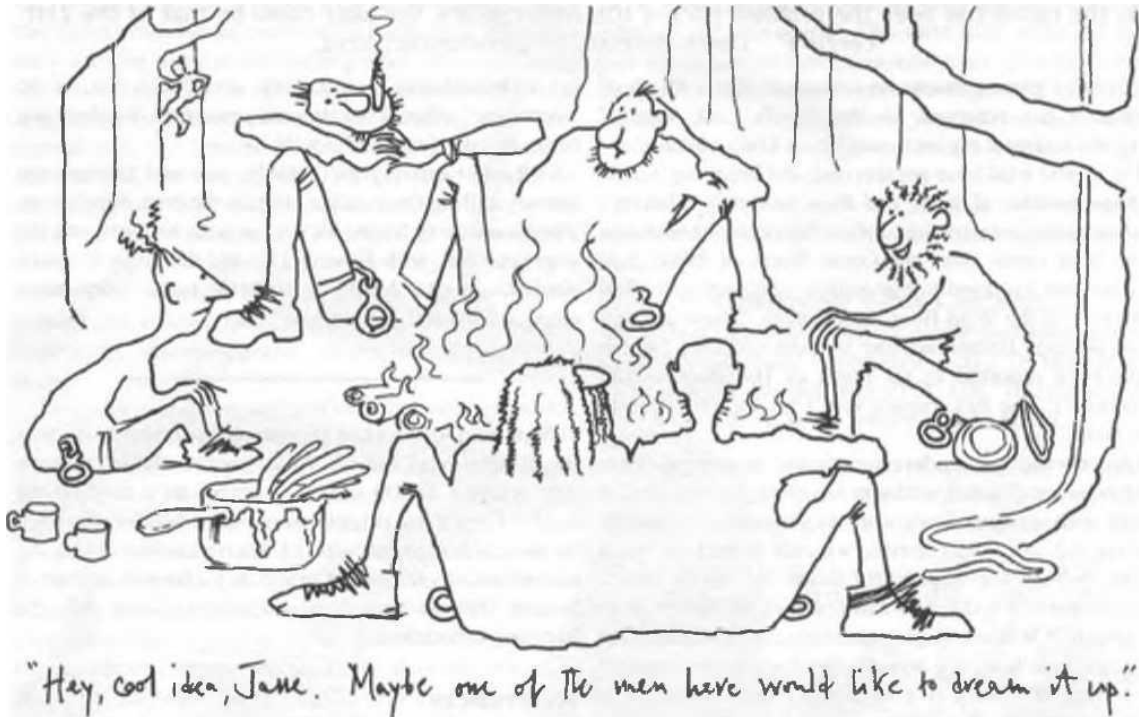


No Escape from Patriarchy

Male Dominance on Site

Anonymous

1998



Living on a protest camp is a unique experience, it is completely divorced from the reality of British society—preconceived ideas and perceptions are altered drastically. Perhaps it is because of the continuous pressure—the reason you are there is to try and save land from being annihilated by companies, government departments and people who have no respect for the world in which we live, who are prepared to decimate land in favour of profit. Due to this, living on a protest camp is not an easy life, it involves a great deal of work and strength of character. A bonding grows between people that I personally have never experienced elsewhere. I can liken it to that of family relationships— what you go through with each other in such a short period

of time is enriching, you are continuously evolving, learning new things about life that no education system could teach you in a hundred years. The overall concept of a camp is one of a free society; you can speak to any ‘road protester’ and they will tell of ideals that focus on anarchy, equality, freedom, free love and basically anything else you want to chuck in as long as it shows respect for freedom in the individual.

Yet despite this, as a woman living on site and speaking to other females involved in various campaigns— everyone agreed that it was without a doubt, a patriarchy dominated environment.

I am trying not to rant and moan, but it has got to be said that protest camps can be one of the most chauvinistic, domineering and belittling experiences for a woman to be in. Maybe it’s the extremely unbalanced ratio of men to women on site that makes the leering, fire lit eyes of the cider induced hippie a very bothersome experience. For starters, there seems to be this assumption that women can’t climb, can’t put up walk ways and that their treehouses need the stem eye of the more experienced male cast upon them before anyone would dream of having a smoke in them.

In the kitchen bender, protest camps seem to be regressing back to an almost medieval level whereby women quietly get things done on a regular basis, and males seem incompetent of even lifting a sponge. There are numerous occasions in which a female will without fuss do the washing up as a matter of course in getting the camp to run smoothly, or get the slop pot bubbling, and not even whisper that she is pissed off with doing it for the tenth night on a run. Yet if one male does it one night you can guarantee the ritualistic argument that will follow during the course of the evening where each testosterone filled being will slam their cards down on the table, and tell every member of the camp and any lurking SAS in more than graphic detail exactly what they had done that day. how they did it, and what techniques they used to tie that particularly complex walkway knot. In most situations it is the description of the knot that gets everyone going, because someone else always knows better and that someone else that knows better, you can bet your harness on it. will invariably be *male*. A friend of mine said something which summed the situation up very nicely: “The ways some blokes carry on, you’d think it was a fucking achievement managing to have a shit in the shit pit”—and that was said by a man!

