything. Both Sam Keen and Robert Bly, for example, blame much of men's misery on industrialization and urbanization. The solutions they offer, however, amount to little more than personal transformation and adaptation, not changing society itself.² So, the system is invoked in contradictory ways. On the one hand, it's portrayed as a formidable source of all our woes, a great monster that "runs us all." On the other hand, it's ignored as a nebulous blob that we think we don't have to include in any solutions.

But we can't have it both ways. If society is a powerful force in social life, as it surely is, then we have to understand it and how we are connected to it. To do this, we have to change how we think about it, because how we think affects the kinds of questions we ask. The questions we ask in turn shape the kinds of answers and solutions we'll come up with. If we see patriarchy as nothing more than men's and women's individual personalities, motivations, and behavior, for example, then it probably won't even occur to us to ask about larger contexts—such as institutions like the family, reli-

gion, and the economy—and how people's lives are shaped in relation to them. From this kind of individualistic perspective, we might ask why a particular man raped, harassed, or beat a woman. We wouldn't ask, however, what kind of society would promote persistent *patterns* of such behavior in everyday life, from wife-beating jokes to the routine inclusion of sexual coercion and violence in mainstream movies. We are quick to explain rape and battery as the acts of sick or angry men; but we rarely take seriously the question of what kind of society would produce so much male anger and pathology or direct it toward sexual violence rather than something else. We rarely ask how gender violence might serve other more "normalized" ends such as male control and domination. We might ask why a man would like pornography that objectifies, exploits, and promotes violence against women; or debate whether the Constitution protects the individual's right to produce and distribute violent pornography. But it's hard to stir up interest in asking what kind of society would give violent and degrading visions of women's bodies and human sexuality such a prominent and pervasive place in its culture to begin with.

In short, we ignore and take for granted what we can least afford to overlook in trying to understand and change the world. Rather than ask how social systems produce social problems such as male violence against women, we obsess over legal debate and titillating but irrelevant case histories soon to become made-for-television movies. If the goal is to change the world, this won't help us. We need to see and deal with the social roots that generate and nurture the social problems that are reflected in the behavior of individuals. We can't do this without realizing that we all participate in something larger than ourselves, something we didn't create but that we have the power to affect through the choices we make about *how* to participate.

That something larger is patriarchy, which is more than a collection of individuals (such as "men"). It is a system, which means it can't be reduced to the people who participate in it. If you go to work in a corporation, for example, you know the minute you walk in the door that you've entered "something" that shapes your experience and behavior, something that isn't just you and the other people you work with. You can feel yourself stepping into a set of relationships and shared understandings about who's who and what's supposed to happen and why, and all of this limits you in many ways. And when you leave at the end of the day you can feel yourself released from the constraints imposed by your participation in that system; you can feel the expectations drop away and your focus shift to other systems such as family or a neighborhood bar that shape your experience in different

ways. To understand a system like a corporation, we have to look at more than people like you, because all of you aren't the corporation, even though you make it run. If the corporation were just a collection of people, then whatever happened to the corporation would by definition also happen to them, and vice versa; but this clearly isn't so. A corporation can go bankrupt, for example, or cease to exist altogether without any of the people who work there going bankrupt or disappearing. Conversely, everyone who works for a corporation could quit, but that wouldn't necessarily mean the end of the corporation, only the arrival of a new set of participants. We can't understand a corporation, then, just by looking at the people who participate in it, for it is something larger and has to be understood as such.

So, too, with patriarchy, a kind of society that is more than a collection of women and men and can't be understood simply by understanding them. *We are not patriarchy*, no more than people who believe in Allah *are* Islam or Canadians *are* Canada. Patriarchy is a kind of society organized around certain kinds of social relationships and ideas. As individuals, we participate in it. Paradoxically, our participation both shapes our lives and gives us the opportunity to be part of changing or perpetuating it.³ But *we are not it*, which means that patriarchy can exist without men having "oppressive personalities" or actively conspiring with one another to defend male privilege. To demonstrate that gender oppression exists, we don't have to show that men are villains, that women are good-hearted victims, that women don't participate in their own oppression, or that men never oppose it. If a society is oppressive, then people who grow up and live in it will tend to accept, identify with, and participate in it as "normal" and unremarkable life. That's the path of least resistance in any system. It's hard not to follow it, given how we depend on society and its rewards and punishments that hinge on going along with the status quo. When oppression is woven into the fabric of everyday life, we don't need to go out of our way to be overtly oppressive in order for an oppressive system to produce oppressive consequences. As the saying goes, what evil requires is simply that ordinary people do nothing.

"The System"

In general, a system is any collection of interrelated parts or elements that we can think of as a whole. A car engine, for example, is a collection of parts that fit together in certain ways to produce a "whole" that is identifiable in many cultures as serving a particular purpose. A language is also a collection of

parts—letters of the alphabet, words, punctuation marks, and rules of grammar and syntax—that fit together in certain ways to form something we can identify as a whole. And societies include a variety of interrelated parts that we can think of as a whole. All of these are systems that differ in the kinds of parts they include and how those parts are related to one another.

The crucial thing to understand about patriarchy or any other kind of social system is that it's something people participate in. It's an arrangement of shared understandings and relationships that connect people to one another and something larger than themselves. In some ways, we're like players who participate in a game. Monopoly, for example, consists of a set of shared understandings about things such as the meaning of property and rent, the value of competition and accumulating wealth, and various rules about rolling dice, moving around a board, buying, selling, and developing property, collecting rents, winning, and losing. It has positions—player, banker, and so on—that people occupy. It has material elements such as the board, houses and hotels, dice, property deeds, money, and "pieces" that represent each player's movements on the board. As such, the game is something we can think of as a social system whose diverse elements cohere with a unity and wholeness that distinguish it from other games and from non-games.⁴ Most important, we can describe it as a system without ever talking about the personal characteristics or motivations of the individual people who actually play it at any given moment.

