

Men's Groups: Their Radical Possibilities

A gay member of a Canberra men's group takes a critical look at writing which has come from the 'men's movement'. And he argues that men's groups have a potential to challenge the gender system.

THE EMERGENCE OF SECOND WAVE

feminism in the late 1960s was closely followed by the mobilisation of several other movements closely concerned with the pattern of gender relations. First there was the gay liberation movement which quickly recognised the points of contact between the oppression of women and gays and threw out its own separate challenges to the gender system. Then there were the 'men's liberation' and 'men against sexism' groups, including some gay men but mainly heterosexual.

The 'men's movement' was never large in Australia. In the early 70s men's groups of one sort or another were established in the cities and they have continued in a fairly precarious manner since then. In the United States and Britain the movement was more vocal and more diverse, containing both reactionary and radical tendencies. In this article I intend to examine some of the literature which came out of the men's movement and then go on to make some more general comments on the basis of my own experience in Canberra men's groups.¹

One of the first publications to emerge from men's groups was a small book, *Unbecoming Men*, published in 1971². It's a collection of articles by four members of a group of seven New Yorkers, all white, mainly heterosexual, mostly middle class. In their writings the men explore the process of growing up male: 'My Parents', 'Growing Up Popular', 'Masturbating' and so on. It's difficult to be critical of a book compiled so early in the piece, so modest

in its aims and so self-deprecating of its achievements. As the authors admit, their writing is neither professional nor analytical: 'We accepted practically anything that was written, just as we accepted practically anything one or another of us did in the group'³. Yet this weakness is also the strength of the book. There is none of the careful, self-conscious 'ideological soundness' of later writings by 'men against sexism'. Some of the reminiscences have an honest directness which is both frightening and revealing. For example: 'The kids next door and I, during our period of drawing heavy war scenes — battleships, tanks, airplane dogfights, etc — included a few Nazi torture scenes of women with their tits cut off and hot irons stuck up their cunts.'⁴

Similarly: 'My obsession with sexual conquests was generally very frustrating. By the end of junior year I still hadn't fucked anyone. But there was always this ethic to insinuate that a guy had gone further than he really had, although not to outright lie about it . . . There was also an ethic, very strong in me, to never go steady — not to be "pussy-whipped". No girl could ever hold me down. I wanted the freedom to fuck with lots of girls. I was always looking for new territory to conquer.'⁵

Unbecoming Men involves men working through their misogyny and, by implication, challenging other men to do the same. Above all, it represents an attempt by men to deal with sexism as a male problem.

A Book Of Readings For Men Against Sexism, edited by Jon Snodgrass, was published in 1977 and reflected the growing sophistication of the men's movement in the United States.⁶ Although

³ Ibid, 61.

⁴ Ibid, 39-40.

⁵ Ibid, 42-3.

⁶ Snodgrass, Jon (ed), *A Book Of Readings For Men Against Sexism*, Times Change Press, Albion, 1977.

¹ In writing this article I am indebted to discussion with other members of my men's group — Tony Ayres, John Carlin, Robert Griew, Tim Mackay, Peter Murphy and Baz Shannon — as well as other friends, especially Jill Bowling, Sue McGrath and Michael McMahon. Responsibility for the opinions expressed naturally rests with myself alone.

² *Unbecoming Men: A Men's Consciousness Raising Group Writes On Oppression And Themselves*, Times Change Press, Albion, 1971.

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'If, by virtue of their genes, men constitute an homogeneous and equally nasty caste, then how can the authors explain themselves and their feminist commitment?'

the book contains many approaches, it specifically repudiates one tendency within the movement, 'men's liberation'. Briefly, men's lib maintains that women and men are oppressed equally by sex roles or, more ambiguously still, by society. Women are unable to be assertive, independent and self-assured. Men are denied the right to cry, nurture and empathise. Thereby male responsibility for female oppression is denied. Liberation involves not struggle by women against men but education and collaboration between the sexes. Men's liberation never took on an institutional form in Australia, although the sentiments are familiar enough from personal experience. It was apparently much more promoted in the United States, with the publication of men's lib handbooks, the formation of men's lib consciousness raising groups, the establishment of men's resource centres, along with extensive media coverage.