I recall once sitting up an ash tree that I had lived in for the last two months when a reasonably experienced male climber visited the site and was pottering about in the walkways, passing by my tree. He took one look at my abline and quickened his pace. “Oh dear” he said, “how long have you been abseiling on that”—just that brief sentence was enough to make my eyes roll into the back of my head, and take a deep breath before proceeding with my somewhat short answer. Before I knew it he was involved with untangling the line of the various branches, tutting to himself about the unsafety of my present line, and about how everyone did it this way these days. Fair enough, at this stage I was grateful for his advice. That would not have been so bad if not an hour later some other “dashing knight in shining harness” was to come ambling past only to re-tie the abline using the previous knot. I threw my hands up in disbelief and left them to it, but admittedly felt somewhat stupid because I had not listened to myself. I should have been able to say that the line was fine as it was. that I had done it myself and I knew it was okay— but my confidence was challenged by these men. and I believed at first that they genuinely knew better.

What males do not realise is that there could actually be two ways, maybe even three, of tying that knot, and each method will still be as effective as the last, still as safe, and there is no need for the temperament of those sitting around the firepit to rise to such vocal levels. Why is it that it only seems to be the women that realise this basic fundamental fact and will calmly find the

way that suits them the best, and if questioned about it will end up being confused and amused by this ranting male, hell bent on proving his masculinity to you by persuading you that you want to do the knot his way? But I tell you, you don't, you're seething underneath, you're pissed off with this continuous rant and this fervent belief upheld by males on site that women really don't know how to do anything.

Back to the washing up. I am sure you will agree that days and time pretty much fall into one on site, yet the *m a l e* will always remember what day, what time and how long it took him to do that particularly distasteful batch of washing up. Not only that, but the reason he did it was because "no one else was doing any fucking work. I've been working all day, there is no food in the kitchen and there's no fucking clean dishes." I do not need to really accentuate the point any more, but whilst males get hysterical and clock up the number of times they have spent doing something as mundane as washing up, females just do it and a hell of a lot else as well. Yet they do not demand continuous thanks, gratification and worshipping as their male counterparts. In discussing this particular issue, which infuriates me on a daily basis, a friend of mine, also female, said "It's always blokes that lunch out whole days, girls always work, even girls that just come down for a day do work." Perhaps it's because men don't have wombs and there is that bit more space in their stomachs which allows them to consume abundant amounts of tea that makes some of them downright lazy.

You have to laugh really but there is more, and it's even worse—going pixieing with a bunch of males because they take it so damn seriously, they seem to think that they become these stealthy creatures of the night interacting with the psyche of nearby security, predicting with dazzling (in)accuracy the securities' movements, moving with the earth in sure quick movements that would daze even the infra red cameras of undercover police.

The funny thing is—the male spends all his time getting to his destination, prepared to trash that generator only to find some one else has got there before him. He then stomps back to camp in annoyance whilst the female has taken down three fields of fencing, but she won't tell the male because she knows that next time he'll want to go with her, and to be honest they are a bloody hindrance with all that macho commando earth stuff. Not only that, but put a slightly drunk blokey bloke near a security guard, whilst you are trying to unload large amounts of sugar into the generator he is guarding, and all manner of hollering, shouting, swearing and general abuse will follow—for I might add, no particular reason whatsoever. It just makes life slightly uncomfortable when you are dangling off a bit of rope trying to prussak up to your tree house, being pelted by stones because some lout has been tormenting security all night. Okay, so it is not a nightly occurrence, but once or twice I have found myself apologising to the security (something no one likes doing) for men's behaviour towards them. Us females found that singing "what did you do in the eco-war daddy" in a particularly out of tune voice and grating fashion far more effective.

If I was going to get hardcore feminist about it then I wouldn't have survived on site for as long as I have, or I would be living in some equally repressive matriarchal site. Obviously sexism doesn't exist all the time, but there is certainly the undercurrent on sites that men are in control. Maybe it is due to the intense situation of living on a site—where there is often a continual presence of security and police—that causes people to be far more aggressive about building and work, and the threat of eviction at any given time that can cause the general attitude of some males to be very oppressive. For example, there seems to be this general unwritten rule that you

CAN'T I TAKE A JOKE?



AS A MATTER OF FACT, I JUST
RAN OUT OF MY SENSE OF HUMOUR!!

do not talk to another man's girlfriend: alright, so you might end up pissed up in bed with them later, but in front of everyone it as if men are holding you at arm's length.