If we watch people play Monopoly, we notice certain routine patterns of feeling and behavior that reflect paths of least resistance that are inherent in the game itself. If someone lands on a property I own, for example, I collect the rent (if I happen to notice), and if they can't pay, I take their assets and force them from the game. The game encourages me to feel good about this, not necessarily because I'm greedy and merciless, but because the game is about winning, and this is what winning consists of in Monopoly. Since everyone else is also trying to win by driving me out of the game, each step I take toward winning protects me and alleviates some anxiety about landing on a property whose rent I can't pay.

Since these patterns are shaped by the game far more than by the individual players, we can find ourselves behaving in ways that might seem disturbing in other situations. When I'm not playing Monopoly, I behave quite differently, even though I'm still the same person. This is why I don't play monopoly anymore—I don't like the way it encourages me to feel and behave in the name of "fun," especially toward people I care about. The reason we behave differently outside the game doesn't lie in our personalities but in the *game's* paths of least resistance, which define certain behavior and

values as appropriate and expected. When we see ourselves as Monopoly players, we feel limited by the rules and goals the game defines, and experience it as something external to us and beyond our control. It's important to note how rarely it ever occurs to people to simply change the rules. The relationships, terms, and goals that organize the game aren't presented to us as ours to judge or alter. The more attached we feel to the game and the more closely we identify ourselves as players, the more likely we are to feel helpless in relation to it. If you're about to drive someone into bankruptcy, you can excuse yourself by saying "I've got to take your money, those are the rules," but only if you ignore the fact that you could choose not to play or could suggest a change in the rules. Then again, if you can't imagine life without the game, you won't see many alternatives to doing what's expected of you.

If we try to explain patterns of social behavior only in terms of individual people's personalities and motives—people do greedy things, for example, because they *are* greedy—then we ignore how behavior is shaped by paths of least resistance found in the systems people participate in. The "profit motive" associated with capitalism, for example, is typically seen as a psychological motive of individuals that explains capitalism as a system: capitalism exists because there are individuals who want to make a profit. But this puts the cart before the horse by avoiding the question of where wanting to make a profit comes from in the first place. We need to ask what kind of world makes such wants possible and encourages people to organize their lives around them, for although we may pursue profit as we play Monopoly or participate in real-world capitalism, the psychological profit motive doesn't originate with us. We aren't born with it. It doesn't exist in many cultures and was unknown for most of human history. The profit motive is a historically developed aspect of market systems in general and capitalism in particular that shapes the values, behavior, and personal motives of those who participate in it. To argue that managers lay off workers, for example, simply because managers are heartless or cruel ignores the fact that success under capitalism often depends on this kind of competitive, profit-maximizing "heartless" behavior. Most managers probably know in their hearts that the practice of routinely discarding people in the name of profit and expedience is hurtful and unfair. This is why they feel so bad about having to be the ones to carry it out, and protect their feelings by inventing euphemisms such as "downsizing" and "outplacement." And yet they participate in a system that produces these cruel results anyway, not because of cruel personalities or malice toward workers, but because a capitalist system makes this a path of least resistance and exacts real costs from those who stray from it.

To use the game analogy, it's a mistake to assume that we can understand the players without paying attention to the game they're playing. We create even more trouble by thinking we can understand the *game* without ever looking at it as something more than what goes on inside individuals. One way to see this is to realize that systems often work in ways that don't reflect the experience and motivations of the people who participate in them. If we try to explain warfare, for example, by looking at what soldiers actually do and the consequences that result, we might attribute war to some human tendency to be aggressive and slaughter one another, to some "natural" murderousness and taste for blood. But if we look for such tendencies in the participants themselves, the soldiers, we won't find much, for account after account shows that the typical soldier is motivated by anything but aggressive, bloodthirsty impulses to kill, maim, and destroy. Most soldiers are simply following paths of least resistance. They want nothing more than to do what they think is expected of them—especially to live up to cultural images of what it means to be a man—and to get themselves and their friends home alive and unharmed. Many are there because they couldn't find any other way to make a living or wanted job training or a subsidized college education and never imagined they'd wind up in combat. Or they got caught up in a wave of nationalism that sent them off to fight for things they dimly perceived and barely understood. Once in battle, their aggressive behavior is more often than not a defensive reaction to fear created by confronting them with men who feel compelled to kill them so that *they* can do what's expected of them and get home safely.⁵

If we look to the personal motivations of national leaders to explain war, we won't do much better. Leaders often seem to feel caught in webs of obligations, contingencies, and alternatives they didn't create and cannot control, and feel compelled to commit armies to war in spite of personal misgivings over the probable result. During the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, for example, U.S. President John F. Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. The evidence suggests that both felt trapped between what they perceived to be the imperatives of national interest and the terror that things might get beyond their control and result in nuclear holocaust. Surely their personal motivations bore little relation to the incalculable horror of what their actions might have caused.⁶

In spite of all the good reasons not to use individual models to explain social life, they are a path of least resistance because individual experience and motivation are what we know best. As a result, we tend to see something like sexism as the result of poor socialization through which men learn to act dominant and masculine and women to act subordinate and feminine.

While there is certainly some truth to this, it doesn't work as an explanation of patterns like gender oppression. It's no better than trying to explain war as simply the result of training men to be warlike, without looking at economic systems that equip armies at huge profits and political systems that organize and hurl armies at one another. It's like trying to understand what happens during Monopoly games without ever talking about the game itself and the kind of society in which it would exist. Of course, soldiers and Monopoly players do what they do because they've learned the rules; but this doesn't tell us much about the rules themselves and why they exist to be learned in the first place. Socialization is merely a process, a mechanism for training people to participate in social systems. Although it tells us how people learn to participate in systems, it doesn't illuminate the systems themselves. As such, it can tell us something about the *how* of a system like patriarchy, but very little about the *what* and the *why*.

