

Scene on Radio

Dick Move (MEN, Part 1): Transcript

<http://www.sceneonradio.org/episode-47-dick-move-men-part-1/>

Celeste Headlee: So John, you said you want to start things off by telling a story.

John Biewen: Hey Celeste. Yeah, a little story from my childhood. You know, having grown up male in America and all.

Celeste Headlee: A white male, for that matter. Cis-gender, hetero, middle class, right? All this is right?

John Biewen: Yes. The oppressor, in other words. So of course I'll want to get us rolling by talking about myself.

Celeste Headlee: Lord knows we never get to hear the stories about folks like you.

John Biewen: Yes. That ever-neglected demographic, the straight white non-disabled American male. Well, we are calling the series *MEN*. And we will be exploring men and manhood, though with that *critical Scene on Radio* gaze.

Celeste Headlee: We'll mostly be looking at men other than you. And, of course, at women's experience, a whole lot. And non-binary people and gay and straight and queer and trans folk.

John Biewen: But I want to make it clear from the top that as the producer and host of this show, I'm not trying to pretend that I can stand outside the frame, alright. I'm not claiming to be some quote-unquote neutral, detached observer.

Celeste Headlee: I don't think anyone would buy that, anyway.

John Biewen: I know our audience wouldn't. In our last series, *Seeing White*, about race, it mattered that I'm a hopelessly white person, and this time out you can't get around the fact that I identify as a dude. Or that you, Celeste Headlee, my guest co-host and conversationalist for this season, you are a woman, and, by the way, a woman of color.

Celeste Headlee: That's very true. And things are gonna get intersectional around here. We will look at how these hierarchies and forms of oppression get all tangled up with each other. So let's hear that story.

John Biewen: Okay, right, the story. So...

[Music]

John Biewen: I guess I was about ten years old when I somehow got the idea to challenge my big brother Paul to a boxing match. We were a big family, and pretty close. Five kids: three boys, two girls. Paul was the oldest, almost four years older than me. Then our two sisters, then me, then my younger brother Todd. For some reason, our family owned two pairs of boxing gloves.

John Biewen, on phone: Do you remember the boxing gloves?

Paul Biewen, on phone: I do, I can picture them very well because we got them for Christmas...

John Biewen: That's Paul. He lives in a suburb of Minneapolis.

Paul Biewen: They were brown with maybe a white wrist area, with laces, they laced up on the inside of the wrist. And they were not very big, they weren't like big puffy ones, they weren't really well padded. (Laughing) They were probably about as light,

you know as close to a fist as you would get to and still have a boxing glove on, is my recollection.

John Biewen: Now, as I said, we did have two sisters.

John Biewen, on phone: It's funny even to say it forty years later, but there was never any doubt that these would have been for the boys, right?

Paul Biewen: I would say no, no, there was no doubt. But we weren't into boxing. I mean I guess we watched things, and Geno would have certainly been watching heavyweight boxing and stuff at that time.

John Biewen: Geno – that's what we call our dad, whose name is Gene.

Paul Biewen: It's not like we were into boxing by any means, so I'm not quite sure why we received that as a present.

John Biewen: I talked to Mom about this and she just shakes her head and she says, she can't imagine why they bought us boxing gloves. And she said maybe they were on sale (laughs), 'cause they didn't have much money and they were trying to get us Christmas presents.

Paul Biewen: Yeah. Yeah.

John Biewen: My brothers and I were very sporty and competitive: basketball, baseball, football. But we weren't fighters. The three of us can each come up with exactly one story in which we *kind of* fought with another boy, a kid from school or the neighborhood. In each case, the other kid started it and it didn't amount to much. None of us have thrown a punch, or taken one, as an adult. I'm sure we had never used the boxing gloves in earnest before the day in question. But this was the early 1970's.

Archival clip, Muhammad Ali: I predict that when I meet Joe Frazier, this will be like a good amateur fighting a real professional. This will be no contest!

John Biewen: The era of the epic Ali-Frazier championship fights. I was Team Ali, a big fan. One day I got to feeling full of myself and put on a pair of the gloves, and my bathrobe over a pair of gym shorts, and started bouncing around our basement “rec room,” as we called it, saying, Come on, Paul. Let’s go. World championship bout. Right here and now.