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Part One of *Readings*, comprising about two-thirds of the book, offers a radically different account of gender relations from that of men's lib. Although there are differences between contributors, the dominant interpretation is feminist, drawing heavily on Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic Of Sex*. As the title of an article by Leonard Schein puts it, 'All Men Are Misogynists'⁷. Another article by John Stoltenberg argues that homosexual men are no less misogynist than heterosexual men. Homosexual men, he maintains, base their claim for civil liberties 'on the presumption that the male assfuck is a special expression of a co-equal power bond between men'⁸. He then goes on to argue that men's consciousness raising '... is but a new manifestation of male bonding. Whether composed of straight men or gay men, these groups are defined in every detail by the culturally programmed urgency of men to bond, in order to confer and confirm their masculinity, which is their power in the culture over and against women.'⁹

To ensure against this Schien argues in another contribution that, before any man joins a men's consciousness raising group, he should be required to fully accept radical feminist theory and practice; that is, 'we must agree that patriarchy is the *prime*

contradiction from which all other models of oppression come — capitalism, imperialism, slavery, racism, etc.'¹⁰

The radical feminist interpretation demolishes the treacherous patter of men's lib. Men might not be able to cry but, as different writers point out again and again, there are plenty of compensations for this. Rape and male sexual performance receive special attention as means by which men control women. The writings serve to remind gay men and 'men against sexism' that they are by no means exempt from sexist practices. This is important.

But the radical feminist approach has problems too. Firstly, as editor Jon Snodgrass admits, the articles on 'Women's Oppression' take almost no account of other forms of oppression. At times this amounts to a denial of these forms of oppression, or at least of their importance. Snodgrass tries to remedy this by having a second part to the book on 'Gay, Class, And Racial Oppression'. These are mainly personal accounts, interesting in themselves but nonetheless detached from the rest of the book. Snodgrass assures us that there are connections and relationships between various forms of oppression but leaves it for the reader to work them out.

Secondly, the radical feminist approach contains problems for the men writing the articles. If, by virtue of their genes, men constitute an homogeneous and equally nasty caste, then how can the authors explain themselves and their feminist commitment? Ultimately they cannot — unless they are part of an insidious male plot to undermine women's struggle through adopting their most radical positions. Nor can they offer a coherent strategy for men against sexism. Stoltenberg ends up urging 'moral commitment to struggle for gender justice': firstly, through reading and studying feminist texts and secondly, by living 'as a conscientious objector to all scenarios of male bonding'¹¹. Moral commitment seems poor weaponry indeed against the dictates of genetic programming. Nor is it clear where the moral commitment comes from and why some men have it (such as Stoltenberg presumably) and not others.

What is needed here is some notion of contradictions within masculinity. This involves examining the different ways in which men are constructed, their relations with each other and their differential relationship to the gender system. Several articles in *Readings* come close to this. Ironically, 'The Effemist Manifesto' is one of the most blatant statements of radical feminist principles in the book, whilst at the same time including some conception of differing interests between men in patriarchy. After asserting that only a 'gynarchist revolution' could strike out the root of all oppression, the manifesto goes on: 'Exactly how women will go

about seizing men. But a standard struggle with effeminate men.'¹²

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7 Schein, Leonard, 'All Men Are Misogynists', in *Ibid*, 69-74.

8 Stoltenberg, John, 'Toward Gender Justice', in *Ibid*, 78.

9 Stoltenberg, 'Toward Gender Justice', in *Ibid*, 80.

10 Schein, Leonard, 'Dangers With Men's Consciousness Raising Groups', in *Ibid*, 131.

11 Stoltenberg, 'Toward Gender Justice', in *Ibid*, 81, 82.

'Tolsen argues that masculine behaviour is rooted first of all in the family, then in school for middle class boys and the peer group for working class boys.'

about seizing power is no business of ours, being men. But as effeminate men oppressed by masculinist standards, we ourselves have a stake in the destruction of the patriarchy, and thus we *must* struggle with the dilemma of being partisans — as effeminists — of a revolution opposed to us — as men.¹²

Similarly, several of the personal reminiscences by gay men include some account of the same contradiction. Michael Silverstein's 'history' is especially good in this regard: '... from the time I was five years old I had wanted to touch and hold the bodies of other boys, and when I had done so I had felt warm and comfortable and affectionate toward them. By the time I was eight or nine I had learned how bad and dirty, how unmanly this was, and I was so scared of being caught at it that I stopped. But the desire remained, a gigantic thing always there. It was totally outside the realm of what it was to be a man. Yet it was so real, so undeniably a part of me, that it forced me to see myself as outside the world of all the other boys I knew. It was not just that I couldn't be a man, it was also that I knew about this part of me that could never be satisfied by manhood, because it wanted something that no man would ever want.'¹³

Andrew Tolsen's *The Limits Of Masculinity* was published in the same year as *Readings*. It is a more coherent book in which one man, involved in an English men's group between 1973-5⁷, explores first the construction of masculinity and then, the potential of men's groups¹⁴. Tolsen does not adopt the radical feminist framework so influential in the States, but rather falls within the English socialist feminist tradition of Sheila Rowbotham, Juliet Mitchell and others. This has its advantages and disadvantages. Tolsen deals only marginally with issues such as sexuality, rape, violence and birth control, identified as critical by radical feminists. On the other hand, he does recognise the inter-connections between class and gender, both in terms of constructing and subverting masculinity.

