

The Unanswered Call

Feminism, Masculinism, and the deconstruction of Gender

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I asked my partner for a statement about Feminism to help me jumpstart my writing process and she looked at me and said, “all men are stupid”. I told her that if she kept talking like that I was going to have to cry, and she amended it to “all men are stupid, except for you.” It was intended as a joke and the exchange was friendly, but it reveals something about the way feminism is perceived in our culture as inherently antimale.

The severe shortage of male feminist writers might at first glance seem to support this view, but it was not always the case – Frederick Douglass and John Stuart Mills were both very influential in the early feminist movement, for example. Attempts to define feminism as anti-male (as opposed to pro-female or pro-equality) should give us pause, at least partially because they demand that we stop and define what Feminism actually is.

In a nutshell, the problem we will examine is that by framing the issue as ‘ending oppression of women by men’¹ instead of ‘ending gender-based oppression,’² much (but fortunately not all) feminist theory has thus far failed to recognize gender-based oppression against men and the linkages between that oppression and the oppression of women. This is important for a variety of reasons, of which we only have the time and space to address a few.

First, we must examine what exactly being a man or being masculine means in our culture and why exactly it is problematic and worth discussing. Secondly, we will look at a very few of the ways in which unrealistic gender roles for men *and* women reinforce and support each other, something that might seem obvious but has attracted surprisingly little serious study. Third, we will test our new masculinist analysis by using it to look at a few issues related to sexual assault and rape. Fourth and (for our purposes at least) finally, we will look at why these issues have remained fundamentally un-addressed for so long and argue that we must begin to seriously address them if we want to win men over to supporting feminism on a large scale.³ There are a host of other issues as well, and perhaps at some point in the future we can explore them more fully, but for now we will circumscribe our analysis to these three.

¹ Wikipedia.org: Radical Feminism. en.wikipedia.org. Accessed Nov. 25th, 2005.

² Greig, Alan. Ending Men’s Violence: Working Paper Series. United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women. www.uninstraw.org. Accessed November 29, 2005.

³ Since one-thing humans generally do not do is embrace things that they see as running counter to their own self-interests. Refer to the discussion of Self-Interest in my paper on Anarchism and International Relations, posted at library.circlealpha.com, for more detail on this.

Our thesis is that it is essential for feminists – male and female – to expand their (our) analysis to comprehensively examine men’s issues, and that since the major obstacle to women’s emancipation is the perseverance of restrictive and oppressive gender roles (be they at home, in the workplace, or in politics) it is and will remain impossible to accomplish the goal of women’s liberation without simultaneously achieving men’s liberation as well. What that liberation may entail is a matter of open debate, and it is clearly out of the scope of this paper to attempt to define it. What we can do, however, is show clearly that ‘male’ and ‘female’ issues are so tightly intertwined as to be inseparable and that attempts to deal with one without the other are doomed to failure.

The failure to recognize the possibility of a masculine analogue to feminism (“masculinism” perhaps?) has some truly disastrous results, for men and women both, since male and female dichotomies reinforce each other. The idealized strong “manly man” (who is impervious to pain, never cries, despises weakness, earns a large enough income that *his* woman does not need to work, and will gladly sacrifice himself for some “greater good”⁴) is as old as chivalry and is the perfect counterpart to the delicate emotional maiden (who stays at home cooking and cleaning, never worries her pretty little head about politics, and relies on her man to bring home the bacon and protect her). Both archetypes are unrealistic and oppressive and reflect the same idealized (upper class⁵) relationship between men and women, neither can exist without the other and neither can be abolished without the other since each creates the other. As evidence, after over a century of feminism, women continue to do the majority of care-taking and childrearing labor and feminist demands that men participate in these activities more equitably will continue to be largely unsuccessful as long as such work is portrayed as unmasculine and men are expected to work longer hours in more dangerous conditions than women.⁶

The implications of these archetypes go far beyond housework, however, and affect many aspects of our lives. Men are taught from a very young age that they cannot cry, cannot show weakness, and cannot be vulnerable, the recent case of a Father who ‘accidentally’ killed his four year old son while trying to “toughen him up” by beating him⁷ is an extreme case but is by no means unusual. Male children in abusive homes will frequently place themselves directly in the path of abuse in order to “defend” their mothers and sisters⁸ and only slightly less likely to be subjected to sexual abuse – a fact which we will explore in much greater detail later. At the less extreme end of the spectrum, statistics indicate that boys are much less likely than girls to receive

⁴ This image is the single constant ideal whether one is looking at rappers like 50 Cent or the Marlboro Man, and transcends race and class.

