

now takes is in urgent need of some profound reconstruction, or at least critical reappraisal. This is not a matter of censorship, but of political priorities and strategies. Research and teaching on men and masculinity need a radical edge if it is not to become part of the problem rather than part of the solution. We would hope that these men will begin to apply the insights of socialist Paolo Friere (1970, pp. 34-5) to their own work on men and masculinity:

Discovering himself to be an oppressor may cause considerable anguish, but it does not necessarily lead to solidarity with the oppressed. Rationalizing his guilt through paternalistic treatment of the oppressed, all the while holding them fast in a position of dependence, will not do. Solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is in solidarity; it is a radical posture. True solidarity with the oppressed means fighting at their side to transform the objective reality.

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CHAPTER 15

Men, feminism and
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Feminism deeply challenges the ways that men are and the ways that men relate. It draws attention to the power men sustained in their relationships with women and shows that what liberalism conceived of as a relationship of equality with men and women operating in different spheres is in reality a relationship of power and subordination (see Seidler 1986). Recognizing this involves more than a change of attitude on the part of men towards women, for it becomes clear that it is not simply enough to think of someone as an equal with equal respect, but it also has to do with the organization of the relationship of power that exists between men and women in relationships. It is a material issue, though there has been considerable difference about how to conceptualize the nature and character of this materialism. Feminism seems to challenge too narrow an economic version of materialism but the extent to which feminism and feminist theory have allowed for a reformulation of Marxist conceptions of materialism is still very much an open issue.

If men have to change they have to do this for themselves, for they can no longer rely on women to 'pick up the pieces'. Men are left to explore and investigate the nature and character of their inherited forms of masculinity. The crucial point is that feminism does not simply present a theoretical challenge to the ways that men understand the world but it also presents a personal and practical challenge to who we are as men and how we relate as men both to ourselves and to others.

It was this personal challenge that men sought to meet in consciousness-raising groups, but often they were difficult situations because as men we were often so used to intellectualizing and rationalizing our experience, rather than sharing it. Sometimes these groups died after a few weeks when it was not clear what men were supposed to talk about. It was difficult for men to *share* their experience with other men because we have been brought up to treat other men as competitors in a way that makes it easy to feel that showing our vulnerability would only be used against us. It was not uncommon for many heterosexual men to say that they did not need consciousness-raising because they felt closer to women anyway, and did not find it difficult to talk to them. Often this would cover over a fear of sharing ourselves with men, a suspicion of men that had deep roots connected to homophobia and a fear of intimacy. This allowed men a certain identification with feminism while being able to disdain men who involved themselves in consciousness-raising. This allowed men to sustain a feeling of superiority in relationship to other men and also to avoid the charges of feminists who would say in the early days that consciousness-raising was simply another form of male bonding that could so easily lead to a reassertion of male power.

Rejecting masculinity

Another significant strain in the response of men to feminism has been a negation by men of their own masculinity. Masculinity was taken to be *essentially* oppressive to women and as being a structure of oppression. This touches something significant in sexual relationships, for it is a movement of denial that involves a self-rejection, often a loss of vitality and even sexuality. It is this response to feminism that was challenged in the writings of 'Achilles Heel',¹ that sought a reworking of masculinity as part of the project of men involved in consciousness-raising. In fact, this self-rejection is often because men have failed to explore the contradictions of their masculinity. Rather they have learnt that masculinity is essentially a relationship of power, so that you could only give up your power in relationship to women, and so no longer collude in women's oppression, if you were prepared to 'give up' your masculinity. This is a part of guilt and self-denial

that was not an uncommon male response to feminism. In the end it is self-destructive but nevertheless it has to be understood.

It has often meant that men, having often found no way through them, have given up these issues and concerns completely. In some cases this has possibly fuelled a kind of anti-feminist politics, a threat or fear that women are somehow out to take away men's potency, and this has fuelled the politics of the Right. The move towards a men's rights position has grown to enormous strengths in the United States, often being larger than any men's movement grouping. This is in part why it is so important to rework and rethink men's relationships to feminism.

