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“Changing men” and feminist politics in the United States

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In recent years, U.S. men have responded to – and at times initiated – changes in the personal and social relations of gender. There is an increasing cultural preoccupation with men’s roles as fathers.¹ Gay liberationists and anti-sexist men are confronting heterosexism and male domination in society,² while some academic men contribute to the feminist challenge to phallogocentric curricula.³ Meanwhile, born-again Christians are subtly re-defining women’s and men’s “god-given roles,”⁴ while conservative ministers hold popular seminars on “the meaning of manhood,”⁵ and angry men (mostly divorced fathers) organize for “men’s rights.”⁶ And as I write, Robert Bly’s book, *Iron John: A Book About Men*⁷ enjoyed over half a year on the national top ten best-sellers list.

Clearly, the question is not “Can men change?” or “Will men change?” Men *are* changing, but not in any singular manner, and not necessarily in the directions that feminist women would like. Some of these changes support feminism, some express a backlash against feminism, and others (such as Bly’s retreat to an idealized tribal mythology of male homosociality) appear to be attempts to avoid feminist issues altogether. One thing is clear: Although these changes by men are not all feminist, the growing concern with the “problem of masculinity” takes place within a social context that has been partially transformed by feminism. Like it or not, men today must deal, on some level, with gender as a problematic construct, rather than as a natural, taken-for-granted reality.⁸

Although men are currently changing in a multiplicity of directions, the popular – and to a great extent, social-scientific – view of contemporary masculinity in the United States is that we now have basically two types: the emergent emotionally-expressive New Man, who is

heavily involved in parenting, and the inexpressive, hypermasculine Traditional Man. One (very conventional and optimistic) view is that the New Man is the wave of the future, while the Traditional Man is an atavistic throwback. Another (radical feminist and pessimistic) view is that the New Man is more style than substance, that he is self-serving and no more egalitarian than the traditional man, and thus does not represent genuine feminist change.

Both of these views of changing men are overly simplistic, but they are understandable, especially in the United States, given our lack of a sophisticated theorization of masculinity. In this article, I draw from recent theoretical insights to examine some current expressions of U.S. masculinity that have received a great deal of attention in popular media. Two general questions guide my analysis: (1) How can we assess the meanings and significance of contemporary men's changes? and (2) To what extent do the dominant expressions of men's changes support a feminist project of social transformation?

Theorizing changing masculinities

Until very recently, even the best of U.S. theorization of masculinity has been uncritically predicated on a role theory that posits a traditional "male sex role" vs. an emergent "new" or "modern" masculinity.⁹ Though some U.S. feminists have criticized the limits of role theory,¹⁰ it is largely social theorists outside of the United States that have constructed a theory through which we can begin to assess the shifting meanings, styles, and structures of masculinity.¹¹ These theories make two points that represent a major break with role theory. First, masculinity and femininity are not fixed, static "roles" that individuals "have," but rather, they are dynamic relational processes. Masculinity and femininity are constantly re-constructing themselves in a context of unequal, but shifting, power relations. Second, there is no singular "masculine role." Rather, at any given time, there are a multiplicity of masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity – that form of masculinity that is currently ascendant and dominant – is constructed not only in relation to femininities, but also in relation to subordinated and marginalized masculinities.

My discussion below relies heavily on Lynne Segal's recent analysis of changing masculinities, aptly titled *Slow Motion*.¹² In taking power as the central dynamic in the construction of a multiplicity of gender identities

and relations, Segal avoids the simplistic and overly-optimistic “men’s liberationism” of the 1970s that viewed almost any changes by men as a sign that men were embracing feminism, and the pessimistic belief by many 1980s radical feminists that violence and domination are an expression of some natural male essence. Segal is realistic in that she recognizes the continued existence of men’s multi-level oppression of women. But she is optimistic in that she refuses to view this oppression ahistorically or as fixed in men’s and women’s biological essence. Instead, she insists on viewing men’s dominance and women’s subordination as a historically grounded relational system, in which women continually contest men’s power. Moreover, following Connell, she views masculinity and femininity not as singular, fixed, and dichotomous “sex roles,” but rather as contradictory and paradoxical categories, internally fissured by class, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and other systems of inequality. The facts that women often contest men’s power, and that some men oppress other men, create possibilities for change.