⁵ Mac-Canty, Colleen Third Wave Feminism and the Need to Re-weave the Nature/Culture Duality. NWSA Journal, 2004. archived online at muse.jhu.edu. Accessed Dec. 1, 2005.

⁶ Interestingly, a recent survey shows that while women do an average of 27 hours of unpaid housework a week compared to 16 by men, men employed full-time work an average of 14 hours a week more than women employed full time. (Sacks, Glen. New Survey Shows men do fair share of house work. www.glennsacks.com. Accessed Dec. 5, 2005.)

⁷ Montgomery, Ben. “Dad Boxed with 3 year old, mom says in Murder trial.” Tampa Bay Tribune. July 13, 2005.

⁸ I don’t have an academic source for this, but since, as they say, the plural of “Anecdotes” is “evidence” I feel like the claim can rest on its own since I know quite a few men – including my own father – who grew up in abusive homes and engaged in this type of behavior in a desperate attempt to “protect” their mothers and younger siblings from abusive fathers. The influence of masculine programming that teaches men to sacrifice their own health and safety to defend others could not be more clear. That programming is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is relevant to the argument we are making.

“positive physical contact”⁹, and boys are taught from a very early age that crying and showing “weakness” are unacceptable.¹⁰ This has direct negative implications, not the least of which is that men live an average of 7–8 years less than women,¹¹ at least partly because the cultural refusal to acknowledge pain or discomfort makes men much less likely to seek and receive necessary medical care.¹² Taken to a systemic level, we find a society that systematically desensitizes its men, renders them incapable of acknowledging their own weakness and pain, and teaches them to perceive external displays of emotion as signs of weakness and inferiority. Little wonder then that so many men would continue to perceive women, who are after all taught *to* display their emotions,¹³ as inferior. To take an extreme example, in mainstream rap music the term “bitch” is applied with equal ferocity to “weak” men, homosexuals, and women; with little differentiation between the three. This is a useful analogy since, as many of hip hop’s more “conscious” artists have argued, rap is no more or less sexist or homophobic than mainstream America, it is just more blunt.

A tangentially related issue is the perception of what is “woman’s work” and what is “mans work” Statistically, women still do a disproportionate amount of unpaid reproductive labor; things like raising children, cleaning the house, and other non-market forms of labor which do not have a currency value and are thus not perceived as “work” in our culture – something feminists organizing around welfare issues have long pointed towards as problematic.¹⁴ The evidence would seem to suggest that, while men are doing a larger share of such labor, they are nowhere near parity with their female peers and don’t appear likely to converge any time soon. Conversely, men are much more likely to work longer hours (as shown earlier) and find employment in high-stress, dangerous, or physically demanding fields – from construction to the military. While the number of women employed in such fields has grown significantly since the 1960’s, it is still nowhere near reaching parity with men and – again – does not appear likely to converge any time soon.¹⁵ In other words, it is not ‘manly’ to change diapers and it is ‘manly’ to be a soldier, a laborer, or an executive – a fact that should surprise no one. To put it differently, women are taught to care for their families by performing unpaid reproductive labor and men are taught to do so by exposing themselves to personal risk and physical hardship. Whether that is a working class man working a dangerous construction job or the highly paid executive working a 60+ hour week and giving himself ulcers it comes down to the same phenomenon. Bias against men as homemaker/caregivers even extends into our legal system. Women are far more likely than men to be awarded primary custody of children in the event of a divorce, even

⁹ Bohmer, Diane. “Raising a happy boy, an interview with Dr. William Pollock.” FamilyEducation.com. www.familyeducation.com. Accessed Dec. 5, 2005.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Census.gov. Women’s History Month: March 1–31. www.census.gov-Release/www/releases/archives/facts_for_features/000781.html. Accessed Dec. 1, 2005.

