

# The Enemy: A Thought Experiment on Patriarchies, Feminisms and Memes<sup>1</sup>

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*“And God blessed them, saying, increase and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the seas and flying creatures of heaven, and all the cattle and all the earth, and all the reptiles that creep on the earth.”—Genesis 1:28*

## Introduction

Upon encountering feminists, specifically those who are blatantly confrontational, one cannot help but wonder if their antagonism towards men is really directed against particular human beings who were born biologically male and embody the masculine role. If some individuals calling themselves feminists express anger at men, or seem to hate them, are they justified in doing so?

This paper examines who or what should be the target of feminist criticism. Throughout the discussion, the concept of memes is applied in analyzing systems such as patriarchy and feminism itself. However, the reader should keep in mind that, explicit as they may seem, the following arguments do not defend individual men who perpetuate oppressive patriarchal practices. The sole aim of this essay is simply to advocate feminism through a conceptual analysis of the origins, so to speak, of the patriarchal system. As a takeoff point, let us briefly discuss Dawkins’ theory on genes.

## Dawkins’ Selfish Gene

Richard Dawkins is a distinguished evolutionary biologist and ethologist who is known for his gene-centered view of evolution, that is, that evolution is best viewed as acting on genes rather than on organisms (Catalano, 1995). In his first book, *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins examines the organic interactions of genes to explain human and animal behavior, arguing that organisms are expected to evolve in order to maximize their inclusive fitness or the number of copies of its genes that are passed on.

Dawkins maintains that genes are replicators. In order for them to reproduce and propagate, replicators have various but distinct coded systems that in effect cause change in the environment. He further contends that the unit of evolution is not the organism but the replicator. In the first chapter of *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins (1976) writes:

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is the unedited penultimate draft that has been accepted for publication in “Feminista: Gender, Race, and Class in the Philippines,” 2011, Anvil Publishing, Inc. The same trade book, including this article, is also set to appear in De La Salle University-Manila’s Centennial Book Set.

The argument of this book is that we, and all other animals, are machines created by our genes... I shall argue that the fundamental unit of selection, and therefore of self-interest, is not the species, nor the group, nor even, strictly, the individual. It is the gene, the unit of heredity.

Genes, according to Dawkins, cause the existence of life in the world. In effect, organisms are relegated to a means for the survival of genes; organisms only act as hosts. Dawkins states that genes

are in you and me; they created us, body and mind; and their preservation is the ultimate rationale for our existence. They have come a long way, those replicators. Now they go by the name of genes, and we are their survival machines.

Further, Dawkins argues that:

The evolutionary importance of the fact that genes control embryonic development is this: it means that genes are at least partly responsible for their own survival in the future, because their survival depends on the efficiency of the bodies in which they live and which they helped to build.

Before Dawkins introduced this idea, the common belief was that the benefits to the organism accounted for genes responsible for the tendency towards that behavior. Catalano (1995) points out that what Dawkins is able to do is to maneuver a shift from the organism as the primary unit of evolution to the characteristics of the gene; the selection based on genes overrides the selection on the level of organisms most of the time. However, Dawkins does not stop there. He develops his theory further so that it crosses the border into understanding culture and society.

### **The Selfish Meme**

A meme is a theoretical unit of cultural information that was first coined by Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (Silby, 2000, p. 1). Memes are ideas that inhabit minds. They are comparable to genes in a sense that they evolve according to the same principles that govern biological evolution.

This unit of cultural transmission or imitation, for memeticists, can be considered as the building block of cultural evolution and diffusion through mind-to-mind propagation. Dawkins (1976) writes:

Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the

meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.

Further, he elaborates on the propagation of ideas:

If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain... When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you initially parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell.

