

The age of patriarchy: how an unfashionable idea became a rallying cry for feminism today

A term that was derided and abandoned a decade ago has come roaring back to life.

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On 7 January this year, the alt-right insurgent Steve Bannon turned on his TV in Washington DC to watch the Golden Globes. The mood of the event was sombre. It was the immediate aftermath of multiple accusations of rape and sexual assault against film producer Harvey Weinstein, which he has denied. The women, whose outfits would normally have been elaborate and the subject of frantic scrutiny, wore plain and sober black. In the course of a **passionate speech**, Oprah Winfrey told the audience that “brutally powerful men” had “broken” something in the culture. These men had caused women to suffer: not only actors, but domestic workers, factory workers, agricultural workers, athletes, soldiers and academics. The fight against this broken culture, she said, transcended “geography, race, religion, politics and workplace”.

Bannon, Donald Trump’s former chief strategist, was one of 20 million Americans watching. In his view, the scene before him augured the beginning of a revolution “even more powerful than populism”, according to his biographer Joshua Green. “It’s deeper. It’s primal. It’s elemental. The long black dresses and all that – this is the Puritans. It’s anti-patriarchy,” Bannon declared. “If you rolled out a guillotine, they’d chop off every set of balls in the room ... **Women** are gonna take charge of society. And they couldn’t juxtapose a better villain than Trump. He is the patriarch.” He concluded: “The anti-patriarchy movement is going to undo 10,000 years of recorded history.”

Until very recently, “patriarchy” was not something rightwing men were even supposed to believe in, let alone dilate upon with such apocalyptic relish. It was the sort of word that, if uttered without irony, marked out the speaker as a very particular type of person – an iron-spined feminist of the old school, or the kind of ossified leftist who complained bitterly about the evils of capitalism. Even feminist theorists had left it behind.

Nevertheless, “patriarchy” has, in the past year or so, bloomed in common parlance and popular culture. Once you tune into it, you cannot escape it: it is emblazoned on banners and T-shirts; it is an unexpected recent addition to the vocabulary of the red-carpet interview; it is there in newspaper headlines, explaining everything from the Irish abortion vote to the recent murder of 10 people in Toronto in a van attack, allegedly by a violently misogynistic “incel” – a man who believes he has been denied a right to sex with women. Outside the anglophone world, the Spanish *patriarcado* has been getting a workout; so too the German *Patriarchat*, the Italian *patriarcato* and the French *patriarcat*. As the #MeToo campaign has grown, so has the use of “patriarchy”. It has burst its way out of the attic of half-discarded concepts to greet a moment – one of fourth-wave feminist ferment – in which there is a newly urgent need to name what women are still struggling against.



Protesters outside the US embassy in London the day after Donald Trump's inauguration. Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

The resurgence of the term is all the more surprising when one considers the forces ranged against it. Many people would question the existence of something called “patriarchy” to begin with – pointing to the strides made in gender equality over the past century, and insisting that instances of sexism are individual and isolated, destined to fade further over time, rather than evidence of a persistent structure of inequality. There are others, meanwhile, who regard the term’s very reappearance as another sign that #MeToo has “gone too far” – and see “patriarchy” as the hysterical war cry of McCarthyite feminists determined to hunt down men who are guilty of nothing more than past behaviours once considered perfectly acceptable.

For some sceptical liberals, there is a resistance to the ideological implications of grand concepts such as “patriarchy” (or “neoliberalism”), which are seen as oversimplifications of a more complex reality. Among gender studies academics, it is no longer in wide use. Once a term debated in endless articles, conferences and books, many theorists now regard it as too blunt and monolithic to capture the nuances of oppression. Paradoxically, some on the right have enthusiastically taken up the term – regarding it not as an evil to be stamped out, but as a “natural” difference between the genders, ordained by God or biology, to be protected against rampaging feminism.