It was an important part of the 'Achilles Heel' project in England to look for more affirming and positive visions of masculinity, and so to challenge some of the sources of guilt and self-denial that had sometimes been part of men's responses to feminism. This involves a personal and theoretical quest. It could also be that 'men's studies', as developed in the United States, is a move away from this difficult personal terrain and an attempt to deal theoretically, so that we will not need to deal more personally, with the challenges of feminism. This suspicion is partly fuelled by the strength of a positivist social science methodology within 'men's studies', which probably is related to the disciplinary strength of psychology and the ways that these issues can become 'topics' within a reworked social psychology. It is as if the claims of feminism, say, around issues of pornography, could be 'tested' so that we could know what the 'effects' of pornography are on men, whether it makes them more violent or not, and whether it influences the nature and character of their relationships with their partners. Women have grounds to be nervous about the testing of feminist claims within this kind of framework.

Of course there has to be a relationship between empirical research and feminist theory, but we have to be very careful about it. It is too easy given the struggle of social science methodologies to imagine that the causal claims can be 'neutrally tested' (see Harding 1986, Ramazanoglu 1989, Roberts 1981, Smith 1987, Stanley & Wise 1983). For what about the fact that we grow up as men within a culture that is deeply imbued with pornographic images? How does this affect us? And is this not the larger context in which these 'experiments' are taking place? At the same time it might be argued that men have to be able to set their own agendas and, if this is the

way they seek to investigate these issues, it has to be left to men to be responsible for the exploration of men and masculinity. But this raises questions and issues about the challenges that feminist theory makes to different forms of social science methodologies and the ways these are marginalized by claiming that they are only relevant in the exploration of women's experience, that will inevitably be troubling.

On the other hand, what about the radical feminist assumption 'that all men are potentially rapists'? What does this mean about the conception of masculinity that underpins some feminist theoretical work? Is this something that men can challenge? If men are seen as an ontological category fixed within a particular position within a 'hierarchy of powers', what space is left for men to explore their masculinity? This is a question that feminists may wish to take seriously. It is also raised for men who would consider themselves as 'male feminists'; or, in a different way, as 'pro-feminists'. A crucial question is who 'sets the agenda' for research on men and masculinity. These are difficult issues to resolve, for it is crucial to keep in mind that it has been the challenges of feminism that have made the dominant conceptions of masculinity problematic. In this sense men's studies has to have a close relationship to feminism, while the extent to which feminism can 'set the agenda' for all studies into men and masculinity remains unclear. It is not unusual these days for men to pay lip-service to feminism and to women's struggles in their opening paragraphs, only to go on to ignore the implications of these studies for the work that they are engaged in.

It needs to be taken seriously that many men have responded to feminism by internalizing a particular conception of their masculinity as 'the enemy'. Since this masculinity was said to be 'essentially' a position of power in relationship to women, there was little for men to do but to reject their masculinity. So it seemed that to identify with feminism and to respond to the challenges of feminist theory involved an abandonment of masculinity itself. Sometimes the analogy is made, which I think is misleading, with the position of whites in South Africa, the idea that the only way that whites could abandon their privilege was to identify completely with the black struggle. So analogously it could seem that there is no point for men to work with other men, for this would be to work with the 'oppressor' and the only thing that could be justified would be to 'give up' our position of oppression.

Here again there is a resonance with an orthodox Marxist frame of mind. Just as middle-class people could 'betray their class' and identify themselves with the struggles of working-class people against capitalistic oppression, so it seems as if men can be asked to forsake their masculinity. In part it is possible to change our class position and identify ourselves within a proletarian position, though there are difficulties with this vision of political struggle. This has often involved denial of our 'education' and of our understanding of how capitalist institutions crush and distort working class life and culture. But why does an identification with feminism have to involve a *rejection* of our masculinity? If we adopt a conception of masculinity which simply defines it as a relationship of power, or as the top place within a hierarchy of powers, then we are tempted into thinking that it is 'possible to abandon our masculinity'. Similarly if we conceive of 'heterosexuality' as simply a relationship of power that fixed straight men in a position of power and enforces the subordination of gay men and lesbians, then it can seem that 'heterosexuality' can equally simply be abandoned. This has often gone along with the idea of sexuality as being 'socially constructed', with the implication that it can equally be 'deconstructed' and different choices made. This fosters the view that sexual orientation is in the last analysis a matter of political choice. At another level this reconstructs a rationalistic project that assumes that our lives can be lived by reason alone and that through will and determination, as Kant has it, we can struggle against our inclinations, to live according to the pattern that we have set for ourselves through reason (Blum 1981, Seidler 1989).