Paul Biewen: And I kind of suggested it wasn’t a great idea, that you maybe wouldn’t come out on it, you know, come out on the long end of it, that was unlikely, but that I was willing to participate if you sort of understood that. That’s kind of the way I remember it.

John Biewen: (Laughs). Yeah, that’s a nice way of saying it. I think, yeah, I think you kind of said, That’s probably not a good idea, John.

John Biewen: I don’t know what I thought was gonna happen. Paul was a foot taller than me and his arms twice as long. Maybe I thought I was just so quick, so naturally talented, that I’d hold my own. More likely, I hoped he would humor me, let me bounce around, float like a butterfly and sting like a bee, have some fun with it.

Paul Biewen: I mean, I think there was a little dancing and a little bumping gloves and, um, you know and then I bopped you basically (laughing) is what I remember. And I don’t remember if I bopped you in the chest or the – I don’t think I would have hit you in the face, honestly, but you might remember differently than that.

John Biewen: You know, honestly, I don’t remember the details. I think you hit me a few times, and it wasn’t like a vicious uppercut or a, you know, you could have just hauled off and decked me if you’d wanted to be really cruel, and it wasn’t like that. But I think you – I don’t know if you hit me in the face two or three times kind of just hard

enough that it really hurt my nose, or if maybe you got me in the solar plexus and knocked my wind out, I don't know. All I know is that, my memory is that it was about thirty seconds and I was crying and it was over. And I was completely humiliated and mad, and [Paul laughs] not happy. Defeated. Soundly defeated.

[Music]

Celeste Headlee: Hmm. So, I'm guessing you never asked Paul for a rematch. You learned your lesson, right?

John Biewen: Yeah, well, I learned that lesson. But sadly, it's not the end of the story.

Celeste Headlee: Oh? It gets worse from there?

John Biewen: Well, remember, I also have a younger brother.

Celeste Headlee: Uh-oh.

John Biewen: Todd was, still is, sixteen months younger than me. He and I played together a lot when we were kids, we were the two youngest, and he was there in the rec room that day. I might have still been wiping the tears from my eyes when I said, Todd, come on, your turn. Put the gloves on.

John Biewen, on phone: But you don't remember this, huh?

Todd Biewen, on phone: Nope, I don't. Yeah, I don't remember specifics about it, how many rounds we went. [Laughter] Or did we, maybe we didn't make it past two minutes, I don't know, but...

John Biewen: That's Todd. He lives in the Twin Cities, too. When he told me this, recently, that he didn't remember our boxing match, that came as a relief.

John Biewen, on phone: Because my memory is that I pretty much did to you what Paul had done to me.

Todd Biewen: Okay.

John Biewen: Which is to say that I popped you in the face a few times. Not really hard, I wasn't trying to hurt you, but it didn't take very much. We weren't big fighters and I think if you get hit in the nose even with a softish, gloved hand, it hurts. So I think it was over pretty fast and you were crying, and that was it.

Celeste Headlee: So did it make you feel better to take it out on your little brother?

John Biewen: You might think so. I had evened my record.

Celeste Headlee: Right.

John Biewen: A few minutes before I'd been a loser, now I was a winner. But actually I felt just awful. Almost sick to my stomach, as my little brother walked away, angry and hurt. Worse than I'd felt getting beaten by Paul. It felt like I'd lost twice, or worse than that.

John Biewen, on phone: I'm glad to hear that it, at least in your conscious memory, that it didn't live on. Because for me occasionally I've thought back on that moment and just, I just wince inside, like, what a crappy thing that was that I did in taking out my frustrations on you. But I don't think I ever said that I'm sorry. So, um. I'm sorry, brother.

Todd Biewen: Thanks, brother.

Celeste Headlee: So does this whole sad story have a moral?

John Biewen: Well, I think it does. Something like, that trying to establish your masculinity, your manhood, as our culture defines it, will tend to make you stupid and destructive.

Celeste Headlee: (Laughs) Well, I'm not a man, but I assume that you might hurt other people and also yourself, the would-be manly man.

[Music]

John Biewen: From the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University and PRX, this is *Scene on Radio*. Welcome to Season Three. I'm John Biewen.

Celeste Headlee: And I'm Celeste Headlee. This is Part One of our new series, MEN. A season-long dive into patriarchy, sexism, misogyny ...

John Biewen: And other words with lots of syllables. Masculinity and male supremacy, past and present.

Celeste Headlee: How we ended up with male dominance, how we can get better at seeing it, and what it might take to change it. With emphasis on how it all goes down here in the U.S. of A.