¹² Men’s Health Forum.org. “Men Tell us Why they Don’t go to the Doctor’s.” www.menshealthforum.org.uk. Accessed Dec. 1, 2005.

¹³ R. Kelly, Janice and L. Hutson, Sarah. “Gender-Emotion Stereotypes are context-specific.” *Sex Roles: A Journal Of Research*. January, 1999.

¹⁴ The “Wages For Housework Campaign”, along with many other Radical Feminists and Black Feminists, has been particularly vocal about this issue for over 30 years. Rather than cite a single publication, it seems to me that readers would gain stronger insight on the issue by simply visiting their website (www.globalwomenstrike.net) and looking at their work in context.

¹⁵ Hirshman, Linda. “America’s Stay-at-home Feminists.” *The American Prospect*. November 24th, 2005. Archived online at Alternet.org: www.alternet.org. Accessed November 28th, 2005.

when there is no evidence of wrongdoing by the father.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the US military refuses to allow female soldiers to do combat duty. Each side of the dichotomy reinforces the other, and we must address both sides if we are serious about creating equality.

Rape and sexual assault are another major set of issues of concern to feminists that could benefit from the inclusion of a ‘masculinist’ analysis. The ongoing crisis-levels of rape and sexual abuse in America have rightly concerned and outraged feminists for years. Unfortunately, that outrage has thus far been fairly one-sided and men have consistently been portrayed as the villains, ignoring the fact that men are almost as likely as women to become victims of sexual assault. 1 in 4 American women will be raped or sexually assaulted before she reaches 18 years old¹⁷ – a fact that feminists rightly point to as an indicator of a society that abuses women. What is forgotten is that 1 in 6 American men suffer the same fate,¹⁸ and that while there are hundreds of hotlines, help centers, and support groups for female victims of sexual assault, there are far fewer that welcome men.

To some degree this is the result of the male archetype discussed earlier – men are not allowed to show weakness or acknowledge pain in our culture, a fact that prevents them from seeking help and results in virtual silence about issues of sexual assault against them.¹⁹ This is at least partly due to the pop-culture representation of men as “animals” who cannot say no to sex – the flippant phrase “you can’t rape the willing”, hides the horrific fact that even if a boy is *not* a willing party to sexual advances by an older woman, he cannot admit that he is or was unwilling since doing so would undermine his masculinity. Such assaults thus go almost completely unreported.²⁰ The rape of young boys by men is likewise underreported (though not by nearly as wide a margin), Admitting that one was sexually assaulted by a man can have an even more traumatic effect because in our homophobic culture male victims of sexual assault and abuse perpetrated by men are likely to have their own sexuality questioned.²¹ Taken as a whole, this phenomenon has horrific implications not only for the men themselves, but for future generations since the many of the perpetrators of such crimes have themselves been victims.²²

The virtual silence in our culture regarding sexual assault against men also has very disturbing racial implications since there are uncounted thousands of cases of prison rape every year,²³ 62% of America’s prison population is Black or Latino,²⁴ and in some states 1 in 10 black men is in jail.²⁵ The fact that America sends so many low-income minority men to what amounts to modern gulags wherein they are systematically dehumanized and raped says quite a bit about our cultures attitudes towards non-white masculinity. Again, there are no support groups, no hotlines, and little or no social recognition that prison rape is even a problem or an issue worth

¹⁶ H. Greenfield, Mace. “Gender Bias Persists in Courts.” Divorcenet.com. Nov. 14th, 2005. www.divorcenet.com. Accessed December 8th, 2005.

¹⁷ Race and Sexual Abuse Center: Statistics. www.rasac.org. Accessed Dec. 1, 2005.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ It also results in men being much less likely to seek medical attention of all kinds, and is one reason why men typically die younger than women.

²⁰ RapeVictimAdvocates.org: Children and Sexual Assault. www.rapevictimadvocates.org. Accessed Dec. 2, 2005.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Malesurvivor.org: Myths about Male Sexual Victimization. www.malesurvivor.org. Accessed Dec. 5, 2005.