Dawkins parallels memes with genes. For Dawkins, "Mememes are to cultural inheritance what genes are to biological heredity" (Catalano, 1995). The two are subject to natural selection wherein human evolution, as Dawkins postulates, is the co-evolution between genes and memes; through the replication process, memes propagate culturally. Analogous to the ideas on natural selection, the memes that are able to replicate themselves successfully against their competition have a greater chance of survival.

The *memepool*, on the other hand, consists of all existing memes that are good at replicating. These memes produce more copies of themselves in the minds of people or in other mediums (e.g., books, clothes, etc.). Silby explains: "There is a limited amount of memetic storage space on this planet, so only the best memes manage to implant themselves" (2000, p. 1). Those that are not able to replicate themselves eventually become extinct.

Hypothesize for a moment and think of the numerous myths, tales, and chants, to name a few, from our early ancestors, that we no longer have any knowledge of. A plausible explanation for their disappearance is that these extinct memes failed to replicate themselves compared to the more successful memes—that is, the myths, tales and chants that we still know today.

Another concept in memetics (i.e., the study of memes) is the *memplex*. According to Silby, memplexes are memes that have come to rely on each other for replication. These memes band together to become more successful in evolution, which helps the memplex replicate itself and have a better chance for survival. A competition occurs between numerous memplexes wherein those that fail to replicate become extinct.

Armed with this background on memes, memplexes, and the memepool, let us investigate through thought experimentation as to how these concepts can shed light on the issue of whether any generalized feminist anger at men is justified.

### **History through Memplexes**

In prehistoric times, the most basic human societies lived by hunting animals and gathering vegetation (Macdonis, 2000, p. 94). In this type of society, the hunters and gatherers had little control over their environment. These people were also nomadic, moving from one place to another, typically depending on the migratory animal that they hunted.

At a very young age, men in hunting and gathering societies were trained to hunt while women were taught how to collect edible vegetation. During those times, it was possible that most individuals looked at men and women as having the same social importance even though the two had different responsibilities (Leacock, 1978). But because of the lack of knowledge on one's biological makeup (e.g., use of birth control techniques, etc.), women got pregnant frequently and the responsibilities of childcare were delegated to them, keeping them at home. And because it was thought that men were greater in strength, they were deemed better fit for hunting and warfare. In due course, this division of gender roles became institutionalized and was taken for granted as natural (Lengermann & Wallace, 1985). But how did the patriarchal system develop? It's useful to consider two popular theories.

One theory has to do with the invention of the plow. Previously, male and female contributions to subsistence were equalized by the unreliability of hunting. Although men brought in nourishing meats, supplies weren't as constant as the fruits, seeds, and herbs gathered by women. This setup changed when farming was invented and men took control.<sup>2</sup> Another theory points to the patrilineal system of property inheritance as the main culprit behind sexual double standards. Female virginity was prized while female promiscuity was denounced. This oppressive "Madonna-Whore" binary is supposed to have ensured the fact that the heirs of the estate were the patriarch's legitimate children. Thus, as the Marxists argue, the abolition of private property would see the end of not only classism but also sexism.<sup>3</sup>

These two theories illustrate the development of the patriarchal memplex. It propagated itself and edged out other memplexes like matriarchy and ancient Goddess cultures. Through the test of time, this patriarchal memplex adapted to the call of natural selection. It was able to stand against the tough challenges of other competing memplexes including the weaker versions of patriarchy. The intricate collection of memes replicated itself in the minds of people, and for centuries it constantly evolved to adapt to its environment.

Through different eras, the patriarchal memplex replicated itself in the language used by people, laws enacted by governments, narratives produced by writers, and so on. One can even suppose that there were a number of competing memes and memplexes that posed a stiff challenge against the patriarchal memplex, which still permeate in our society today, but all of them have so far failed to override it. The idea is not that hard to imagine if one looks at it from a Darwinian perspective. On the presupposition that the view of a Darwinian culture is correct, a possible explanation for the said memplexes' resilience can be drawn.