Since focusing just on individual women and men won't tell us much about patriarchy, simply trying to understand people's attitudes or behavior won't get us very far so long as patriarchy goes unexamined and unchallenged as the only gender game in town. And if we don't look beyond individuals, whatever change we accomplish won't have much more than a superficial, temporary effect. Systemic paths of least resistance provide powerful reasons for people to go along with the status quo. This is why individual change is often restricted to people who either have little to lose or who are secure and protected enough to choose a different path. So change typically gets limited to the most oppressed, who have the least to lose and are in the weakest position to challenge the system as a whole, and the most privileged, who can afford to attend workshops or enter therapy or who can hire someone (typically a woman) to take care of their children. In this latter group in particular, it's easy for men to fool themselves into thinking they can find nicer, less oppressive ways to participate in an oppressive system without challenging it, and therefore without disturbing the basis for male privilege. It's like the myth of a kinder, gentler capitalism in which managers still overwork and lay off employees in order to bolster the bottom line and protect shareholders' interests; but now they do it with greater interpersonal sensitivity. The result is pretty much the same as it was before, but now they can feel better about it. After all, if changing the system isn't a goal, then it makes sense to accommodate to it while maintaining the appearance of regretting its oppressive consequences. And an individualistic approach is perfectly suited to those ends, for the privileged can feel bad about the people who suffer even as they shield from scrutiny the system that makes both suffering and privilege inevitable.

Without some sense of how systems work and how people participate in them, we can't do much about either. Robert Bly and others in the mythopoetic men's movement, for example, want to change cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity. They want men to become "spiritual warriors" in touch with the "deep masculine," who feel good about themselves as men and who don't need to rely on coercion and violence. And they want the "old men"—the fathers—to initiate the young men into this new way of being. Presumably, however, this is going to happen without doing anything about patriarchy as a system, since this concept has no place in their analysis. In other words, masculinity is going to be transformed without confronting the control-driven system of patriarchal power relations and male competition and all the ways it's embedded in social institutions. Where, then, will we find all these old men who are prepared to give up their gender privilege and adopt, promote, and welcome young men into ways of seeing men (and women) that contradict the prevailing order that gives those same old men the most to lose? And where will we find young men willing to follow their lead? Quite simply, we won't, except among a relative few who adopt "new masculinities" as personal styles. These new masculinities, however, are generally reserved for ritual observances among the like-minded and otherwise kept from public view; or, as seems to be the case in the "new men's movement," they turn out to be not so new after all.⁷

Either way, the individualistic model offers little hope of changing patriarchy because patriarchy is more than how people think, feel, and behave. As such, patriarchy isn't simply about the psychic wounding of sons by their fathers, or the dangers and failures of heterosexual intimacy, or boys' feelings about their mothers, or how men treat women and one another. It *includes* all of these by producing them as symptoms that help perpetuate the system; but these aren't what patriarchy *is*. It is a way of organizing social life through which such wounding, failure, and mistreatment can occur. If fathers neglect their sons, it is because fathers move in a world that makes pursuit of goals other than deeply committed fatherhood a path of least resistance.⁸ If heterosexual intimacy is prone to fail, it is because patriarchy is organized in ways that set women and men fundamentally at odds with one another in spite of all the good reasons they otherwise have to get along and thrive together. And if men's use of coercion and violence against women is a pervasive pattern—and it is—it is because force and violence are supported in patriarchal society; it is because women are designated as desirable and legitimate objects of male control, and because in a society organized around control, force and violence *work*.

We can't find a way out of patriarchy or imagine something different

without a clear sense of what patriarchy is and what that's got to do with us. Thus far, the alternative has been to reduce our understanding of gender to an intellectual gumbo of personal problems, tendencies, and motivations. Presumably, these will be solved through education, better communication skills, consciousness raising, "heroic journeys," and other forms of individual transformation. Since this isn't how social systems actually change, the result is widespread frustration and cycles of blame and denial, which is precisely where we⁹ seem to have been for the better part of thirty years.

We need to see more clearly what patriarchy is about as a system. This includes cultural ideas about men and women, the web of relationships that structure social life, and the unequal distribution of rewards and resources that underlies oppression. We need to see new ways to participate by forging alternative paths of least resistance, for the system doesn't simply "run us" like hapless puppets. It may be larger than us, it may not *be* us, but it doesn't exist except *through* us. Without us, patriarchy doesn't *happen*. And that's where we have power to do something about it and about ourselves *in* it.

Patriarchy

The key to understanding any system is to identify its various parts and how they're arranged to form a whole. To understand a language, for example, we have to learn its alphabet, vocabulary, and rules for combining words into meaningful phrases and sentences. With a social system such as patriarchy, it's more complicated because there are many different kinds of parts, and it is often difficult to see just how they're connected. Patriarchy's defining elements are its male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered character, but this is just the beginning. At its core, patriarchy is a set of symbols and ideas that make up a culture embodied by everything from the content of everyday conversation to literature and film. Patriarchal culture includes ideas about the nature of things, including men, women, and humanity, with manhood and masculinity most closely associated with being human and womanhood and femininity relegated to the marginal position of "other." It's about how social life is and how it's supposed to be; about what's expected of people and about how they feel. It's about standards of feminine beauty and masculine toughness, images of feminine vulnerability and masculine protectiveness, of older men coupled with young women, of elderly women alone. It's about defining women and men as opposites, about the "naturalness" of male aggression, competition, and dominance and of female caring, cooperation, and subordination. It's about the

valuing of masculinity and maleness and the devaluing of femininity and femaleness. It's about the primary importance of a husband's career and the secondary status of a wife's, about child care as a priority in women's lives and its secondary importance in men's. It's about the social acceptability of anger, rage, and toughness in men but not in women, and of caring, tenderness, and vulnerability in women but not in men.