²³ Human Rights Watch.org. No Escape: Male Rape in US Prisons. www.hrw.org. Accessed Dec. 1, 2005.

²⁴ HumanRightsWatch.org: US Incarceration Rates reveal Striking Racial Disparities. hrw.org. Accessed Dec. 1, 2005.

²⁵ Ibid.

discussing; and is largely absent from discussions of Rape and Sexual assault. Such deafening silence is tantamount to complicity, and we cannot allow this silence to continue.

The common (mis)perception that feminism emasculates men by undermining their traditional roles is another manifestation of this same dichotomy. Essentially, the argument is that by encouraging women to take over Men's traditional roles, Feminism has unacceptably encroached upon and eroded what it means to be a man in our society, and assumes as its basic precursor that these gender role dualities are the result of "nature", not "nurture". In order to adequately address these issues it is necessary to construct new definitions of masculinity and femininity. There are a wide range of possible reasons why feminism has thus far failed to substantially address these issues, not the least of which is the fact that — even considering the points raised here — women have historically been much more dramatically and visibly disempowered than men. One could hardly expect early feminists to have addressed these issues — they were far too busy trying to deal with their own oppression to worry about liberating men as well, especially when so many men opposed their efforts. The question then arises as to why — if the situation is really so bad — men have not stepped up to the metaphorical plate and taken action on their own behalf. The answer, or so it seems to this author, is that since an integral part of masculinity in our culture is the refusal to acknowledge pain or discomfort, men who raise these issues risk being portrayed as un-masculine *effeminate* whiners — in much the same way feminists have been (and to some degree still are) depicted as un-feminine. The threat of loss of prestige and peer-group respect is a powerful motivation for men to keep their mouths shut. Ironically, the problem seems particularly acute among self-described "radicals", attempts on my part to organize mens groups to discuss these issues within the context of both anarchist and anti-globalization organizations have been consistently met with derision, by men and women both. The common perception is that gender oppression is a function of men oppressing women and that to suggest that gender norms in and of themselves are inherently dehumanizing is to distract from the more important work of combatting the oppression of women by men. If, however, the arguments presented here are compelling then such short-sighted refusal actually reinforces the problem.

At its core, the problem is one of identity; and is therefore more difficult to frame and address than traditional feminist demands for an end to discrimination since the culprit is not a system of legal discrimination but a set of cultural preconceptions. Activist tactics such as marches and protests are thus particularly unsuited for such a project. Addressing these issues will thus require a new type of movement, rooted in the experience and analysis of Feminism, but extending that analysis to explore a whole new range of issues and develop new tactics. The issue is beginning to reach a boiling point and has already spawned several different attempts to address the issue, from conservative groups like the Christian "Promise Keepers" which seek to deal with the crisis by reinforcing traditional gender roles to New-Age "men's groups" and drum circles.²⁶ At this point the question is not whether these issues will be addressed, but rather how and by whom, and who will benefit. Feminism has done quite a bit to destabilize "the west's" traditional gender system, the question at hand is whether our society (societies) will take advantage of that destabilization and the opportunity it presents to redefine our conceptions of gender, or if we will be caught up in reactionary conservative backlash aimed at reinforcing older "traditional" norms of behavior. While the results of any such projected movement are impossible to predict, what we can say

²⁶ Faludi, Susan. *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*. Harper Collins. New York, NY. 2000. I am summarizing the main argument of the book so citing specific pages would be pointless.

with certainty is that the ends reached will be largely determined by the ways in which the issues are framed.

To conclude: First of all, the status quo definitions of Masculinity and Male identity are clearly problematic and untenable since they require the systematic dehumanization of men and the devaluation of women. Secondly, the false dichotomies of gender identity are interlocked and mutually supportive. It is impossible to put to rest negative stereotypes of women and complete the dismantling of institutional barriers against them without doing the same for men since as long as our culture divides different types of labor into “men’s work” and “women’s work”, individuals attempting to cross that barrier will be subject to discrimination. Third and finally, dealing with these issues is critical from a moral standpoint since our failure to do so has allowed for patterns of systemic violence and sexual assault to continue unacknowledged and un-addressed. Continuing our current patterns of neglect is simply not a viable option, for us or for our children.

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