John Biewen: And yes, this *is* a follow-up to our series on race last season, *Seeing White*, and we're modeling it loosely on that project. Celeste, more than a few listeners responded to *Seeing White* by saying, how about doing something roughly similar but on gender? On, you know, toxic masculinity?

Celeste Headlee: Were those listeners women?

John Biewen: Every single one.

Celeste Headlee: Yeah, I bet. (Laughs.)

John Biewen: Before we go any further, let's tell the people who you are, for those who don't know you. Celeste Headlee, longtime public radio host, including at NPR and WNYC. Author of the book, *We Need to Talk: How to Have Conversations that Matter*. You're often on the road speaking and your TED Talks have many millions of views. And if that weren't enough, you're a trained, sometimes performing, classical soprano. You're the granddaughter of William Grant Still, often called "the dean" of African American classical composers. Gonna see if I can get you to sing for us at some point.

Celeste Headlee: Yeah, if you go first.

John Biewen: That's not gonna happen. So Celeste, I pulled together some clips and we made the inevitable introductory montage that would typically come in about now, you know, dramatizing the many forms of damage and mayhem wrought by members of my gender.

Celeste Headlee: Right.

John Biewen: But I've been thinking, do we even need to tick off the stuff? I mean, everybody knows all this, right?

Celeste Headlee: Are you kidding me? I want to hear it. Just to get us all on the same page so we understand what we're talking about here.

John Biewen: Yeah? You think we need....

Celeste Headlee: Who doesn't like a good montage? Let's hear it.

John Biewen: OK. Here goes.

[Music]

John Biewen: Most of the headlines on the toxic masculinity beat, lately, have come from the #MeToo movement. It blew open in October 2017 with the Harvey Weinstein allegations, but...

Donald Trump, Access Hollywood video: I moved on her like a bitch. But I couldn't get there, and she was married....

John Biewen: The fuse may have been lit a year earlier.

Donald Trump: And when you're a star they let you do it. You can do anything.

Celeste Headlee: Of course, women have been talking about sexual abuse and harassment for much, much longer. It's just that few in the mainstream were listening or amplifying those voices until now. The activist Tarana Burke first used the phrase Me Too a full decade before it became a hashtag. But since things blew up in 2017, dozens of men have fallen, most of them in high-profile industries where the victims were prominent white women.

Reporter, Inside Edition: O'Reilly paid former Fox News personality Lis Wiehl 32 million dollars to settle sexual misconduct claims.

Reporter, ABC: Popular comedian Louis C.K. at the center of the latest sexual misconduct allegations....

David Muir, ABC News: Pressure is growing at this hour for congressman John Conyers to step down after more women have now come forward....

Reporter, CBS News: Dozens of people accusing Las Vegas casino mogul Steve Wynn of sexual misconduct....

John Biewen: And we just have to include this moment: the disgraced TV news guy Bill O'Reilly, of Fox News, being grilled by the then-*soon-to-be* disgraced TV news guy Matt Lauer, of NBC.

Matt Lauer: Since your firing, have you done some soul-searching? Have you done some self-reflection, and have you looked at the way you treated women....

Celeste Headlee: It's not clear yet how far MeToo will go, whether time really is up for harassers. But over the past year or two it's become nearly impossible to deny the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and abuse. It's not *only* men who do it, but it's overwhelmingly men.

Louis C.K., *standup*: How do women still go out with guys, when you consider the fact that there's no greater threat to women than men! We're the number one threat to women! (laughter) Globally and historically....

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, NPR: The suspect in the attack, Alek Minassian, was quickly linked to an online community of trolls and violent misogynists that call themselves Incels....

John Biewen: Incels are a group of men who think they have a right to sex and they're filled with rage toward women who don't give it to them. But of course, men are also the number one physical threat to other men. And to trans people, and to children. To everybody.

Reporter, ABC News: ...where that gunman fired from above onto the crowd below, again killing at least 58 people at this point....

Celeste Headlee: Violence, rape, and sexual harassment are usually abuses of power. And, well, half a century into the modern women's movement, men still have most of it.

Reporter, Fox Business: New study out today finds that men are paid more than women in every single industry at every single level. How about that?