From my own personal experience, when I arrived on one camp I was with my boyfriend of the time. I found that the other people living on site tended initially to talk to him far more than me, almost as if I was a second class citizen. Questions about where we had come down from were directed at him, he was the one being offered the spliff and beers first, and what was even worse was that one particular individual actually directed questions about me at him. I am 20 and well trained in the art of responding to questions about what my name is and how old I am. yet I found myself having to be assertive all the time and behave in a confident manner, directing questions at people in order to get a response from them. Eventually my bossiness worked its way through and males would begin to voluntarily talk to me. but there was a certain amount of scathing analysis beforehand.

Then it comes to sex; as I said before the ratio of men to women is disproportionate, for each woman there are several men. and as new arrivals appear on site single females are very quickly weighed up and a mental battle begins as suitors line up for their attention. For example, a friend's sister came down to site at Manchester Airport's Wild Garlic Camp. (During the previous week there had been two women on site, and most males were at this stage exhibiting signs of sexual starvation. I was out of bounds as I was seeing someone and none of the blokes wanted to tread on my blokes toes, and the other girl was in the process of fighting off two blokes—in her own words, “deliberately building barriers in front of me in order to put them off”). Now this girl was very pretty, yet as she came gingerly across the dodgy bridge that crossed the river, this almighty ‘Wooah’ emerged from the fire pit area—eyes widened, mouths salivated and tongues hung, as the main contenders for ‘Sexist Pig of the Week’ went into action.

She was eventually claimed by one of the *males* that lived on site (and I do not use that word lightly) after much arguing, barging and clamouring for attention. It was sickening to watch, yet on site there is certainly this general free love ideal which, as one male that I discussed the issue with said “is manipulated by some men living on site”. That is of course a matter of opinion, but he asserted that there was a certain amount of pressure to conform to the free love ideal, and “not everyone wants such relationships, if they don't their space should be respected. Some men I know can be really pressurising and really hassle a girl when she blatantly doesn't want to... it does tend to be men more then women that are up for it”.

Of course this comment is not intended to point the finger at anyone, or say that women do not enjoy the concept of ‘free love’ to the fullest, but there is a vast difference between free love, sharing your body with someone for the night, and a drunken quicky, when you only realise half way through the monotonous thrusting that you haven't got a clue who you are with, and start trying to work out how on earth you managed to get yourself in that situation, and how the fuck to get out of it.

One thing that came up as an issue in a discussion about patriarchy on sites was the ‘clothing problem One woman told the following story: “I used to have this pair of purple trousers, which I wore all the time because they were really comfortable. One day a good male friend of mine said to me ‘you look really sexy in those trousers’, and I sort of laughed it off as you do. but then he said “have you not noticed all the blokes looking at you”. I didn't like the thought of that so I stopped wearing them, I didn't want people to see my sex. I wanted them to see me. I began deliberately to dress in a less feminine manner, bland and laddish to avoid hassle.”

I personally had a similar experience when one sunny day feeling buoyant I wore a skirt, numerous males commented on it, one even asked me “what the fuck I thought I was wearing.” There is this definite fashion to dress in masculine clothes—which I generally do anyway through choice, but in both situations neither of us should have been made to feel that our clothes were in any way sexual, or that we should not have been wearing them for whatever reason.

The same woman told another story of living on site which emphasises some of what I have been trying to say: “I had been away from site for two days, and I was walking down the slope to the tire pit when someone shouted hello out of their treehouse, I shouted hello back, there must have been about six men on site, one person shouted “women at last” and they all jeered. It felt like a building site—the energy in that little bit of valley was completely male. It was not that I didn’t like it there. I loved it. there was space for me there, but it made me uncomfortable. After a month or so I began to really notice that when I was with girls, there was something inside me that I could release, something that made me relax. With blokes I was always a little guarded.”

Despite all this disgruntlement, the patriarchy that exists is not a conscious thing. Once on an action I had a go at someone who was being blatantly sexist, he apologised immediately and looked distressed that he had said anything that could be considered sexist. For all men’s faults women are still very much respected on site and patriarchy does have its ‘advantages’. For example, when situations are getting really tense between men, women seem to have a strangely calming effect. If you talk to them in a calm voice, they often listen, you can tell them not to be violent and they frequently are not. Men on site tend to become very protective over you. not in a possessive way but you know they will always look out for you.

The fact that this happens proves there are gender differences, that sites are patriarchal, but then so is society, and it is society I blame for it. Many of us have been brought up recognising men as dominant in some way, sexism remains predominant in much of western culture, the fact that site living is supposedly some form of free anarchic society is true only to the extent that we say it is. The reality is that our cultural knowledge is inadvertently embodied within us, and in order to release ourselves from a male dominated environment then we need a long and concentrated project that is not hampered by the continuous threat of eviction, arrest and soaring stress levels. Despite this, there is no reason for complacency; being aware, and not assuming that women are incompetent is a major step forward.

The patriarchy on road protest camps is not a conscious one, often it is not deliberate, and it is a by-product of western culture. However it can make for a repressive environment—“there is something about sites that brings out the caveman in some men.”



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