These are difficult and complex questions and they need to be handled with care and sensitivity. It might be that heterosexuality is a structured institution and that it enforces the conception of 'normality' that is taken for granted within the culture. This establishes important relationships of power that marginalize and, with Section 28, work to criminalize the sexuality of gay men and lesbians. It has been crucial to understand sexuality not as a 'given' but as the outcome of a series of personal relationships, so bringing out the precarious character of all our sexualities. This is part of the importance of recognising 'differences'. But it is one thing to understand the institutional power of heterosexuality and another to think that sexual orientation is a matter of 'political choice'.

In part it has been our sharp dichotomy, inherited as a defining

feature of modernity and further inscribed within a structuralist tradition, between 'nature' and 'culture', that has fostered this way of thinking, as if 'culture', in opposition to 'nature', as an outcome of reason, is within our conscious control. This is one of the difficulties with the prevailing conceptions of 'social construction' deeply embedded within the human sciences, which help foster a form of rationalism that gives us the idea that our lives are within our rational control and that through will and determination alone we can determine our lives. It forms our vision of freedom and morality which within a Kantian tradition are identified with reason.

This is part of an Enlightenment rationalism and develops a particular vision of self-determination, as if we *should* be able to control our lives by reason alone. So we begin to think that to say that our sexuality is 'natural' is either to say that it has been 'given' or that it is somehow beyond our conscious control. But this is to create too sharp an opposition. Freud helps us understand the organization of our sexuality, how it has come to be what it is. He does not thereby think that it can be 'rationally reconstructed'. For Freud change comes through some form of *self-acceptance* of our sexual feelings and desires, even if these do not take the form that we would want or even that would be regarded as legitimate within the larger society. Rather than judging these feelings and desires by external standards, we learn to acknowledge them for what they are and we learn to suspend judgement. This is part of a psychoanalytic process. It is crucial for Freud that within a rationalistic culture we learn to judge and often condemn our feelings and emotions because they do not fit in with the ideals that we have set ourselves. Part of the originality of Freud, despite all the difficulties, is his break with the idealization of culture and his recognition of the importance of validating our experience for what it is.

Similarly we cannot simply *reject* our masculinity as if it is 'wrong' or 'bad', or 'essentially oppressive to women'. This is not to say that we cannot *change* the ways that we are. What is at issue is the model of change that we inherit within our culture, and in this respect Freud is critical of a Kantian-Protestant tradition that says that we can *cut out* or eradicate those parts of ourselves, of our feelings and desires, that we judge as wanting, as if reason provides some kind of neutral arbiter or legislator for determining what is to be regarded as *unacceptable* to us. This was also part of a 1960s

inheritance, that said that our anger or jealousy was 'unreasonable' and therefore unacceptable, and that therefore it should be eradicated. It was assumed that we could somehow cut our feelings of jealousy out and behave as if they did not exist at all. Jealousy was socially and historically constructed and so equally it could be reformulated according to our wills. If we insisted on our jealousy this just showed a failure of will and determination (see Seidler 1989, Ch. 3).

Such a Protestant tradition is still very much with us in the idea of 'mind over matter', in the idea that if you take your mind off what is troubling, then the feelings of despair or sadness will somehow disappear. Because we live in a secular culture we are often unaware of the Protestant sources of many of our ideas and values. Freud and psychoanalytic theory move against this aspect of our inherited culture. It was part of the project of 'Achilles Heel' to say that you could not *reject* your masculinity, but you could work to *redefine* it. We would work to change what we are by first accepting the nature of our emotions and feelings rather than judging ourselves too harshly. This is to come to terms with the self-critical voice which too often stands in the way of our changing.