Stephanie Ruhle, MSNBC: For example, there are fewer women GOP senators total than male GOP senators with the name John. There are fewer female Democratic governors than male Democratic governors named John. As for CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, fewer total women CEOs than men CEOs named James. And those are just a few examples. Come on, now! We've gotta change this.

John Biewen: Since we're cataloguing the troubles with male supremacy here, we should at least mention the everyday irritations that, well, that you women in particular have to put up with.

Celeste Headlee: Like mansplaining, you mean?

John Biewen: Yes, let me tell you about it!

Celeste Headlee: (Laughs.) Male overconfidence and also, somehow, at the same time, dude-ish insecurity? Entitlement? Manspreading?

John Biewen: Yeah. Etcetera, etcetera. Those things. You know, all that stuff is part of the bigger picture and they'll come up along the way, I'm sure. But like we did with *Seeing White*, we're going to concentrate more on the big stuff: Power and its abuse, and how to make things better.

Celeste Headlee: We'll go way beneath the headlines to deeper questions. What is gender, anyway, and why do we make so much of it?

John Biewen: How did we get patriarchy, and how has it evolved over the centuries? What does the latest science say? Is masculinity as we know it necessary or inevitable?

Celeste Headlee: Before we go any further, though, John, I want to say I hope we'll also look at the cost *to* men. Toxic masculinity damages everybody, including the masculine.

John Biewen: Absolutely, we will get to that.

John Biewen: I have one more thing I'm just a little bit nervous about that I'd like to put on the table.

Celeste Headlee: Yeah?

John Biewen: So, you and I are in this together and we're co-hosts. But listeners might notice as we go along that, if you're doing a word count or measuring our actual airtime, it's gonna be somewhat more than 50-50 me.

Celeste Headlee: Right. And if you're going to hog the airtime, at least you're transparent about it. (Laughs)

John Biewen: I picture our astute listeners, especially women, out there rolling their eyes as the guy yammers on, as I do more than my share of talking.

Celeste Headlee: It's called side-eye, John. But it's not like it sounds. I'm here as your guest co-host, but this podcast is your actual job. And you're the reporter as well as co-host. You've spent months doing research and interviews. So in lots of episodes you'll sort of take it away and deliver the reported parts ...

John Biewen: Except for a few episodes that'll be reported by other people.

Celeste Headlee: Right. And then you and I will reconvene at the end to talk things through.

John Biewen: You pitched in ideas that have shaped my reporting, and our conversations will be crucial to what we're trying to do here. Sort of like Chenjerai Kumanyika was here to check my work as a white dude looking at whiteness, you'll keep me honest as a man looking at men.

Celeste Headlee: Trust me, I will do that.

John Biewen: I have total faith.

[MUSIC]

Celeste Headlee: So. Welcome to MEN, everybody. Let's get into it.

John Biewen: And let's start by going back, a little before the #MeToo movement caught fire. Well, thousands of years before.

Celeste Headlee: Have men always been in the driver's seat? Or did they seize the upper hand with respect to women after a more egalitarian time in early human history?

[BREAK]

Archival TV clip, Fred Flintstone: Wilma!

Wilma Flintstone: (Startled scream) Hi Fred!

Fred: What's the idea being on television instead of being here making dinner. How many times have I told you a woman's place is in the home!

[**Sound:** Cars, shopping cart wheels...]

John Biewen: Okay I'd say this is a representative spot in Anytown, USA. Durham, North Carolina. Strip mall. Best Buy over there, Walmart here....

John Biewen: My name's John, I'm working on a podcast. If you think about sort of men being in charge, how do you think we got that system in the first place?

Man #1: Going back back back?

John Biewen: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Man #1: I mean, the obvious answer would be back to the hunter-gatherers. To when men were out being providing, being the provider, if you will.

Woman #1: I would imagine because of strength, maybe?

John Biewen: Physical strength?

Woman #1: Yeah, physical strength.

Woman #2: Well, I would have to go back way before Christ. Why? Because god created man first. So man was in control.

John Biewen: So that was the way it was intended?

Woman: That was the way it was intended. Uh-huh.

Man #2: Well I think it goes back to the cave man days. I mean, you know, who ruled the cave? The man.

John Biewen: Really?

Man #2: As far as I know. (Laughter)

[Music]

Celeste Headlee: There are some common assumptions we make about how men got the upper hand. Not surprisingly, the actual evidence tells a more complicated story. So John, you spoke with a few scholars who've worked in this area for decades. Tell us what you learned and I'll see you on the other side.