Above all, patriarchal culture is about the core value of control and domination in almost every area of human existence. From the expression of emotion to economics to the natural environment, gaining and exercising control is a continuing goal of great importance. Because of this, the concept of power takes on a narrow definition in terms of "power over"—the ability to control others, events, resources, or oneself in spite of resistance—rather than alternatives such as the ability to cooperate with others, to give freely of oneself, or to feel and act in harmony with nature.¹⁰ To have power over and to be prepared to use it are defined culturally as good and desirable (and characteristically "masculine"), and to lack such power or to be reluctant to use it is seen as weak if not contemptible (and characteristically "feminine").

The main use of any culture is to provide symbols and ideas out of which people construct their sense of what is real. As such, language mirrors social reality in sometimes startling ways. In contemporary usage, for example, the words "crone," "witch," "bitch," and "virgin" describe women as threatening, evil, or heterosexually inexperienced and thus incomplete. In pre-patriarchal times, however, these words evoked far different images.¹¹ The crone was the old woman whose life experience gave her insight, wisdom, respect, and the power to enrich people's lives. The witch was the wise-woman healer, the knower of herbs, the midwife, the link joining body, spirit, and Earth. The bitch was Artemis-Diana, goddess of the hunt, most often associated with the dogs who accompanied her. And the virgin was merely a woman who was unattached, unclaimed, and unowned by any man and therefore independent and autonomous. Notice how each word has been transformed from a positive cultural image of female power, independence, and dignity to an insult or a shadow of its former self so that few words remain to identify women in ways both positive and powerful.

Going deeper into patriarchal culture, we find a complex web of ideas that define reality and what's considered good and desirable. To see the world through patriarchal eyes is to believe that women and men are profoundly different in their basic natures, that hierarchy is the only alternative to chaos, and that men were made in the image of a masculine God with whom they enjoy a special relationship. It is to take as obvious the idea that there are two and only two distinct genders; that patriarchal heterosexual-

ity is “natural” and same-sex attraction is not; that because men neither bear nor breast-feed children, they cannot feel a compelling bodily connection to them; that on some level every woman, whether heterosexual or lesbian, wants a “real man” who knows how to “take charge of things,” including her; that females can’t be trusted, especially when they’re menstruating or accusing men of sexual misconduct. To embrace patriarchy is to believe that mothers should stay home and that fathers should work out of the home, regardless of men’s and women’s actual abilities or needs.¹² It is to buy into the notion that women are weak and men are strong, that women and children need men to support and protect them, all in spite of the fact that in many ways men are not the physically stronger sex, that women perform a huge share of hard physical labor in many societies (often larger than men’s), that women’s physical endurance tends to be greater than men’s over the long haul, that women tend to be more capable of enduring pain and emotional stress.¹³ And yet such evidence means little in the face of a patriarchal culture that dictates how things *ought* to be and, like all cultural mythology,

will not be argued down by facts. It may seem to be making straightforward statements, but actually these conceal another mood, the imperative. Myth exists in a state of tension. It is not really describing a situation, but trying by means of this description to *bring about* what it declares to exist.¹⁴

To live in a patriarchal culture is to learn what’s expected of us as men and women, the rules that regulate punishment and reward based on how we behave and appear. These rules range from laws that require men to fight in wars not of their own choosing to customary expectations that mothers will provide child care, or that when a woman shows sexual interest in a man or merely smiles or acts friendly, she gives up her right to say no and control her own body. And to live under patriarchy is to take into ourselves shared ways of feeling—the hostile contempt for femaleness that forms the core of misogyny and presumptions of male superiority, the ridicule men direct at other men who show signs of vulnerability or weakness, or the fear and insecurity that every woman must deal with when she exercises the right to move freely in the world, especially at night and by herself. Such ideas make up the symbolic sea we swim in and the air we breathe. They are the primary well from which springs how we think about ourselves, other people, and the world. As such, they provide a taken-for-granted everyday reality, the setting for our interactions with other people that continually fashion and refashion a shared sense of what the world is about and who we are

in relation to it. This doesn’t mean that the ideas underlying patriarchy determine what we think, feel, and do, but it does mean they define what we’ll have to *deal with* as we participate in it.

The prominent place of misogyny in patriarchal culture, for example, doesn’t mean that every man and woman consciously hates all things female. But it does mean that to the extent that we don’t feel such hatred, it’s *in spite of* paths of least resistance contained in our culture. Complete freedom from such feelings and judgments is all but impossible. It is certainly possible for heterosexual men to love women without mentally fragmenting them into breasts, buttocks, genitals, and other variously desirable parts. It is possible for women to feel good about their bodies, to not judge themselves as being too fat, to not abuse themselves to one degree or another in pursuit of impossible male-identified standards of beauty and sexual attractiveness. All of this is possible; but to live in patriarchy is to breathe in misogynist images of women as objectified sexual property valued primarily for their usefulness to men. This finds its way into everyone who grows up breathing and swimming in it, and once inside us it remains, however unaware of it we may be. So, when we hear or express sexist jokes and other forms of misogyny we may not recognize it, and even if we do, say nothing rather than risk other people thinking we’re “too sensitive” or, especially in the case of men, “not one of the guys.” In either case, we are involved, if only by our silence.

The symbols and ideas that make up patriarchal culture are important to understand because they have such powerful effects on the structure of social life. By “structure,” I mean the ways that gender privilege and oppression are organized through social relationships and unequal distributions of rewards, opportunities, and resources. This appears in countless patterns of everyday life in family and work, religion and politics, community and education. It is found in family divisions of labor that exempt fathers from most domestic work even when both parents work outside the home, and in the concentration of women in lower-level pink-collar jobs and male predominance almost everywhere else. It is in the unequal distribution of income and all that goes with it, from access to health care to the availability of leisure time. It is in patterns of male violence and harassment that can turn a simple walk in the park or a typical day at work or a lovers’ quarrel into a life-threatening nightmare. More than anything, the structure of patriarchy is found in the unequal distribution of power that makes oppression possible, in patterns of male dominance in every facet of human life, from everyday conversation to global politics. By its nature, patriarchy puts issues of power, dominance, and control at the center of human existence, not only in relationships between men and women, but among men

as they compete and struggle to gain status, maintain control, and protect themselves from what other men might do to them.