Possibly it is because the culture puts such great force on the idea of 'self-rejection' that so few men have really taken up these issues. In part it is also up to a theoretical grasp of men and masculinity to reject the idea that men cannot change and to show the ways that men can change might be an important way of un-freezing the notions that make masculinities seem unredeemable. In working towards a transformed understanding of men and masculinity we have to recognise the injuries that were done by the idea that men should be guilty *as men*. At the same time we have to take responsibility for how under-developed the theoretical grasp of men and masculinity remains and how long it has taken for men to explore more openly and honestly their relationship to feminism.

Men, power, and feminism

If we think about the question of whether feminism is in men's interests we can say that clearly at one level it is not, in the sense that it is a challenge to the power men have to make the larger

society in their image. Liberal theory argues that men and women should have equal rights in society and to the extent to which women are denied these rights, the society is unequal and unjust. So it is that men have been able to support the claims of liberal feminism without having to bring into question the inherited forms of masculinity. The women's movement has gone further in its challenge to the power men have to make society in their own image. It also challenges the dominance of masculine values and aspirations which are largely taken for granted in the institutional organization of society. Feminism in its new phase presents a challenge to men's power in society and also to the sources of men's power in sustaining personal relationships. It is a challenge to the ways that both public life and private life are largely organized around the value of men's time and interests, so devaluing and failing to recognize, or giving equal value to, women's time, values and aspirations. So the women's movement has encouraged women to recognize how much they have been forced to give up in themselves in order to see themselves through the eyes of men. It recognizes the difficult tasks that women have of rediscovering their own values and relationships in the context of a patriarchal society.

So it is important to keep in view the ways that feminism remains a threat to the ways that men are, without thereby insisting that it is up to feminism to somehow set the agenda for the reworking of dominant forms of masculinity. In this context, it is quite common for men 'sympathetic' to feminism to find some kind of security in the ideas the feminism should be left to women to do, and that women should be given space to set down their ideas and projects free from the interferences of men. This is not an uncommon response but it fails to take account of the challenge that feminism presents to the prevailing forms of masculinities. Briefly, we learn to say 'the right thing' when we are around feminists; we feel that we are walking on thin ice and we learn to be careful. It is important to keep in view the ways that feminism remains a challenge to the character and organization of men's power in society, since this challenges the parallelism that can so easily be drawn when we talk about 'men's studies' in relationship to 'women's studies'. The idea that 'in the last analysis' or at some deeper level feminism is in fact in the interests of men, has to be handled with great care, for this too can foster a kind of parallelism,

where it is also possible for men to assimilate certain feminist insights which they can then use against women.

It also becomes possible to give deference to feminism and to talk about the power which men have within the larger society without fully grasping the power of sociology to co-opt a feminist challenge. Even though a 'men's studies' paradigm has challenged the pervasive influence of role theory, the idea that gender exists as a pre-existing set of expectations of what 'men' and 'women' are supposed to be and do in the larger society is very current. It is easy, and the literature shows it, to fall back into a much more refined form of role theory, which allows for greater flexibility in gender expectation but loses a grip on issues of power and subordination, because this is such a dominant paradigm within psychology and the human sciences generally. It is the methodology of the social sciences, largely unchallenged, which comes to provide the legitimacy for these areas of intellectual study. The critique that feminism can make of an Enlightenment tradition and the forms of social theory and methodology that have emerged from it, tends to get lost. An empirical sociology tends to take charge and begins to set the terms in which 'gender studies' are to prove themselves as valid and legitimate.

A different approach to power is provided by recent developments in post-structuralist theory. Here we have a vision of power as all-pervasive, that can undermine our sense of the nature of interpersonal power. This insight into the pervasiveness of power can be used to question whether it is right to say that men have power in relationship to women, because it can be argued that both 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are interpolated within a particular relationship of power. This could be another support for a kind of parallelism being set up between men's studies and women's studies, because both genders are embedded or organized within particular relationships of power. We are offered the notion of identity as being articulated through particular relationships of discourses of power. This is the way that the notion of 'social construction' is conceived within a post-structuralist framework. It rejects the idea of power as a thing-like 'commodity' that some people have over others for it wants to insist that the pervasiveness of power means that all identities are articulated with particular discourses of power. In part this accounts for the difficulties which Foucault (e.g. 1976) has in illuminating gender relationships of

power. In this sense the influence of Foucault's work has tended to subvert some crucial insights into the relationship between power, identity and experience.