But how can we conceptualize “change”? In this article, I briefly examine three changes in U.S. masculinity that have received considerable attention in print journalism, television, and film: The New Fathering, the mythopoetic men’s movement, and the increase in the prevalence of highly successful men weeping in public. I argue that these phenomena represent highly significant (but exaggerated) shifts in the cultural and personal styles of hegemonic masculinity, but these changes do not necessarily contribute to the undermining of conventional structures of men’s power over women. Although “softer” and more “sensitive” styles of masculinity are developing among some privileged groups of men, this does not necessarily contribute to the emancipation of women; in fact, quite the contrary may be true.

New fathers and changing gender relations

In the early 1980s, Friedan announced the arrival of a “quiet revolution among men,” and Goode cited what he saw as a “grudging acceptance” by men of more egalitarian gender relations.¹³ Two interrelated phenomena fueled this optimism: First, public-opinion polls indicated that the majority of men were in favor of equal opportunities for women in public life, and increasing numbers of men – especially young men – expressed a desire for egalitarian relationships with women. And second, the 1970s and early 1980s saw the emergence of the cultural

image of the New Father, a man who placed family relationships – especially the care and nurturance of children – ahead of career goals.

By the mid-to-late 1980s, evidence suggested that the view that men were embracing feminism may have been grounded more in shifts in what men *say*, rather than in what they actually *do*. Today, many young heterosexual men appear to be more inclined than were their fathers to “help out” with housework and childcare, but most of them still see these tasks as belonging to their wives or their future wives.¹⁴ And despite the cultural image of the “new fatherhood,” and some modest increase in participation by men, the vast majority of child care, especially of infants, is still performed by women.¹⁵

How do we explain the gap between what many men say (that they are in favor of egalitarian families, that they want to be “involved fathers”) and what they do? One possible explanation is that their publicly-stated opinions are inauthentic presentations-of-self that can be viewed as attempts to conform to an acceptable image of the New Father. Indeed, Eliasoph argues that opinions expressed in polls often tell us more about how people construct public selves than they do about people’s genuinely held attitudes about public issues.¹⁶ Along these same lines, some feminists today speculate that many men’s publicly expressed egalitarian attitudes about gender issues might prove to be “a liberal ‘gloss’ on a generally more conventional outlook.”¹⁷ In this view, it may be in men’s interests to change their words, but not to change their behaviors in any substantial manner.

It is probably true that some of men’s publicly-expressed gender egalitarianism is inauthentic, but evidence suggests that there is likely more to it than that. Recent research on fathering – much of which includes qualitative research in addition to opinion polls – indicates that many young men today truly desire greater involvement and connection with their children than they had with their own fathers.¹⁸ But why, then, does this desire so rarely translate into substantially increased involvement? Segal argues that the fact that men’s apparent attitudinal changes have not translated into widespread behavioral changes may be largely due to the fact men may (correctly) fear that increased parental involvement will translate into a loss of their power over women. But she also notes that men who truly desire to share parenting find that it is difficult to do because of the continued existence of “...external and social as well as internal and psychic factors.”¹⁹

The “internal” constraints on increased paternal involvement include deeply-held psychological fears and ambivalences surrounding intimacy and nurturance.²⁰ But recent research on “men who mother” suggests that men’s “psychological incapacity” to care for and nurture infants has been over-stated and may be as much a myth as women’s “natural maternal instinct.” Drawing from Russell’s survey of “a host of relevant studies,” Segal notes that “the most remarkable finding about reversed-role parenting with full-time fathers is how little difference it seems to make to the children, female or male, *which* parent parents.”²¹

Although we should not minimize the extent to which women and men are still differentially prepared to parent, men’s psychological and emotional constraints can apparently be overcome if social conditions are conducive to substantially increased paternal involvement and responsibility. Most important among the “external” structural constraints to men’s increased parenting are the demands of men’s wage labor. Men with young children are likely to work more irregular hours and more overtime hours, while the opposite is true of mothers.²² This reality is reinforced by the facts that women earn substantially lower wages than men do, and that there is little (often no) childcare or parental leave provided by employers or by the state in the United States.²³

Thus, although a small proportion of fathers today are choosing to parent equally with women, increased paternal involvement in childcare will not become a widespread reality unless and until the structural preconditions exist. Rosanna Hertz found in her study of upper-middle-class “dual career families” that egalitarian divisions of family labor did not develop because of a commitment to feminist ideologies, but rather, as a rational (and constantly negotiated) response to a need to maintain his career, her career, and the family.²⁴ In other words, career and pay equality for women was a structural precondition for the development of equality between husbands and wives in the family.