But for those who have lost a basic trust in the forward motion of human progress – or who were born too recently to have known it – “patriarchy” seems exactly the word to explain the continued existence of pervasive, seemingly ineradicable inequality. The moment of #MeToo brought this into relief: it revealed to many feminists that despite all those years of working hard, of *leaning in*, of waiting till unfairness gradually ebbed away, of absorbing and internalising sexism, of building starry careers or else toiling away in menial jobs in the hope that their children would have it better, you could still be pinned to a bed or cornered at a party or groped, or leered at or catcalled by a man – simply because of your woman’s body.

In this moment, the concept of “patriarchy” has offered itself as the invisible mechanism that connects a host of seemingly isolated and disparate events, intertwining the experience of women of vastly different backgrounds, race and culture, and ranging in force from the trivial and personal to the serious and geopolitical. For it allows us to ask, according to the philosopher [Amia Srinivasan](#), “whether there is something in common between the Weinstein affair, the election of Trump, the plight of women garment workers in Asia and women farm workers in North America, and the Indian rape epidemic. It allows people to ask whether some machine is at work that connects all the experiences they’re having with all the experiences others are having.” The return of “patriarchy” raises the question: does the naming and understanding of this invisible mechanism offer the key to its destruction?

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or much of human history, the persistence of male domination was so much part of the oxygen of life that patriarchy was not even identified as a concept – unlike democracy, autocracy or oligarchy, whose relative merits were vigorously debated by the Greeks. The notion that male supremacy was “natural” was self-fulfilling, since those who wrote the laws, the poems, the religious books, the philosophy, the history, the medical treatises and the scientific texts were, very largely, men writing for the benefit of men. As Jane Austen’s character Anne Elliot says: “Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands.” You might even say that patriarchy’s particular power is its capacity to make itself as invisible as possible; it tries very hard not to draw attention to the means of its endurance.

But if you look at the world with patriarchy in view, you might see how some intelligent, successful and apparently assertive women fail to leave men who humiliate them and monitor their every move (such are the hallmarks of “coercive control”, now a **criminal offence**). You might see why even apparently liberal organisations, even those run by women, still have a gender pay gap. Or why about **80 women a year**, in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, are murdered by a male partner or ex-partner. Why women do more childcare and housework than men, and why this domestic “second shift” has until recently been completely ignored by economists. Why the clothing of Angela Merkel and Theresa May is avidly critiqued, but that of Emmanuel Macron is not. Why there are so few meaningful female characters in films. Some concepts are like a pair of spectacles that allow otherwise invisible or inexplicable things to be seen with sudden sharpness: “patriarchy” is one of them.

The word literally means “rule of the father”, from the ancient Greek. There are many different ideas about its extent and force. Some people have used it to describe patterns derived from the structure of the family; to others, it is an entire system of oppression built on misogyny and the exploitation and brutalisation of women. It is not simple, in fact, to produce a concise definition of patriarchy. But at its simplest, it conveys the existence of a societal structure of male supremacy that operates at the expense of women – rather in the way that “white supremacy” conveys the existence of a societal structure that operates at the expense of black people.

Part of the idea of “patriarchy” is that this oppression of women is multilayered. It operates through inequalities at the level of the law and the state, but also through the home and the workplace. It is upheld by powerful cultural norms and supported by tradition, education and religion. It reproduces itself endlessly through these norms and structures, which are themselves patriarchal in nature; and thus it has a way of seeming natural or inevitable, or else, in a liberal context, it is obscured by piecemeal advances in gender equality. Because it offers the idea of a structure of power relations, rather than a series of specific sexist acts, “patriarchy” accommodates the idea that not all men enthusiastically uphold it or benefit equally from it; and that some women may, on the other hand, do a great deal towards supporting it. It also allows for the fact that however much we might loathe it, we all, perforce, participate in it.