John Biewen: All right. Meet Meg Conkey.

Meg Conkey: Sure, yeah.

John Biewen: She spent almost half a century doing archaeology, much of it in the French Pyrenees -- yes, looking at those ancient cave paintings but also digging up stuff out in the open, not in caves.

Meg Conkey: I didn't like this concept of the Cave Man. It sort of rubbed me the wrong way in terms of, as if our past was all these men dragging women around by the hair. And I also realized, archaeologically, a lot of the time they actually didn't live in caves.

So the whole idea of a *cave man*, and then of course its extension, the sort of inner caveman that some men feel they need to express, sort of bothered me and I thought okay I've got to go back to some of the basics, and let's just see...

John Biewen: Conkey's a professor emerita of Anthropology at California Berkeley. Her publications include a book called *Engendering Archaeology*. She's a leader in applying a feminist critique to the study of prehistory, or what she prefers to call deep time.

Meg Conkey: My research is about the people who lived during the Ice Age, that is around 15-20,000 years ago.

John Biewen: Think about the words we use to talk about deep human history: The Stone Age...

Meg Conkey: Bronze Age, the Iron Age....

John Biewen: Conkey says this way of carving up time started a few hundred years ago, with the people who first did what would eventually be called archaeology.

Meg Conkey: It was decided that there might have been several different quote-unquote Ages of Man. Of course they were the ages of *man*, and they were all technologically based. So we have the Paleolithic, which is *paleo* meaning really old and *lithic* referring to stone....

John Biewen: Conkey notes that archaeology got going at a time of industrial and technological advances, so it's not too surprising that those early researchers thought in those terms when looking at the past. Besides, tools of stone and metal are tangible – you can dig them up and hold them in your hands.

Meg Conkey: They actually can measure them and organize them into little categories, so I can see why it happens. But it also is clearly, as we know from any classification system, it tells you as much about the organizers as it does about the people that you're trying to organize.

John Biewen: I asked, rhetorically, about those organizers.

John Biewen: Who has it been, through most of the history of your field?

Meg Conkey: Oh, these are all men of course. (Laughs.) You know these, many of them upper class, elite men....

John Biewen: So archaeologists categorized people by the tools they used, but Conkey says they didn't try very hard to tease out the social structures of early human societies, until just the last few decades. What traditional researchers did do was to make assumptions about men's and women's roles, projecting their 19th or 20th century societies back into prehistory. So they declared there was a strict division of labor: men did the hunting, women the gathering. Men were the tool makers, women the child rearers. And of course, from the Dawn of Man, as people used to say, men were in charge.

Mel Konner: Now, anthropologists talk about public and private spaces that exist in a lot of societies, and....

John Biewen: That's Mel Konner. He's a professor of anthropology and neuroscience at Emory University, and author of a book we'll hear more about. It's called *Women After All: Sex, Evolution, and the End of Male Supremacy*. About those public and private spaces: On one hand, the public: the workplace, governing councils and the like – places dominated by men in most recent cultures, including ours. And private space: the home, the domain of women. Mel Konner spent a couple of years studying the

Bushman people of northern Botswana. He says in that culture's small tribal bands, there is no division between the public and the private.

Mel Konner: The men that I knew, the hunting and gathering men that I knew, would probably exclude women if they could. (Laughs.) I'm not saying that they have this wonderfully egalitarian ideology. I'm just saying that the conditions of life make it ridiculous if not impossible to exclude half the adult population from decision making when they're contributing half the food and they're also smart. (Laughs.) They have good things to say in those conversations around the fire.

[Music]

John Biewen: Konner and other scholars think that's how decisions got made in *ancient* hunting and gathering cultures, too: collectively. Often, yes, around the fire. Meg Conkey says old-school anthropologists were probably right that in deep history, men did more hunting than women – though more recent findings indicate women also helped with some forms of hunting. Still, in a lot of ancient cultures, women likely were the main providers of food, day to day, as plant gatherers.

Meg Conkey: In many hunting and gathering cultures in more tropical environments, they mostly eat plants because, you know, it's hard work to go out and hunt a giraffe or something like that. The whole idea of killing a mammoth, was probably something that happened once every couple of generations and then they talked about it the whole rest of the time. So... (Laughs.)

John Biewen: And did cave art about it, right?