In *The Origin of Species*, Darwin maintains that species are adapted for interaction with its natural enemies such as parasites, competitors, and resource supplies (Ridley, 2005, p. 21). It is

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<sup>2</sup> See *The Underside of History* (1992) by Elise Boulding and *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1990) by Carolyn Merchant.

<sup>3</sup> See *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884) by Friedrich Engels.

therefore possible to apply this notion to the patriarchal memplex. Using Catalano's (1995) analogy that "Mememes are to cultural inheritance what genes are to biological heredity," a memplex can therefore adapt to their environment and learn how to interact with their competitors. The patriarchal memplex having replicated successfully, one can argue that, until recent history, it was favored by the law of natural selection.

It can be supposed that among competing memplexes of sexual relations, patriarchy remained the most resilient. But now, let us focus on other memplexes that have challenged the patriarchal memplex in unprecedented ways.

### **Freedom from Slavery**

The 1830s saw the rise in America of abolitionism, or the radical anti-slavery movement which demanded the immediate cessation of slavery on the grounds that everyone is a self-owner. The movement centered on the idea that "every human being has a moral jurisdiction over his or her own body" (McElroy, 2006).

Although certainly less influential, the abolitionist memplex competed with the patriarchal memplex. The competition between memplexes is illustrated by Darwin's principle of divergence, which:

concerns the relative strength of competition... In general we can consider the relative strength of competition that any individual experiences from other individuals like itself and from other, different forms. The competition from the other life forms like itself will generally be much stronger: they will be exploiting similar resources. (Ridley, 2005)

Further, Ridley states that:

In a crowded environment, the way to avoid competition is to evolve to become different from other, similar life forms to yourself.

This gives us a probable explanation of how abolitionism could have started. Remember that, as far as this paper is concerned, systems (e.g., patriarchy, abolitionism, etc.) are memplexes. And as mentioned earlier, there is only a limited amount of memetic storage space in the world. Relating this idea to Darwin's principle of divergence, one can argue that because the patriarchy and abolitionism fight for the same resource, the minds of people, one of them evolved into a completely different form.

Because the patriarchal memplex is more adaptive, the abolitionist memplex had to evolve into something different in order for it to survive. That is to say, the abolitionist memplex could have gone extinct if it had not branched out into a different form.

Citing the principle of divergence again, Ridley states:

Darwin suggested that competition between varieties within a species would cause them to diverge further apart, until they became different species. Then competition between the two species would drive them apart until they become two genera. The principle of divergence drives all evolutionary lineages apart and results in the tree-like pattern of evolution on the grand scale. (2005, p. 25)

Although it did not replace patriarchy, abolitionism possibly led to an important historical divergence from the logic of oppression. This is where the feminist memplex comes in.

### **Freedom and Sexual Equality**

Another memplex that could have possibly evolved through the principle of divergence is the feminist memplex. McElroy states that during the height of the abolitionist movement, women played a huge role in such organized, radical fight against oppression, which marks the time when “a woman’s movement sprang.” To a certain extent, feminism has its roots in the abolitionist movement.<sup>4</sup> Further, McElroy (2006) cites historian Aileen Kraditor:

A few women in the abolitionist movement in the 1830s... found their religiously inspired work for the slave impeded by prejudices against public activity by women. They and many others began to ponder the parallels between women’s status and the Negro’s status, and to notice that white men usually applied the principles of natural rights and the ideology of individualism only to themselves.

This exemplifies how Darwin’s principle of divergence could explain the birth of feminism. As mentioned earlier, it all started with abolitionism. During that time, women began to realize that they were also subject to oppression like the slaves, initially fighting with them. But a number of women began to plant the seeds of feminism. At first, they created a new meme in the context of abolitionism. But as it grew, by replicating in the minds of feminist women and men, this meme evolved into a memplex of its own.