To understand patriarchy, we have to identify its cultural elements and see how they are related to the structure of social life. We must see, for example, how cultural ideas that identify women primarily as mothers and men primarily as breadwinners support patterns in which women do most domestic work at home and are discriminated against in hiring, pay, and promotions at work. But to do anything with such an understanding, we also must see what patriarchy has to do with us as individuals—how it shapes us and how we, in choosing how to participate, shape it.

The System in Us in the System

One of the most difficult things to accept about patriarchy is that we're involved in it, which means we're also involved in its consequences. This is especially hard for men who refuse to believe they benefit from women's oppression, because they can't see how this could happen without their being personally oppressive in their intentions, feelings, and behavior. For many men, being told they're *involved* in oppression can only mean they *are* oppressive.

A common defense against this is to attribute everything to "society" as something external and autonomous, with wants, needs, interests, and the power to control people by making them into one sort of person or another. "It's not men, it's society," and society supposedly does what it does for mysterious reasons known only to itself. Like many others, Sam Keen resorts to this when he writes that men are "assigned" dominant roles in warfare and economics, that women are assigned emotion and men are assigned reason, or that male dominance can be attributed simply to warfare, industrialization, urbanization, or capitalism.¹⁵ But he never asks just who or what does all this assigning or whose interests are served by it. He doesn't ask how things like capitalism came into being, for example, or how this might be connected to core patriarchal values of dominance and control and, hence, to men and male control over major social institutions.¹⁶ Presumably there are no issues of sexism, racism, or class to be reckoned with here—nothing for men, whites, or privileged classes to be concerned about—just the workings of "society."

But societies aren't sentient beings capable of knowing, wanting, or doing anything, including forcing people to perform particular roles. Societies don't exist without people participating in them, which means that we can't understand patriarchy unless we also ask how people are connected to it and

how this connection varies, depending on social characteristics such as race, gender, ethnicity, age, and class. Capitalism, for example, didn't just happen on its own but emerged as an economic system in a patriarchal world dominated by men and their interests, especially white European men of the newly emerging merchant class. The same can be said of industrialization, which was bound up with the development of capitalism in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. This line of thinking might seem to undermine the argument I've made about including systems in our thinking—"It really comes down to individuals after all"—but it's more complicated than that. The problem isn't society and it isn't us. It's the relationship between the two that we have to understand, the nature of the thing we participate in and how we choose to participate in it and how both are shaped in the process. In this sense, it's a mistake to equate patriarchy with men; but it's also wrong to act as though systems like patriarchy or capitalism have nothing to do with gender and differences in power and interests that distinguish and separate men and women. It's equally wrong to act as though all men or all women are the same, as though dynamics such as racism and class oppression don't affect how patriarchy operates and affects people's lives in different ways.

One way to see how people connect with systems is to think of us as occupying social positions that locate us in relation to people in other positions. We connect to families, for example, through positions such as "mother," "daughter," and "cousin"; to economic systems through positions such as "vice president," "secretary," or "unemployed"; to political systems through positions such as "citizen," "registered voter," and "mayor"; to religious systems through positions such as "believer" and "clergy." How we perceive the people who occupy such positions and what we expect of them depend on cultural ideas—such as the belief that mothers are naturally better than fathers at child care or the expectation that fathers will be the primary breadwinners. Such ideas are powerful because we use them to construct a sense of who we and other people are. When a woman marries, for example, how people (including her) perceive and think about her changes as cultural ideas about what it means to be a wife come into play—ideas about how wives feel about their husbands, for example, what's most important to wives, what's expected of them, and what they may expect of others.

From this perspective, *who* we and other people think we are has a lot to do with *where* we are in relation to social systems and all the positions that people occupy. We wouldn't exist as social beings if it weren't for our participation in one social system or another. It's hard to imagine just who we'd be and what our existence would consist of if we took away all of our

connections to the symbols, ideas, and relationships that make up social systems. Take away language and all that it allows us to imagine and think, starting with our names. Take away all the positions that we occupy and the roles that go with them—from daughter and son to occupation and nationality—and with these all the complex ways our lives are connected to other people. Not much would be left over that we'd recognize as ourselves.¹⁷

We can think of a society as a network of interconnected systems within systems, each made up of social positions and their relations to one another. To say, then, that I'm white, male, college educated, and a writer, sociologist, U.S. citizen, heterosexual, middle-aged, husband, father, brother, and son identifies me in relation to positions which are themselves related to positions in various social systems, from the entire world to the family of my birth. In another sense, the day-to-day reality of a society only exists through what people actually do as they participate in it. Patriarchal culture, for example, places a high value on control and maleness. By themselves, these are just abstractions. But when men and women actually talk and men interrupt women more than women interrupt men, or men ignore topics introduced by women in favor of their own or in other ways control conversation,¹⁸ or when men use their authority to sexually harass women in the workplace, then the reality of patriarchy as a kind of society and people's sense of themselves as female and male within it actually happen in a concrete way.

In this sense, like all social systems, patriarchy exists only through people's lives. Through this, patriarchy's various aspects are there for us to see over and over again. This has two important implications for how we understand patriarchy. First, to some extent people experience patriarchy as external to them; but this doesn't mean that it's a distinct and separate thing, like a house in which we live. Instead, by participating in patriarchy we are *of* patriarchy and it is *of* us. Both exist *through* the other and neither can exist without the other. Second, patriarchy isn't static; it's an ongoing *process* that's continuously shaped and reshaped. Since the thing we're participating in is patriarchal, we tend to behave in ways that create a patriarchal world from one moment to the next. But we have some freedom to break the rules and construct everyday life in different ways, which means that the paths we choose to follow can do as much to change patriarchy as they can to perpetuate it.