However, Hertz notes two reasons why this is a very limited and flawed “equality.” First, Hertz’s sample of dual career families where the woman and the man make roughly the same amount of money is still extremely atypical. In two-income families, the husband is far more likely to have the higher income. Women are far more likely than men to work part-time jobs, and among full-time workers, women still earn about 65 cents to the male dollar, and are commonly segregated in lower-paid, dead-end jobs.²⁵ Thus, most women are not in the structural position to be able to bargain with their husbands for more egalitarian divisions of labor in the home.²⁶

Second, Hertz observes that the roughly egalitarian family division of labor among dual career couples is severely shaken when a child is born into the family. Initially, new mothers are more likely than fathers to put their careers “on hold.” But eventually, many resume their careers, as the childcare and much of the home labor is performed by paid employees, almost always women, and often immigrant women or women of color. Thus, the construction of the dual career couple’s “family equality” is premised on the continued existence of *social inequality*, as a pool of poor women performs domestic labor for relatively low wages. In other words, some of the upper-middle-class woman’s gender oppression is, in effect, bought off with her class privilege, while the man is let off the hook from his obligation fully to participate in childcare and housework. The upper-middle-class father is likely to be more involved with his children today than his father was with him, and this will likely enrich his life. But, as Segal observes, given the fact that the day-to-day and moment-to-moment care and nurturance of his children is still likely to be performed by women (either his wife or a hired, lower-class woman), “the contemporary revalorisation of fatherhood has enabled many men to have the best of both worlds.”²⁷

Zeus power and the New Man

Just as with the New Father, the more general cultural image of the New Man is based almost entirely on the lives of white, middle, and upper-class, heterosexual men. What we are witnessing is a shift in personal styles and lifestyles of privileged men that eliminate or at least mitigate many of the aspects of “traditional masculinity” that men have found unhealthful or emotionally constraining. At the same time, these shifts in styles of masculinity do little, if anything, to address issues of power and inequality raised by feminist women. For example, the “gatherings of men” organized by Robert Bly are based on the assumption that young males need to be “initiated into manhood” by other men in order to get in touch with “the deep masculine,” an instinctual male essence. Echoing his masculinist predecessors at the turn of the century who also feared a “feminization of society,”²⁸ Bly states that “when women, even women with the best intentions, bring up a boy alone, he may in some way have no male face, or he may have no face at all. The old men initiators [in tribal societies], by contrast, ...helped boys to see their genuine face or being.”²⁹ Bly virtually ignores an entire generation of social-scientific research that demonstrates that masculinity is socially constructed.

It is important, but not too difficult, to criticize Bly's curious interpretations of mythology and his highly selective use of history, psychology, and anthropology as "bad social science."³⁰ Perhaps more needed than a critique of Bly's ideas is a sociological interpretation of why the "mythopoetic men's movement" has been so attractive to so many men in the United States over the past decade (thousands of men have attended Bly's "gatherings," and as mentioned above, his book is a national best seller). I speculate that Bly's movement attracts so many U.S. men *not* because it represents any sort of radical break from "traditional masculinity," but precisely because it is so congruent with shifts that are already taking place within current constructions of hegemonic masculinity. Many of the men who attend Bly's gatherings are already aware of some of the problems and limits of narrow conceptions of masculinity. A major preoccupation of the gatherings is the poverty of these men's relationships with their fathers and with other men in workplaces. These concerns are based on very real and often very painful experiences. Indeed, industrial capitalism undermined much of the structural basis of middle-class men's emotional bonds with each other, as wage labor, market competition, and instrumental rationality largely supplanted primogeniture, craft brotherhood, and intergenerational mentorhood.³¹ Bly's "male initiation" rituals are intended to heal and reconstruct these masculine bonds, and they are thus, at least on the surface, probably experienced as largely irrelevant to men's relationships with women.

But in focussing on how myth and ritual can reconnect men with each other, and ultimately with their own "deep masculine" essences, Bly manages to sidestep the central point of the feminist critique – that men, as a group, benefit from a structure of power that oppresses women, as a group. In ignoring the social structure of power, Bly manages to convey a false symmetry between the feminist women's movement and his "men's movement." He assumes a natural dichotomization of "male values" and "female values," and states that feminism has been good for women, in allowing them to reassert "the feminine voice" that had been suppressed. But, Bly states (and he carefully avoids directly blaming feminism for this), "the masculine voice" has now been muted – men have become "passive ... tamed ... domesticated."³² Men thus need a movement to reconnect with the "Zeus energy" that they have lost. And "Zeus energy is male authority accepted for the good of the community."³³