John Biewen: To take one more example of rewriting anthropology's early narratives: Tool making. Those wondrous stone and metal artifacts that gave the Ages of Man their names. The *men* of deep history carved and forged those tools, right? Well.

Meg Conkey: We know from ethnographic and ethno-archaeological and ethnohistoric accounts, women were the primary butchers. Arctic society women and even the women in North America during the same time period, of the so-called Pleistocene, they were making and using and refining their own butchering tools. So the whole idea that only men make stone tools: What is somebody, a woman, going to do, sit around and wait till somebody comes back from five days on the hunt before making a tool? (Laughs) I'm sure it was shared knowledge that they all needed to have to get on in the world.

Mel Konner: The hunting and gathering peoples that were our ancestors, and that were the only humans on the planet for hundreds of thousands of years, generally had, I wouldn't argue a completely egalitarian kind of society, but considerably more egalitarian than what we've had for the last, let's say, ten or twelve thousand years, which to an anthropologist is not that long.

John Biewen: What happened ten or twelve thousand years ago? Those nomadic or seminomadic humans started settling down and farming. Some accumulated property. They formed villages, then bigger societies. Mel Konner.

Mel Konner: And then, with an increase in population density you have specialized warriors, a specialized priesthood, specialized merchant class, noble class. I actually refer to them in the book as male conspiracies to exclude women from the public spaces. And the difference between public and private spaces arises for the first time, and you have the option to relegate women to the private space of the home. And that really happens for the first time in that type of society.

John Biewen: So, most scholars now think male supremacy is new – well, a mere ten millennia old – in a species that's been around roughly twenty times longer than that. That would suggest patriarchy is not a necessary, baked-in feature of human society. Oh, and Meg Conkey says, the old cave man narrative didn't just oversimplify the *roles* of men and women in deep time.

Meg Conkey: It's also a problem in thinking that there were only men and only women.

John Biewen: More recent archaeology has found signs that some ancient cultures recognized more than two genders. Of course, so have some Native American tribes.

Meg Conkey: And there are ritual specialists, people who move in and out of different gender categories depending on what they're doing. Among the Chumash Native American group here in Southern California, they had long documented that there's a whole group of people who are in charge of burying the dead. And to bury the dead you can't just be an ordinary man or an ordinary woman, you have to be a somebody else.

[Music]

John Biewen: So, Celeste, there's a pretty broad consensus among scholars that the invention of agriculture and of more settled, specialized societies created an opportunity for men.

Celeste Headlee: They pushed for these more distinct gender roles, and seized for themselves the roles that carried most of the power. Especially political and economic power.

John Biewen: We're gonna hear more of that history in later episodes. And of course we'll look at how women have pushed back, with some real but limited success, in the last couple of centuries. But before we leave deep time, I had one more question for Meg Conkey and Mel Konner, and that was, *why* did the patriarchy happen?

Celeste Headlee: You mean, what was the motive. Why did the men of ten thousand years ago *want* to seize the upper hand at the expense of the women in their lives?

John Biewen: Yeah. I mean, what a dick move.

Celeste Headlee: That's dick move you've all been making ever since.

John Biewen: And here's how Meg Conkey answered the why question.

Meg Conkey: Some people will argue that men need to tell themselves, or want to be in charge, because they are left out of the whole reproductive process, really, in terms of being the one that can create life. And even if people are informed that it can't happen without their sperm, nonetheless it's a huge cultural difference. And in many societies the creation and perpetuation of life is a really big deal. Right?

John Biewen: So guys have insecure egos because of this amazing thing that women can do that they can't do, that we can't do.

Meg Conkey: And then the....

John Biewen: So that makes us want to run for Congress.

Meg Conkey: (Laughs.) Right. And then you think you can control women's bodies by, you know, endorsing anti-abortion laws. Anyway, um,...

Mel Konner: Margaret Meade came up with this concept of womb envy as an answer to Freud's concept of penis envy. And I so think that is a much better concept. Penis envy seems kind of ridiculous to me.

Celeste Headlee, whispering: Me too.

John Biewen: (Laughs)

John Biewen: But even though Mel Konner thinks womb envy is real, he says there's a simpler reason men built the gender hierarchy and put themselves in the top spot.

Mel Konner: The most basic explanation for why male supremacy appeared after the rise of agriculture was that, that it was possible. Men controlled women, as well as oppressed them, because they could.

[Music]

Celeste Headlee: And so, it's about power, really.