On the other hand, part of what is appealing in this move is that it brings out into the open the idea that men are not all-powerful in all spheres of their lives and that women are not always completely powerless or subordinate. It helps challenge the pervasive picture of a hierarchy of powers with white men sitting on the top of the pile. But this means listening to the experience of men and taking seriously the terms in which they present themselves. A structuralist framework undermines its own insight into the complexity of power by seeing experience as itself the outcome or product of particular discourses. The dialectic that exists between experience and identity and the continuous struggle that people are involved in, in trying to clarify their needs and desires, gets lost. The complexities and tensions of experience are lost as they are presented as the effects of language.

Nevertheless, the picture of the 'hierarchy of powers' so easily places woman in a position of victim, as being subordinated and oppressed, and so denies her her own activity and power to shape her own history. At one level a similar problematic can be identified within post-structuralist theory because it assumes that subjects or identities are the products or results of discourses. It tends to present people as passive. The vision of people as victims has a powerful hold within different traditions of social theory. Sometimes the theory can be part of the problem, for it can place, for instance, women in a position of subordination and powerlessness that seems impossible to break. It can create its own forms of dependency and submissiveness and it can stand in the way of women being able to empower themselves. In this sense, structuralism has found a way of talking about identities, but it has been difficult to identify the ways in which it sustains a particular form of rationalistic theory. It sees identities as being provided externally and thereby tends to reinforce a vision of women as being passive. We are back to the idea that the powerless have to be rescued or that there has to be some kind of external intervention, by the state say, to save them. Even if this process of identity formation is seen as an ongoing active process within certain post-structuralist writings, it is difficult to make sense of this because experience itself is taken to be a product of discourse.

It was an insight of the early women's movement to stress the self-activity of women and to focus on the ways that women can retain power in their lives. But this vision remains theoretically in tension with a vision that draws on the 'hierarchy of powers', as well as with a more general structuralist/post-structuralist tradition, as if we have to work for the whole structure to be turned upside down before there is going to be any movement.

Men, power, and social theory

As already noted, the dominant paradigm in much academic work on men and masculinity has in fact been provided within a revised and flexible form of social psychology. A competing conception has been provided by sociology whereby social theory has begun to talk of the social construction of masculinity, whether positivist, structuralist or post-structuralist, to point out that masculinity is not simply given or provided for by biology but is sometimes constructed within particular social relationships. Both conceptions can operate within a particular social science methodology. They can both present themselves as being 'objective' and 'impartial'. Crucially they avoid issues of method that have been acutely raised within feminist theory. It might be useful to set out some of the issues which this 'gender perspective' framework, as it is often called, tends to avoid. This begins to set the ground for a different kind of exploration of men and masculinity, which is more sensitive to historical and philosophical sources.

First, these theories avoid the tension between the experience that men have of themselves and the way they are supposed to be within the dominant culture. If they illuminate the pain and confusion that are often felt, this is put down as transitional, as part of the movement from one social role to a newly defined and more flexible social role. Second, by talking about this tension in terms of 'social construction', we undermine people's trust in their own experience, in the ways that they might come to define what they want for themselves both individually and collectively.

Third, it displaces the issue of *responsibility*, for the role, like the construction, is provided for me 'by society'. It is not anything that I can help, nor is it anything that I can be held individually responsible for. This is important for men because it is important

for men to learn to take responsibility for a masculinity that is so often rendered invisible. It is also important for men to think about the dominant position of masculinity. Responsibility might well turn out to be a crucial issue for men, especially in relationships, for it can be seen that, even though men are 'responsible' in the public world of work where it can be a matter of following established rules and procedures, often in relationships men can be controlling, constantly finding fault with what their partners are doing, and feeling somehow estranged or outside of the relationship.