The notion that men need to be empowered *as men* echoes the naïveté

of some 1970s men's liberation activists who saw men and women as "equally oppressed" by sexism.³⁴ The view that everyone is oppressed by sexism strips the concept of "oppression" of its political meaning, and thus obscures the social relations of domination and subordination. "Oppression" is a concept that describes a relationship between social groups; for one group to be oppressed, there must be an oppressor group.³⁵ This is not to imply that an oppressive relationship between groups is absolute or static. To the contrary, oppression is characterized by a constant and complex state of play: oppressed groups both actively participate in their own domination and they actively resist that domination. The state of play of the contemporary gender order is characterized by men's individual and collective oppression of women.³⁶ Men continue to benefit from this oppression of women, but, significantly, in the past twenty years, women's compliance with masculine hegemony has been counterbalanced by active feminist resistance. Men, as a group, are not oppressed by gender, but some certainly feel threatened by women's challenge to their power. Men are also hurt by this system of power: we are often emotionally limited, and commonly suffer poor health and a lower life-expectancy than women. But these problems are more accurately viewed as the "costs of being on top."³⁷ In fact, the shifts in masculine styles that we see among relatively privileged men may be interpreted as a sign that these men would like to stop paying these "costs," but it does not necessarily signal a desire to cease being "on top."

In addition to obscuring the oppressive relations between the sexes, and thus positing a false symmetry between women's and men's "movements," Bly's workshops also apparently do not question or challenge hierarchies of intermale dominance based on class, race, or sexuality. It is predominantly white, middle-aged, middle- and upper-middle class, and heterosexual men who attend these men's gatherings. Indeed when, several years ago, I was invited to a meeting of "mythopoetic followers of Robert Bly," the man who invited me attempted to lure me by enthusiastically whispering to me that "these are all *very* successful men!" Clearly, Bly's "men's movement" is so popular among relatively privileged men because, on the one hand, it acknowledges and validates men's experiences of pain and grief while guiding them to connect with other men in ways that are both nurturing and mutually empowering. On the other hand, and unlike feminism, it does not confront men with the reality of how their own privileges are based on the continued subordination of women and other men. In short, Bly facilitates the reconstruction of a new hegemonic masculinity – a masculinity that is less

self-destructive, that has re-valued and re-constructed men's bonds with each other, and has learned to feel good about its own "Zeus power."

The power to cry in public

A large part of the naiveté about the emergent New Man is the belief that if boys and men can learn to "express their feelings," they will no longer feel a need to dominate women. The idea that men's "need" to dominate others is the result of an emotional deficit overly psychologizes a reality that is largely structural. It does seem that the specific kind of masculinity that was ascendant (hegemonic) during the rise of entrepreneurial capitalism was extremely instrumental, stoic, and emotionally inexpressive.³⁸ But there is growing evidence that, today, there is no longer a neat link between men's emotional inexpressivity and their willingness and ability to dominate others. For instance, shortly following the recent Gulf War, U.S. General Schwartzkopf was lauded by the media as an example of the New Man for his ability to show his compassion (he unapologetically shed a tear in public) for the U.S. men and women who were killed, wounded, or captured. But this "new" emotional expressivity did not supplant a very "old" style of violent, dominating masculinity: As he was showing his feelings for his troops, Schwartzkopf was unsuccessfully urging President Bush not to stop the war too early. Following his hero, the Carthaginian general Hannibal, Schwartzkopf argued that "we had them in a rout and we could have continued to reap great destruction on them. We could have completely closed the door and made it a battle of annihilation."³⁹

In recent years there does appear to be an increase of powerful and successful men crying in public – Ronald Reagan shedding a tear at the funeral of slain U.S. soldiers, basketball player Michael Jordan openly weeping after winning the NBA championship. It might be, ironically, that crying in public (at situationally appropriate moments) is becoming a legitimizing sign of the New Man's power. On the other hand, public crying for women – for instance when U.S. Representative Patricia Schroeder shed tears during a press conference while announcing her decision not to run for President – is still viewed as a sign of women's "natural weakness."

The easy manner in which Schwartzkopf was enthusiastically lauded as a New Man for shedding a tear in public is indicative of the importance

placed on *styles* of masculinity, rather than the institutional *position of power* that many men still enjoy. In fact, there is no necessary link between men's "emotional inexpressivity" and their tendency to dominate others.⁴⁰ Men can learn to be situationally expressive while still very efficiently administering the institutions from which they gain their power over others. Representative Schroeder, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives Armed Services Committee, tells the story of how when she regularly visits military bases to assess their needs, the generals and admirals privately tell her that their "number one need" is childcare facilities. But when these same generals and admirals address Congress, their stated needs are ships, planes, tanks, and weapons systems. Childcare disappears from the list. Powerful men's public performances, after all, are staged primarily for each other. And though shedding a public tear for one's fallen comrades in war may now be an accepted part of the public presentation of hegemonic masculinity, there is still very little willingness among powerful men to transform the social institutions within which they construct their power and privilege over others.