We're involved in patriarchy and its consequences because we occupy social positions in it, which is all it takes. Since gender oppression is, by definition, a system of inequality organized around gender categories, we can no more avoid being involved in it than we can avoid being female or male. *All* men and *all* women are therefore involved in this oppressive system, and

none of us can control *whether* we participate, only *how*. This is especially important in relation to men and gender privilege:

We need to be clear that there is no such thing as giving up one's privilege to be "outside" the system. One is always *in* the system. The only question is whether one is part of the system in a way which challenges or strengthens the status quo. Privilege is not something I *take* and which I therefore have the option of *not* taking. It is something that society *gives* me, and unless I change the institutions which give it to me, they will continue to give it, and I will continue to *have* it, however noble and egalitarian my intentions.¹⁹

Because privilege is conferred by social systems, people don't have to feel privileged in order to *be* privileged. When I do public presentations, for example, I usually come away feeling pretty good about what happened and, therefore, about myself. If anyone were to ask me to explain why things went so well, I'd probably mention my abilities, my years of experience in public speaking, the quality of my ideas, and so on, as well as the interest and contributions of the audience. The last thing that would occur to me, however, would be that my success was aided by my gender, that if I'd performed in exactly the same way but happened to be a woman, research shows quite clearly that I'd have been taken less seriously, been evaluated less positively, and attributed less of my success to my own efforts and ability. The difference between the two outcomes is a measure of my gender privilege, and there is little I can do to get rid of it, because its authority doesn't rest in me but in society itself, especially in cultural images of gender. The audience doesn't know it's conferring gender privilege on me, and I may not be aware that I'm receiving it. But the privilege is there, nonetheless, whether we intend or want it. That all this may feel "natural" and nonprivileged only deepens the system's hold on all who are involved in it.²⁰

Since we're born into patriarchy, and since participating in social life is what makes us who we are, we can't escape growing up sexist to some degree. This means that the question we have to ask ourselves isn't whether sexism is part of who we are, but how broadly and deeply it is ingrained in us, how it appears in our experience and behavior, and what we can do about it. No one wants to think of themselves as involved in social oppression, but being involved doesn't mean we're bad or to blame for oppression, for people can and do participate in systems that produce horrible, immoral consequences without being horrible and immoral people. None of us is responsible or to blame for the world we were born into or the inevitable way

in which we took it into ourselves. But—and this “but” is crucial—the ongoing reconstruction of that society is shaped by how people like us choose to participate in it once we’re here. We are involved; we are part of the problem; the question is whether we’ll choose to also be part of the solution.

A Case in Point: Rethinking Gender Violence

It’s a sociological truism that problems produced by social systems can’t be solved without changing systems, but one would never know it to judge from most discussions of how to cure what ails us. No matter how liberals and conservatives approach a problem like poverty, for example, the focus always comes around to changing individuals rather than systems, which means they essentially agree on perpetuating the status quo. Conservatives blame the poor, leaving it to them to pull themselves together, adopt the right values, and work harder. Liberals turn to government for the answer, but this shouldn’t be mistaken for changing society. Liberals use government programs to change individuals—poor people—by giving them money, job training, food stamps, or health care rather than trying to change how society generates poverty in the first place. The industrial capitalist economic system, for example, allows a small portion of the population to appropriate most of the income and wealth created each year through people’s labor—as anyone can see from readily available sources. In the United States, the richest 10 percent controls roughly 67 percent of all the wealth, including 87 percent of the cash and more than 90 percent of business assets, stocks, and bonds. The wealthiest 20 percent controls almost half of annual income, leaving the “bottom” 80 percent to compete over the rest.²¹ When most of the population is left to fight over half the income and a third of the wealth, it’s inevitable that large numbers of people will wind up with too little or just barely enough to live a decent life no matter how hard they work, including huge numbers of “working poor” who have full-time jobs. In the end, both liberal and conservative solutions call on individuals to work harder and compete more effectively; but the predictable result is that tomorrow’s losers will simply be better educated and harder working than today’s. What neither side even dares to hint is that a system organized to produce such gross inequality might need to be looked at or changed.

As with poverty, so too with patriarchy. Instead of focusing on patriarchy as a system and understanding people’s relation to it, most discussions psychologize and individualize gender issues and concentrate on education, self-help workshops, psychotherapy, and other programs for individual

change. This may make some people happier, better adjusted, or more successful, but without a critical awareness of patriarchy as a system, there’s little reason to push beyond personal change. Men, for example, are often motivated to avoid accusations of sexism, and once they’ve achieved a socially acceptable level of interpersonal sensitivity, they enjoy some sense of relief and relative safety from criticism, if not a certain smugness in relation to men who don’t yet “get it” (even here, the patriarchal game continues). And, having found a safe haven, they see little reason to risk making anyone, including themselves, uncomfortable by digging deeper into questions about what patriarchy is, how it works, and why and how it needs to be changed. The same can be said of women who manage to rise to the top of their occupations, for having achieved acceptance by the patriarchal system, they risk losing its rewards and recognition if they then challenge that same system. As a result, they often serve patriarchal interests by accusing feminists who focus on patriarchy of “playing victim” instead of working to succeed as individuals.