Only “patriarchy” seems to capture the peculiar elusiveness of gendered power – the idea that it does not reside in any one site or institution, but seems spread throughout the world. Only “patriarchy” seems to express that it is felt in the way individual examples of gender inequality interact, reinforcing each other to create entire edifices of oppression. Take the fact that **only about 20%** of rapes and sexual assaults in England and Wales are reported to the police, and that of those only a tiny proportion – **7.5% in 2015** – results in a conviction. Why should that be? The most immediate reason is that only a few are brought to trial – a fact that, in isolation, illuminates very little. But the concept of patriarchy helps to reveal that such a trial is merely the pinnacle of a structure supported on myriad props. These props might include all kinds of things without obvious connection: a legal system historically designed by men; the lingering misrecognition of rape as simply an excess of male desire; a police force carrying a legacy of sexism; the cultural and religious shaming of sexually active women; the objectification of women’s bodies; pornography; the fact that women in general are discouraged from speaking out (and if they do, they may expect baleful consequences, as Mary Beard has shown in her book **Women and Power**). That is before you scrutinise the act of rape itself: for some feminists, sexual violence is so clearly a means of controlling women that it is not only an outrage often perpetrated under patriarchy, but its very underpinning.

Once you see the world through the lenses of “patriarchy”, the thought naturally arises: what would the world be like if it weren’t there? Some feminists have argued that if women gain equal rights in society, patriarchy will be at least sufficiently tempered. Others have argued that even if equality were achieved, patriarchy would still exist, because human institutions – political, legal, educational, cultural – are themselves, in their bones, patriarchal structures. But it says something about the nature of this inquiry that it has most vividly been answered by writers of speculative fiction. In the 19th-century novel **Herland**, Charlotte Perkins Gilman imagined a women-only society: one of calm justice, efficient agriculture and comfortable clothing with lots of pockets. In Naomi Alderman’s novel **The Power**, published last year, women, through a kink of evolution, gain superior physical strength over men. A bloody revolution ensues, and there is no hint that the resulting reversal of patriarchy – matriarchy – will be any less oppressive than what it has replaced. It seems to be a zero-sum game.

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atriarchy” is not a stable concept. It has fallen in and out of fashion, flourishing at moments of feminist renewal. Nevertheless, feminism began without it. Mary Wollstonecraft was clear, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) that there was such a thing as “the tyranny of men”, but it was another 60 years before the term “patriarchy” was adopted as something like a theory of social relations.

By the mid-19th century, the world was coming to seem older, bigger and more unstable than it had done before. In 1859, Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* was published. Marx’s *Das Kapital* would follow in 1867. At the same time, work by anthropologists and ancient historians was revealing that there were, and had been, family structures, legal systems and whole societies that looked radically different from those in modern Paris, Berlin or London. Industrialisation and urbanisation were underway in Europe, especially in Britain; women were rapidly entering the workforce.

Two years after *On the Origin of Species*, and six years before *Das Kapital*, a Swiss jurist and classicist called Johann Jakob Bachofen published a book whose influence remains nearly as pervasive – even though hardly anyone has heard of it now, its substantive claims have been repudiated, and it has never been fully translated into English from its original German. It was taken up strongly by Friedrich Engels; it deeply interested Sigmund Freud; and its theories were absorbed by early archaeologists and prehistorians. The book was called *Das Mutterrecht* (“Mother Right”), and its grand theory was that, in a distant prehistoric era, the father’s role in begetting children had not been yet recognised, and women (and mother goddesses) held power in the world.

This highly speculative account of a matriarchy simultaneously birthed the idea of “patriarchy” as a historically contingent, manmade, societal structure that had, according to Bachofen, eventually superseded matriarchy. His method involved close readings of Greek literature and some contemporary anthropological studies. According to his interpretation of Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, for example, Orestes’s acquittal for the murder of his mother, Clytemnestra, on the grounds that she was not a parent but only a “container” for his father’s seed, echoed the moment when the patriarchy established itself – when “the Apollonian age [emerged] out of the ruins of mother right”. Many academics would now argue that such myths are not really echoes of real matriarchal societies – but instead operated, as Mary Beard put it, “to justify the existence of the patriarchy, as charter myths for why men run things”.



It was Virginia Woolf who first pulled the idea of ‘patriarchy’ out of the realm of theory and into the zone of experience. Photograph: George C Beresford/Getty Images

For Bachofen, matriarchy and patriarchy were opposites: dark versus light, “the bloody law of the earth” set against “the pure celestial power of the sun”. His vision of the elementally opposed “female” and “male” has been hugely influential. The idea of an earthbound, essentially non-rational femininity has sometimes been claimed by feminists; in a very different way, you can hear the echoes of the rhetoric, roughly filtered through Nietzsche and Jung, in the statements of rightwing male supremacists of today, especially those who speak of the “chaos” of the feminine. Bachofen himself was no feminist. The idea of the Amazons – mythical female warriors – particularly disturbed him. They represented “an extreme and decadent form of

gynococracy ... man-hating, man-killing, bellicose virgins”, he wrote.