Beyond style to politics

Lynne Segal's theorization of masculinities challenges us to "...move beyond the methodological individualism of all psychological thinking ... to see that the relative powers and privileges that most men may still take for granted are not reducible to any set of facts about individual men." The key question, she suggests, is "under what social and structural conditions will men be encouraged, induced, or forced to change in ways that support feminist goals of equality and justice?" Since it is highly unlikely that all men – or even the majority of men – will actively support feminism, I would state the question even more specifically: "Under what social and structural conditions will *particular groups of men* be encouraged, induced, or forced to change in ways that support feminist goals of equality and justice?" This is an inherently political question.

Segal identifies the state and the economy as two key sites of political struggle. State social-welfare policies, parental leave and childcare programs, workplaces transformed by affirmative action and comparable worth, and the creation of democratic working conditions are structural changes that are necessary both to empower women and to encourage (or force) men to change in ways that are consistent with

women's emancipation. Segal and other socialist-feminists have observed that the United States has the most regressive state policies and workplace structures when compared with other industrialized nations, and thus women's quest for equality there has moved at a snail's pace.⁴¹

This raises an important (but certainly not a new) question: What does it mean to be in favor of socialist-feminist transformations of the state and the workplace in the United States, given the weakness of our unions and given the fact that we have virtually no socialist or feminist presence in our government (especially at the federal level)? One answer is that "change" in the United States takes place less in the conventional political realm than in the arenas of culture and personal lifestyles. This is particularly true when we examine the most visible forms of recent change in U.S. masculinity. I have suggested that middle-class New Fathers, Mythopoetic Wild Men, and weeping generals are real and significant changes (i.e., they are genuine responses to real limits and dangers that many men face). But these changes represent a shift in the style – not in the social position of power – of hegemonic masculinity. In fact, I have suggested that these shifts in style might in some cases serve as visible signs of men's continued position of power and privilege vis-à-vis women and less powerful men.

Does this mean that all of men's changes today are merely symbolic, and that they ultimately do not contribute to the kinds of changes in gender relations that feminists have called for? It may appear to be so, especially if social scientists continue to collude with this reality by theoretically framing shifts in styles of hegemonic masculinity as indicative of the arrival of a New Man, while framing marginalized men (especially poor black men, in the United States) as Other – as atavistic "traditional" men. Instead, a feminist analysis of changing masculinities in the United States might begin with a focus on the ways that marginalized and subordinated masculinities are changing.

This shift in focus would likely accomplish three things. First, it would remove hegemonic masculinity from center-stage, thus creating a view of masculinities that emerges from a different standpoint. Second, it would require the deployment of theoretical frameworks that examine the ways that the politics of social class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality interact with those of gender.⁴² Third, a sociology of masculinities that starts from the experience of marginalized and subordinated men

would be far more likely to have power and politics – rather than personal styles or lifestyles – at its center. This is because men of color, poor and working-class men, and gay men are often in very contradictory positions at the nexus of intersecting systems of domination and subordination.

Though it is beyond the purview of this article, I briefly suggest here some key questions that future studies of changing masculinities might begin with: To what extent are working-class men, when confronted with issues such as comparable worth, identifying not simply as “men,” but with women as “workers?”⁴³ To what extent are Black, Chicana, and Asian women and men successfully linking feminism with struggles against racism?⁴⁴ We can ask similar questions about gay men’s roles in feminist and sexual politics. Gay men – especially those who are white and middle class – often share much of men’s institutional power and privilege, while at the same time undermining a key component (heterosexuality) of hegemonic masculinity. There is evidence that some gay men identify with conventional masculine power, and would simply like to incorporate homosexuality into the definition of hegemonic masculinity.⁴⁵ On the other hand, for the past twenty-plus years, gay men have been in the forefront of pro-feminist men’s organizations that have supported feminist political struggles. For instance, gay men’s recent active participation in the defense of women’s abortion clinics against anti-choice demonstrators suggests a sophisticated political understanding of the mutually interlocking nature of gender and sexual oppression. It is precisely this sort of analysis and political practice that is necessary if today’s changing masculinities are to contribute to the building of a more egalitarian and democratic world.

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