We must focus on patriarchy as a system, but this doesn’t mean we have to ignore individuals, only that we include them as participants in a larger system rather than treat them as the beginning and end of everything. Consider, for example, the problem of male violence and harassment against women. Between one quarter and one half of U.S. women can expect to suffer some form of sexual violence during their lives, and women are equally likely to be physically abused in other ways, especially by men close to them. Battering by intimates has become the most frequent cause of injury to women, occurring in some states more often than mugging, car accidents, and sexual assault combined. Sexual harassment is pervasive in the workplace, with the proportion of women who say they’ve been harassed ranging from just under one half to more than three quarters, depending on the occupation.²²

With the exception of some feminist analysis²³ (which rarely receives mass media coverage), most discussions of gender violence and harassment focus on questions about individuals rather than patriarchy. What kind of men rape and harass? What kind of personality problems do they have? What were their childhoods like? And what bad experiences did they have with women, especially their mothers? This last reason is especially popular, but it makes sense only if we ignore questions about how individuals and their experience are connected to social systems. Why, for example, should bad experiences with members of a particular group lead to a lifetime of prejudice, hatred, and violence against them? Having a bad experience with someone who wears glasses is unlikely to lead to antipathy toward those who wear glasses, but people often say their prejudice against groups such

as blacks, women, or Jews is based on a few bad experiences during their younger years. The difference between people who wear glasses, on the one hand, and Jews, blacks, and women on the other is that the latter are all regarded and treated as minorities in a racist, anti-Semitic, sexist society, while the former are not. What turns a bad individual experience into a pattern of prejudicial, discriminatory, and violent behavior is a social environment that encourages and supports just that sort of generalization. It does this by presenting minorities in such a way that we can easily attribute bad experiences with individuals to their stereotypical group characteristics. So if an individual Jew treats a non-Jew badly, the latter is culturally supported in attributing the bad treatment to Jewishness itself rather than, say, to that individual's personality or mood at the moment. The same dynamic occurs with all devalued and subordinate groups, including people of color and women. Without such cultural linkages, people would interpret unpleasant incidents with individuals as no more than that, and the particular social characteristics of the other person would take on no special *social* significance. But when such linkages are provided as paths of least resistance, it's all too easy to seize upon devalued characteristics and generalize to them from what is otherwise an isolated individual experience.

Individual psychology and experience are of course important keys to understanding social life. By themselves, however, they can't possibly explain social *patterns* such as prejudice, discrimination, and violence inflicted by members of one group against another. It's like trying to explain the pervasive lynching of blacks in the post-Civil War South by analyzing the personalities of individuals who took part while ignoring how the long history of racial oppression shaped people's perceptions, expectations, and judgments of what they thought they could do to one another. It's as if we don't need to consider the racist social environment in which lynchers acted, which defined blacks as suitable targets for hostility and violence and made it clear that whites who tortured and murdered blacks would go unpunished. It would seem almost silly to suggest that this pattern of lynching occurred simply because one community after another just happened to have some number of people whose troubled personalities led to racial hatred and violence. And it would seem equally silly to suggest that we could stop lynching by identifying troubled individuals and trying to change them—through re-education and psychotherapy, perhaps—rather than focusing on a social system that promoted and protected their behavior.

And yet that's precisely what we've done in relation to men's violence against women. There is a phenomenal amount of public resistance to the idea that such patterns could involve anything more than individual mis-

behavior and pathology. Several years ago, for example, I testified before a state commission charged with finding ways to stop violence against women. I asked the commission to consider that (1) the vast majority of violence against women is perpetrated by men; (2) this takes place in a society that is clearly male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered; and (3) we need to understand how these two are connected, how the patriarchal character of the society contributes to patterns of violence by members of the gender-dominant group against members of the gender-subordinate group. This generated considerable interest and I was invited to meet with a subcommittee responsible for public education and awareness. My argument was fine, they said, but what could be done with it? I suggested a first step that was both simple and radical: be perhaps the first governmental body in the United States to acknowledge openly that gender violence is widespread, that we live in a patriarchal society, and that we need to devote some serious resources to studying how those two are connected. This was greeted with a murmur of nervous energy that circled the room, for apparently even to acknowledge that patriarchy both exists and is problematic is a risky thing to do. Needless to say, patriarchy remained safely invisible in the commission's final report. In other such groups, the response has been similar—clear recognition of the scope of the problem but an unwillingness to come out and speak the plain truth. "It'll make a lot of men angry," worried some, which, of course, is probably true. But the alternative is to go along as we have, shielding the system by pretending problems like violence aren't about systems, only about individuals who have somehow gone astray.

Like lynching, gender violence is of course something that individuals do and for which they can and should be held accountable. But it's *more* than that, and this means we have to pursue its causes in a broader and deeper way. In addition to being something that individual men do, violence against women is also a pattern of behavior that reflects the oppressive patriarchal relationships that exist between men and women as dominant and subordinate groups in society as a whole. Individuals don't behave in a vacuum—everything about us takes shape in relation to social contexts larger than ourselves. As such, our perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and behavior are neither self-contained nor simply "out there" in society. Rather, they emerge through and reflect our *participation* in patriarchal society. If we ignore this, then we perpetuate the status quo by focusing on the individual *manifestations* of social forces rather than on the social forces themselves. And that is one reason why an individualistic approach serves patriarchal and other status quo interests so well.

To understand violence against women as both a social and a psychological problem, we have to ask what kind of society would provide fertile ground for it to take root and flourish as a recurring pattern of behavior. Decades of research, for example, have established a clear link between pervasive sexual violence against women and a patriarchal environment in which control and dominance are highly valued, especially in men.²⁴ Under patriarchy, for example, “normal” heterosexuality is male-identified and male-centered, emphasizing men’s access to women and equating “real” sex with intercourse, a practice that’s far more conducive to men’s pleasure than women’s.²⁵ Such a system encourages men to value women primarily in terms of their ability to meet men’s needs and desires and to support men’s self-images as potent and in control.²⁶ The huge pornography industry, for example, exists primarily to provide men with female images available for them to appropriate and incorporate into masturbatory fantasies. As a result, men’s use of coercion and violence in order to control women sexually and their use of women as objects on which to act out feelings of rage, shame, frustration, or fear are commonplace, not only in behavior, but as popular themes in literature, films, and other mass media.