When the term “patriarchy” started to circulate in this new formulation, it opened up new avenues of thought on the left. Engels, in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, drew deeply on Bachofen in order to argue that patriarchy was a crucial factor in the emergence of capitalism. For him, the arrival of patriarchy – which was associated with the recognition of fatherhood, the development of monogamous marriage and inheritable private property – represented “the world-historical defeat of the female sex. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude, she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children”.

It took a female thinker, and a feminist, to pull “patriarchy” out of the realm of theory and into the zone of experience. Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas* (1938) set “patriarchy” to work on the reality of her own circumstances. For her, it described the dynamics within families like hers – in which the father held economic power and authority, boys were trained for public life and girls were debarred from either a serious education or the opportunity to earn a living. The battle lines were drawn “between the victims of the patriarchal system and the patriarchs”. In other words, it was “the daughters against the fathers”.

Woolf did not here write of “patriarchy” as a social structure that went beyond the boundaries of the bourgeois household. Nor did she have time for feminine essentialism: she predicted that the opportunity for women to amass capital and property on equal terms as men would mean that women could change “from being the victims of the patriarchal system ... to being the champions of the capitalist system”. She expanded: “Behind us lies the patriarchal system: the private house, with its nullity, its immorality, its hypocrisy, its servility. Before us lies the public world, the professional system, with its possessiveness, its jealousy, its pugnacity, its greed.” It is an ambiguous picture: she shows little admiration for the capitalist world she describes. And yet in her formulation – an idea that some later feminists would find themselves echoing – the “creative destruction” of capitalism had the capacity to leave patriarchy behind.

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In the late 1960s and early 70s, amid the ferment of revolutionary thought on the campuses of western Europe and north America, a new generation of feminist activists emerged. It was clear to them that oppression continued to bear down on women despite their increased access to the rights that Woolf’s generation fought for – access to education, the vote and the workplace. It was also obvious that existing theories of power were not equipped to explain this oppression: women had been of little interest as subjects for economics, history and sociology, with questions of gender inequality either ignored entirely or regarded as a natural byproduct of societal development. For the feminists of the second wave, part of the work was to bring women into the light. Oppression could be eradicated only if it could be identified, understood and effectively treated, quite possibly with radical or revolutionary medicine.

“Patriarchy” at first provided the most useful focus for this work. Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1970) was an early text that attempted to flesh out “patriarchy” into society’s “most fundamental concept of power”. For her, patriarchy was everywhere; it was “the most pervasive ideology of our culture”. Even ordinary, apparently harmless social norms were in fact tools of oppression, according to her analysis: romantic love, for example, was simply a means of emotionally manipulating the female by the male, tricking her into subservience. Female compliance was also ensured by force – by rape. Women were socialised into pleasing, flattering, entertaining and gratifying men. Millet called the assumed birthright of male dominance “a most ingenious form of ‘interior colonisation’,” which was “sturdier than any form of segregation, and more rigorous than class stratification, more uniform, and certainly more enduring”.

The feminist Rosalind Coward, author of *Patriarchal Precedents: Sexuality and Social Relations* (1983), one of the weightier academic tomes on the subject, recalls going to “endless conferences and meetings” in the 1970s and 80s where the idea of the patriarchy was discussed, analysed and thoroughly broken down. Her own book sets out some of the most pressing questions, not least the conundrum of where it actually came from. “Patriarchy offers itself as an account of the history of sexual relations, but at a certain point the same question has to be asked: why was it men who took control and what were the interests thus served? These questions lead back with an unerring certainty to the same divisions: are there natural sexual differences in which the sexes have distinct interests? Or are sexual dispositions produced by the patriarchal structure itself?” She had hit on a problem of circular thinking in relation to patriarchy – if it had emerged from some kind of a pre-patriarchal society, then surely the patriarchy would have been required in order to produce it in the first place.