John Biewen: Right? And scholars say, after patriarchy developed with the first societies to settle down and farm, those cultures became the first colonial powers, and they spread systems of patriarchy to the places they colonized.

Celeste Headlee: I have a question, though, about this womb envy idea. In our society today, I don't really see a lot of reverence for motherhood, or fatherhood for that matter. The U.S. is practically alone among rich countries in not guaranteeing paid parental leave or help with early child care. We don't pay child care workers a living wage. There are rampant reports of pregnancy discrimination – women not getting jobs, or losing them, because they got pregnant. And really, even in terms of attitudes, do you really think the typical man in our society is in awe of women's ability to give birth? Or do most guys kind of see it as mundane, no big deal, something you're quite happy to leave to women?

John Biewen: I take your point. I don't think our society socializes us to truly hold motherhood in high esteem, except on Mother's Day.

Celeste Headlee: If that.

John Biewen: But there is evidence that – if we're talking about how we got this thing, you know maybe the original motives for patriarchy – there is evidence that that was different in at least some hunter-gatherer societies. Mel Konner told me about cultures

in which the husbands of pregnant women eat plants that make them constipated. So when the woman goes into labor, the dad goes out into the bush and struggles and strains to push out a heroic poop, and then he comes back and reports he gave birth to a stillborn baby.

Celeste Headlee: Wow.

John Biewen: So that seems like some kind of indication those guys want in on the drama and the glory of childbirth. Maybe the equivalent in our culture is the high-class guy who points at his partner's pregnant belly and says, "Look what I did."

Celeste Headlee: I want to pick up on something else. Meg Conkey talked about controlling women's bodies. And that is really a huge part of what male supremacy is about for me. Men want access to women's bodies, and they want to control women's sexuality and our production of babies. Power and control. Isn't that another piece of the puzzle, at least as important as womb envy.

John Biewen: Well, here's how Mel Konner put it. He says a lot of what has happened in human history over the last ten thousand years is about men's desire to control uteruses. Let me bring in one more expert here: Lisa Wade, she's a sociologist at Occidental College in California.

Lisa Wade: So for example, controlling women's sexual behavior wasn't, there wasn't a lot of reason to do that when men weren't really interested in being able to pass down their stuff to their own biological child. If they didn't own a bunch of stuff, there was no real passing down to do, and from what we know, hunter gatherers – even if they understood the biology of reproduction, they didn't really prioritize biological fatherhood so much as understand that we are a big kin group and everyone is sort of helping each other raise all of these children which are *ours*, right?

John Biewen: But when people started accumulating stuff – land and other property – and men were building these patriarchal conspiracies, as Mel Konner put it, men decided it was important to know they'd be passing their property down to their biological children. Well, OK, their sons.

Celeste Headlee: And men started to think of women as property, too. Property they could trade, by way of marriage, for land or some other financial alliance with another patriarch. Property that could be damaged as an act of war. Property that had no more legal rights than a chair or a table.

[Music]

Celeste Headlee: All right. So here's my next question. From what you've told us so far, it kind of sounds arbitrary. As if men just happened to decide to build the patriarchy, and it could have gone the other way. As if women could just as well have taken the dominant position but you men beat us to it.

John Biewen: You sound skeptical.

Celeste Headlee: Well, I mean it's possible that maybe women behaved less aggressively because that's what they were socialized to do. But there's also this hormone called testosterone, you may have heard of it?

John Biewen: Mmmm.

Celeste Headlee: It has an impact on behavior. So maybe that has something to do with you men having decided to dominate and oppress us women when you got the chance. Maybe it's a tendency that you're born with.

John Biewen: Yeah. Are men socialized to be the way we are, or is it, at least in part, in our wiring? Our genes, brains, hormones?

Celeste Headlee: That's what I want to hear about next. The nature-nurture question. And I get it, it's not very easy to tease apart the cultural and biological.

John Biewen: But it is a great question and a huge one and a complicated one. So next time, in Part 2: To what extent are gender differences innate, or inevitable. Or is it all man-made?

[Music]

John Biewen: Music in this episode by Alex Weston. And by Evgueni & Sacha Galperine. Music and production help from Joe Augustine at Narrative Music. Like our Facebook page and follow us on Twitter. I'm @SceneonRadio.

Celeste Headlee: I'm @CelesteHeadlee, that's H-E-A-D, like the body part, L-E-E.

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