None of this can be divorced from a society organized around inequality and oppressive relations between men and women as groups. To the degree that violence, control, domination, objectification, and sexuality are bound up with one another under patriarchy, we need to look at how patriarchal culture defines normal sexuality. What we take for granted as “natural” sexuality is not; it is and always has been socially constructed, and the context in which this occurs as well as what goes into it are profoundly bound up with the culture and structure of patriarchal systems.²⁷ This means that although sexual violence certainly involves how some men feel and behave, it goes beyond this to include patterns that are rooted in patriarchy as a whole. Specific acts of violence directed at women *because* they are women are related to the social oppression of women as a group, just as specific acts of violence directed against blacks *because* they are black are related to the existence of racial oppression in society as a whole. This means that men’s violence against women involves *everyone* who participates in the life of patriarchal society, *even though only a minority of individuals may actually do it or be directly victimized by it.*

The challenge for individuals—men in particular—is to figure out what it means to be involved in patriarchy and, therefore, also to be involved in consequences such as sexual violence that patriarchy produces. When Susan Brownmiller wrote, in *Against Our Will*, that rape “is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in

a state of fear,”²⁸ many men felt offended by what they thought was an accusation that all men are rapists. Regardless of what Brownmiller actually meant, men wouldn’t react so defensively if they realized that “involvement” in a system like patriarchy doesn’t necessarily reflect their personal motives and behavior. Regardless of whether I, as an individual man, rape anyone, I am connected to the pattern of violence through which other men do. I am connected if only because I participate in a society that encourages the sexual domination, objectification, and exploitation of women, all of which normalize and support sexual violence as a pattern of behavior. Whether I personally encourage or support this behavior is beside the point. That women, for example, will tend to fear and therefore defer to me simply because they identify me as a man, or that they’ll seek me out for protection against other men, or that they’ll curtail their freedom of movement in ways that are unnecessary for me, all affect me, regardless of how I think, feel, or behave. In such a world, being able to walk freely about at night or look people in the eye and smile when you pass them on the street or dress as you please becomes a privilege precisely because it is denied to some and allowed to others, and the privilege exists regardless of whether men experience it as such.²⁹ That I don’t rape women doesn’t mean I’m not involved in a patriarchal society that promotes both male privilege and male violence against women.

If we think about problems like gender violence in a way that appreciates both the power of systems and the importance of our role in them, it frees us to talk about patriarchy and to work toward change. This approach can help us see that social problems like sexism and racism aren’t simply the fault of “bad people” or “bad systems” without involving “good people.” Instead, social problems arise from a mutual interaction between systems and people in an ongoing spiral that shapes social life. The spiral isn’t us and it isn’t the system; it’s the two together, and it cannot be transformed without attention to both.

This means that there’s little to be gained and much to lose from focusing on individual blame and guilt as a way to get humanity out of the patriarchal mess it’s in. Individual men, for example, can be held accountable for what they do or don’t do, but since patriarchy isn’t “men,” blaming men for it simply because they *are* men won’t do much good. Worse, it makes it harder for many men to look critically at patriarchy because they’re so busy defending themselves or apologizing for being male. It also distracts everyone from patriarchy as a system by making it all but impossible to talk about oppression. It forces a choice between blaming and attacking men, on the one hand, and not talking about oppression at all, on the other. Either way, we stay stuck.

The split between two equally ineffective alternatives has profoundly affected attempts to deal with racism and sexism. This has been especially true in U.S. corporations that have tried to come to grips with issues of inequality. The more controversial programs focus on individuals as the root cause of sexism and racism and provoke hostility and blame between different groups. Trapped in an individualistic model, the only alternative is to minimize conflict by using “diversity issues” as a euphemism for “sexism,” “racism,” “heterosexism,” and other forms of oppression, and by emphasizing similarities and common goals between groups and building skills for interpersonal sensitivity and teamwork. These are worthwhile goals, but they’re limited by the fact that social oppression is rooted in the concrete realities of how social systems like patriarchy are organized. Gender oppression isn’t just a matter of attitudes or behavior: it consists of real privileges such as income, wealth, power, safety, respect, and freedom of movement. And men aren’t sexist simply because they’re ignorant, irrational, or have been socialized in sexist ways. Sexism is powerful because it serves men’s interests by protecting privilege. In other words, it is powerful because it *works*. This means that attacking sexism as a purely individual phenomenon will do little to change gender privilege unless we *also* focus on the larger social reality that produces and legitimates it.

Once we see the relationship between patriarchy as a system and individual men and women, the choice facing us becomes clearer. The choice isn’t about whether to be involved in oppression; it isn’t about accepting blame for a system we didn’t create; and it isn’t about whether to make ourselves better people so that we can consider ourselves above and beyond sexism as a social problem. The choice is about how to participate in this system differently so that we can help to change not only ourselves, but the world that shapes our lives and is, in turn, shaped by them. Ultimately, the choice is about empowering ourselves to take our share of responsibility for the patriarchal legacy that we’ve all inherited.

5

Feminists and Feminism

Every struggle to change the world needs a way to make sense of where we are, how we got here, and where we might go. The women’s movement is no exception. It has developed feminism as a diverse and evolving framework for understanding gender inequality and interpreting women’s experience in relation to men, other women, and patriarchy as a system. After more than two centuries, feminism is a rich body of thought that is both analytical and ideological: it makes sense of reality and supports work for something better.

Every struggle for change is also resisted in ways ranging from subtle to overt, from passive to violent; and the women’s movement is no exception. Trashing feminism is now so routine that most women won’t openly identify with feminism even when they support feminist goals and ideas. The backlash has been so successful that “feminism” carries only a vague and highly distorted meaning for the average person, and “feminist” is increasingly used as an accusation or insult needing neither explanation nor justification: “What are you, some kind of feminist?” or, “Don’t get me wrong; I’m no feminist, but. . . .” Before rushing to explain this as something peculiar to feminism, it’s important to realize how typical this is for any way of thinking that challenges basic assumptions about social life. Galileo nearly lost his life for pointing out that Earth revolved around the sun. Critics of capitalism are dismissed as communists and reds in the West, just as critics of communism were castigated as reactionaries and counterrevolutionaries