“Patriarchy” sprouted dozens of reformulations and refinements as feminists attempted to theorise it into a coherent system of domination. The radical feminist Catharine MacKinnon took a hardline view: she saw patriarchy as inscribed into the very structures of the liberal state. “Men against women” was precisely the fuel that kept society, as it is currently constituted, running. By contrast, the African American feminist bell hooks resisted the notion that the primary conflict in society was one of “men against women”, which seemed inherent in radical definitions of “patriarchy”. For her, it could be simply defined as

“institutionalised sexism”. In order to end it, everyone, male and female alike, must “let go of sexist thoughts and action”.



African American feminist writer bell hooks. Photograph: bell hooks Institute

Lived reality threw up problems with the concept. Experience tells us that some men are oppressed more than some women. Not all women are oppressed in the same way. Writers such as hooks pointed out that for African American women, the family was not necessarily the site of oppression it was for white people, representing a place of possible refuge from the traumas of white supremacy. The kind of workplaces available to many black women, too, were not of the liberating kind accessible to educated white women.

Queer theorist Judith Butler critiqued MacKinnon’s universalising view of patriarchy on similar grounds, arguing that it involved “erasures” of other forms of subtle and layered oppression; it was a kind of “theoretical imperialism”. Butler also sought to question the “naturalness” of gender. There were many possible categories of gendered and sexual practice, she argued, not simply the binary definitions that dominated the culture. And for psychoanalytically inclined feminist thinkers such as [Jacqueline Rose](#), “the notion that all men are a category in opposition to all women breaks down because not all men are men,” she told me. “That is, not all men embody the kind of masculinity that men are supposed to inhabit.”

The eventual rejection by many feminists of the usefulness of “patriarchy” as a fine-grained analytic concept coincided with a general diminuendo in feminist debate in the 1990s and early 2000s – a period later identified by the feminist Beatrix Campbell as a time of “[neoliberal neopatriarchy](#)”. Rapid globalisation and a culture of hyperindividualism, Campbell argued in *The End of Equality* (2013), had in fact led to yet more extreme forms of oppression, citing brutal conditions for labouring women in Mexico, the disproportionate number of female foetuses aborted in India and everywhere a working week “institutionalised in the interests of men unencumbered by duties of care”. While feminism had not died, during this period, it had certainly withered, she wrote.

A few years earlier, in her book *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2008), Angela McRobbie had questioned her own initial enthusiasm for the symbols of the “third-wave feminism” of that period: Sex and the City; “girl power”; pole-dancing classes. In those days, to throw around the word “patriarchy” – when many people assumed that moral and economic progress were destined to eradicate inequality – would have seemed eccentric, misguided or plain mad. Women, or so it seemed, had never had it so good.

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atriarchy is nimble and lithe. Its margins of operation always seem to be expanding. Feminists have naturally tended to

arrange their battle lines in front of the aspect of oppression that they have regarded as the most pressing. If “patriarchy” has returned as an idea in public debate, it is because feminism has returned with renewed vigour; because inequality has not been eradicated.

In 1990, the feminist Sylvia Walby crisply laid out six areas of patriarchal oppression in her book *Theorizing Patriarchy*; they still seem to be ticking along nicely. In the home, women still do most of the domestic labour. In the workplace, a legal right to equal pay has not resulted in the eradication of the gender pay gap. At the level of the state, women are underrepresented nearly everywhere in the world in parliaments, legislatures, the military and other bodies. In terms of male violence, the charity Rape Crisis estimates that in Britain, 11 rapes are carried out or attempted every hour of every day. Women and men are still judged differently when it comes to sex. And the “patriarchal gaze” is still strong in education, religion, culture and the media. And so, for feminists right now, the uses of “patriarchy” are greater than its analytic flaws; it allows feminists to perceive the gap between the status quo and what they would like to achieve. “If patriarchy weren’t effective, we wouldn’t need feminism; if it were totally effective, we wouldn’t have feminism,” Jacqueline Rose told me.