Thus, as the more focused feminist memplex competed with the more generalized abolitionist memplex, the former had to evolve into a different form. Since the two shared a similar resource—that is, the energies and allegiances of groups of people, feminism had to diverge from abolitionism in order to survive. From the meme advocating freedom from slavery, a new meme that advocated equality between men and women evolved alongside other related memes, forming a new memplex.

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<sup>4</sup> The anti-slavery movement took place in the United States, so the development of feminism as discussed in this paper refers to the American context. Nonetheless, the argument linking the oppression of certain groups (e.g., slaves, the poor, colonized races, etc.) and that of women as a sex class, still stands. The development of feminisms globally has frequently coincided with the rise of emancipatory movements such as liberalism, Marxism, socialism, and nationalism. See in particular the history and philosophy of feminisms in the Philippines as discussed by Arnado and dela Cruz, respectively, in this volume.—*Eds.*

But as it is commonly known, feminism has a number of types that fall under it, which is why it is more apt to use the term *feminisms*. Each type has its own distinct characteristics, at times conflicting with others. But the memplex of feminism, or feminisms, acts like an umbrella that encompasses all of these. What seems to be common to all of them is the belief that women are oppressed by men in the context of patriarchy. Stewart (2000) writes,

Feminism is the organized movement which promotes equality for men and women in political, economic and social spheres. Feminists believe that women are oppressed simply due to their sex based on the dominant ideology of patriarchy.

The idea of a single memplex for the entire feminist movement is quite feasible. With that said, let us try to explain what the possible reason could be for women to be oppressed in the patriarchal system. Is it the result of the conscious, willful effort of individual men to oppress individual women? Or could it be something else? Lets us discuss a few other concepts that I think will help us identify the real “enemy.”

### **The Gene of Selfishness**

Genes, as defined by Dawkins, are selfish, as they increase their own chances of survival in the gene pool at the expense of their alleles. The gene is thus the basic unit of selfishness. To a certain extent, Dawkins seems to think that the individual can still exercise control; but because this is not apparent to us, it would be very difficult to do so. He writes,

Not only are brains in charge of the day-to-day running of survival machine affairs, they have also acquired the ability to predict the future and act accordingly. They even have the power to rebel against the dictates of their genes, for instance in refusing to have as many children as they are able to. But in this respect man is a very special case, as we shall see. (Dawkins, 1989).

He further states that:

The genes are the master programmers, and they are programming for their lives. They are judged according to the success of their programs in coping with all the hazards that life throws at their survival machines, and the judge is the ruthless judge of the court of survival. . . . Whenever a system of communication evolves, there is always the danger that some will exploit the system for their own ends.

Relating this to his ideas in *Viruses of the Mind*, one could draw the inference that the host rarely realizes that he or she has already been infected by an unknown virus.

Like computer viruses, successful mind viruses will tend to be hard for their victims to detect. If you are the victim of one, the chances are that you won't know it, and may even vigorously deny it. Accepting that a virus might be difficult to detect in your own mind, what tell-tale signs might you look out for? (Dawkins, 1993)

It is possible that the hosts may not be aware that they are already inflicted with a virus, or, in the context of this discussion, a *memplex*. One might contend that it is still up to the individual to be responsible for knowing that he or she is already infected, but this is not always the case. In another article, *What Use is Religion?*, Dawkins explains the idea that there is something in us, in our biological structure, which is susceptible to these kinds of viruses.

Natural selection builds child brains with a tendency to believe whatever their parents and tribal elders tell them. And this very quality automatically makes them vulnerable to infection by mind viruses. For excellent survival reasons, child brains need to trust parents and trust elders whom their parents tell them to trust. An automatic consequence is that the “truster” has no way of distinguishing good advice from bad. The child cannot tell that “If you swim in the river you’ll be eaten by crocodiles” is good advice but “If you don’t sacrifice a goat at the time of the full moon, the crops will fail” is bad advice. They both sound the same. Both are advice from a trusted source, and both are delivered with a solemn earnestness that commands respect and demands obedience. (Dawkins, 2007)

Having presented the arguments above, let us now assess if there are any grounds for holding men responsible if they continuously adhere to the patriarchal memplex. Are individual men the enemy?