Fourth, these conceptions of masculinity make no sense of the contradictions within men's experience. For instance, there is little sense that it is because men identify with their reason, because of the Enlightenment identification between masculinity and reason, that they are thereby estranged from their emotions and feelings. This is systematically organized and structured. It is a matter of the way a particular dominant form of masculinity and male identity is organized. So this sets up a particular tension between what men grow up to want for themselves, for example, to do well at work, to be successful, to achieve, and their feelings for what matters most to them in their lives.

In the light of these complications, one way forward might be that we have to take more seriously the idea of sexual politics, particularly the idea that the 'personal is political', as the basis for a renewed conception of the dialectic between experience, identity and history, or of a reformulated historical materialism. Feminists have long recognized that there is no way of squaring the contradiction whereby women have struggled for an autonomy and independence which are being constantly challenged and negated within the larger society. This is a contradiction that women have learnt to live with, recognizing the importance of the support they can receive from others. In this sense it is no different from men who are struggling to change the patterns of behaviour that have been institutionalized. In both contexts we have to recognize the importance of a social movement for change, as part of a redefinition of values and relationships, so that 'the micro' and 'the macro' have to be brought into relationship. They cannot be separated off as independent levels of analysis as is often done within the human sciences.

So as men change it will have to be part of a movement for change which will transform the organization of institutional

powers and the forms of personal relationships. So it is that the 'micro' cannot be separated from the 'macro', nor can they be reduced to one another. This is an important feminist insight that men are in danger of losing if they take their theoretical starting point not from within sexual politics or from within a developing male sexual politics but from within the established social scientific frameworks. It is understandable that this temptation will be strong because the movements for change have been relatively weak for men, understandably so because men have been so closely identified with prevailing relationships of power, dominance and authority. This also serves as a warning against thinking that the 'speculative claims' of feminist theory can somehow be tested against the causal claims that they seem to be making, say, in the case of the effects of pornography on men's values and behaviour. This would be for men to take the high ground of a refined positivist methodology, thinking that this is neutral and provides a secure base from which feminist claims can be evaluated.

If this temptation is to be resisted it will be because men have learnt their own complicity with the dominant forms of social theory. They have learnt to question the universality of these theories and methods, recognizing the masculinist assumptions which they carry. They are set within a rationalist framework that recognizes reason as the only source of knowledge and invalidates feelings and desires as being legitimate sources of understanding, insight and knowledge. It is a constant danger for new areas of studies, whether it be women's studies or men's studies, somehow to seek legitimacy in terms of the prevailing paradigms of scientific investigation. This is a tendency to be watched because it can easily lead to losing the crucial power and value of feminist insight.

But this is not to say that a sexual politics of masculinity will not yield new questions that might challenge some of the notions of some feminist methodologies. A study of men and masculinity will yield its own methodological concerns. These questions will not always lie within feminist theory, nor can we say in advance what they might be. They cannot necessarily be judged according to pre-existing feminist standards but if they are firmly grounded they will deepen our understanding of the sources of women's oppression and subordination. They will also illuminate the conditions and possibilities of changing conceptions of masculinity, if not also the conditions for the liberation of men.

Notes

This commentary is an extract from a much longer paper entitled, 'Men, feminism and social theory', part of a forthcoming text on masculinity and social theory. The full paper includes the discussion of several other questions, including the historical relationship of men and feminism, men's studies, and the 'hierarchy of powers'. Many of these thoughts were stimulated by discussions that were going throughout the conference. That it provoked such excitement and opposition can only be a tribute to the occasion and to the sense of lively exploration it helped create.

- 1 Achilles Heel is a men's publishing collective which produced the journal of the same name from 1977 to 1983, and again in 1987, as well as a number of pamphlets. While the political position of the collective developed over this time, it was broadly concerned with the relationship between men's sexual politics and socialism (see Achilles Heel Collective 1978, and Morrison 1980). I was a member from 1977 to 1983. The journal was relaunched in 1990.

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