Feminists of an older generation note that the popular revival of “patriarchy” has not (yet) been accompanied by the intense debate and academic theorising that flowered around it in the 1970s. It is a slogan and a popular rallying cry rather than an analytic tool. “What I don’t like about it,” said Mary Beard, “is that it is convenient and simple. I don’t really like ‘misogyny’ either, for the same reason. It’s no more a tangible ‘thing’ than capitalism. Saying ‘crush the patriarchy’ has a nice ring, but it doesn’t contain any political analysis.”

While it is true that lots of intangible things are pressed into service as useful abstractions for helping us understand the world, some feminists still worry that “patriarchy” is in danger of being oversimplified in the course of being co-opted into public debate. “It is now seemingly used almost interchangeably with sexism,” Rosalind Coward said, “and it certainly doesn’t seem to be accompanied by a discussion about where it came from.” Jacqueline Rose told me: “It’s used as a call-out phrase, as if it explained everything. It’s fine to use it as a tool, as long as you don’t mistake it for a complete description of how the world is organised.”

But then, perhaps the revival of “patriarchy” is a bellwether for today’s feminism, which is presently more concerned with action than theory. The concept has survived its biggest theoretical challenge – that of intersectionality, which argues that “patriarchy” universalises and oversimplifies the subtle realities of oppression – because it offers a description of the world that many people recognise, and that unites the many people who want to fight against it. It is particularly suited to today’s fast-moving, hyper-connected digital feminism, where immediate, personal connections can be made in an instant between feminists across the world and radicalising work done in a moment.

“Patriarchy” is also deeply energising to those who use it. There is a certain relief in giving a name to the affliction. It has a satisfying ring of old-fashioned radicalism about it, and it comes with a sharp flavouring of conflict. “Patriarchy” is a battle cry. That is not surprising: the internet has enabled the rapid expansion of feminist campaigning, but also the deep and sometimes violent radicalisation of those who fear and hate it. A reaction against the new feminism has arrived almost simultaneously, as the discontents of disgruntled and unsettled men are stirred and stoked online, in the so-called manosphere. Cynical politicians crusading against “political correctness”, such as Trump, have fed off this baleful energy. In this clamorous world, “patriarchy” has become “the patriarchy”, a further simplification that makes it seem even more crude and concrete – less of an invisible mechanism, more of a statue to be smashed.

One might reasonably ask whether the patriarchy is truly in any danger, as Steve Bannon fears. It is easier to topple patriarchs, as Susan Faludi [pointed out](#) in the wake of Weinstein, than patriarchy. Powerful men who have been called out by #MeToo have left the room, but the room itself still looks very much the same. (Some of the men, too, look very much as if they will be returning to the room quite soon.) If anything can unravel “the rule of the father”, it is likely to be the gradual shift in the way gender and sexuality are being understood. New ways of bringing up children outside traditional family structures will chip away at it. So will the rising generation of bold young feminists who have not internalised oppression like their elders, and who are calling out sexism and misogyny where they see it.

But Bannon can relax. As Mary Beard said recently: “Patriarchy has had several thousand years of practice – of course it’s good at it. It’s very good at bolstering its own sexist values.” If a horde of angry leading women did take a guillotine to the testicles of Harvey Weinstein, patriarchy would survive. The word “patriarchy” ought to be a reminder that Weinstein and his ilk are the symptom, not the disease – but it is easier to tackle individuals than structures, signs rather than causes.

At the moment – although the picture varies wildly across the globe – feminists are increasingly using the tool of “patriarchy” to recognise the subtle depth of the forces that keep oppression in place, from the expectations about the behaviour of women in the workplace to the way they are portrayed in fiction. It will be harder to unravel the effect of this cultural inheritance than it was to get the vote. As Max Weber observed, it is the very longevity of patriarchal traditions and norms that serve to prop it up – “the belief in the inviolability of that which has existed from time out of mind”. The eradication of patriarchy looks like a task of enormous complexity; when it is smashed, it will take a lot down with it. And so the patriarchs – from the bully in the White House to the bully in your workplace – are still in charge. For now.

Main illustration by Nathalie Lees