### **The Enememe**

As mentioned above, the patriarchal memplex is deeply ingrained in us. Through the passage of time, it has adapted and evolved to meet the demands and challenges of other competing memplexes in the memepool. Because it is deeply embedded in us, in our biological structure to a certain extent, it is very difficult for anyone to detect if he or she is already infected by it (Macionis, 2000, p. 123).

Looking at how history transpired, or at least how it could have from the start, the memplex of patriarchy eagerly and selfishly replicated itself. This means that different sets of memes joined to push the agenda of the patriarchal memplex. These memes are not limited to language or social customs alone. As Dawkins (1976) argues, memes could be “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches.” In order for the memplex of patriarchy to successfully propagate, there are a number of memes that help to spread the memplex in the minds of individuals, thus parasitizing them.

Because we were born into a particular social reality that is patriarchal, we heavily depended on the guidance of our parents and the environment around us during our childhood. Because most, if not all, individuals around us were shaped, or infected, by the memplex of patriarchy, these people have grown and learned to adapt to this dominant system. In the absence of education, an ideological shift, or the experience of shared oppression resulting in empathy, it is difficult for individuals to realize that they are indeed infected by this virus. If one is so used

to doing things the way he or she has always done, detecting the virus would be extremely easier said than done. Arguably, the only time the virus manifests itself is when oppression has already been experienced.

Hence, individual men are not the actual enemy of feminists. The real enemy is the system, the patriarchal memplex. It tolerates, breeds, and encourages the oppression of women. It perpetuates oppressive thoughts about women because of its constant desire to selfishly replicate itself. Men and women are just sacrificial pawns of the system's craving to propagate itself.

Before concluding the discussion, let us consider Karl Marx's relevant insights.

### **Remembering Marx**

Marx, in his discussion of social conflict during his time, presents the idea of class consciousness. This is "the recognition by workers [the proletariat] of their unity as a class in opposition to capitalists and ultimately, to capitalism itself" (Macionis, 2000, p. 105). The proletariat provides labor to operate the productive enterprises of capitalists. Once they recognize that the system of capitalism creates class conflict, the workers would push for the eventual overthrow of the system—not of individual capitalists. Targeting the capitalists is what Marx describes as false consciousness. In discussing Marx's notion of false consciousness, Macionis writes:

False consciousness. . . [is the product of] explanations of social problems in terms of the shortcomings of individuals rather than the flaws of society. Instead, he [Marx] thought industrial capitalism itself was responsible for the social problem he saw all around him. False consciousness, he maintained, victimizes people by hiding the real cause of their problems. (2000, p. 103)

What Marx gives us is the idea that everyone is oppressed by the capitalist system, and the reason for class conflict is not the capitalist themselves, but this system. If this is not yet already blatantly right in front of us, there is some sense in saying that the capitalists, the bourgeoisie, despite their economic advantages, are victims as well. The adverse effects of the system that creates their privileged class include the dearth of individual responsibility and empathy, to say nothing of their participation in the pernicious logic of dominance.

Relating this to the patriarchal system, one could argue that men are not the real enemy; they too are victims. Condemning individual men as the source or cause of conflict and oppression is a form of false consciousness. As Kaufman (2000) cogently argues, men no less than women are adversely affected by patriarchy, inasmuch as their experience of power is inextricable with pain. Thus, as feminism promises to equalize male and female access to power, so too does it lessen men's pain.

Patriarchies and feminisms are in fact, systems. They are so intricate, so deeply ingrained in us, that individuals barely notice how pervasively they are practiced and lived. If men oppress

women, this may be due in part to the infection of an unseen parasite, a mind virus. In order to emancipate its victims, to prevent further cruelty, everyone—male and female—has to overthrow the cause of conflict: the system.

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