Tolsen argues that masculine behaviour is rooted first of all in the family, then in school for middle class boys and the peer group for working class boys. Masculinisation in each of these 'institutions' involves ambivalence. More specifically, boys are alienated from their father in the family; masculine education drives a wedge between external behaviour and internal experience for middle class boys; whilst the working class boy finds himself part of a world where he is condemned to fail. Tolsen notes the different masculine types which emerge from these processes. On the one hand there is the updated middle class 'gentleman', competitive, personally ambitious, respectful of authority and

emotionally restrained. On the other hand there is the more aggressive, sometimes violent style of working class masculinity.

The ambivalences noted during boyhood are not developed. Two-thirds of the book is about 'the "right" to work'. Tolsen discusses first the centrality of work to masculine self-identity. He then examines the contradictions between the historical development of a capitalist wage labour and masculinity. In the case of the working class, mechanisation and automation have progressively undermined the authority of the father. This authority has, in turn, undermined working class struggle: 'with a "wife and kids to support" the boat cannot be rocked too drastically.'¹⁵ As for middle class men, the increasing drudgery of modern bureaucracy has been accompanied by the withering of Britain's international power, the demise of its economy and, as a result, the destruction of the 'professional ideal'. At the same time, with the growth of the 'affluent society', middle class women have increasingly challenged male chauvinism at work and in the home.

The picture is one of masculinity in crisis. Ultimately, it seems, this crisis derives from growing contradictions within British capitalism. Contradictions within the gender system are hinted at but not developed. Socialist analysis apparently takes precedence over feminist analysis. This leads Tolsen to recognise 'the limits of masculinity'. In his own words: 'Not only are different gender-identities ("feminine", "gay", "masculine") distinctively irreducible; they also fundamentally contradict, and do not simply "complement" each other. The relation between the sexes . . . is constructed in terms of social power ("oppression"). To simply deny, or vaguely wish to "relinquish", the reality of this power is to fall victim to a liberal myopia.'¹⁶

As a corollary, the role of men's groups is strictly limited. Men's groups can play a supportive role for the women's and gay movements; explore the ideology of patriarchy and its linguistic expression; and operate as a base for reconstructing the sexist dogmas and practices of the male-dominated socialist left. For all this, 'to assume that men can, unproblematically, experience "men's liberation" — that

12 Dansky, Steven, Knoebel, John and Pitchford, Kenneth, 'The Effeminate Manifesto', in *Ibid*, 117.

13 Silverstein, Michael, 'The History Of A Short, Unsuccessful Academic Career', in *Ibid*, 179.

14 Tolsen, Andrew, *The Limits Of Masculinity: Male Identity And Women's Liberation*, Harper & Row, New York, 1977.

15 *Ibid*, 65.

16 *Ibid*, 144.

'Heterosexual men have been forced to confront their sexuality and the nature of their relations with other men in a way that is usually, in this society, required of gay men only.'

there are any analogies with gay or feminist politics — is, in the end, an illusion.¹⁷

There is a sense in which Tolsen is right. Men's groups, whether composed of gay or straight men, cannot be understood as the complement of women's groups. At the same time I think he sells the men against sexism movement short. The reason for this is the manner in which he treats the gender system as fixed, changing only in accordance with the development of the mode of production. Tolsen's failure to explore the complexities of the gender system is epitomised in the quote above, where he speaks of 'gender-identity' as an irreducible tripartite, 'feminine', 'gay' and 'masculine'. Here he confuses sex, gender and sexual orientation. Sex (male, female) is irreducible. Gender (feminine, masculine) is socially constructed and highly variable. So too is sexual orientation (gay, straight). This confusion enables Tolsen to largely ignore male homosexuality and the challenge it poses to dominant masculinity. It also means that he fails to see the contradictions within masculinity which make men against sexism groups more than idealist. I'll return to this point shortly.

AT THIS STAGE I WANT TO DEVELOP

some of the points I've made so far more generally. I'll do this by looking at the three major criticisms which have been directed against men's groups. In the process I'll draw from my own experience in Canberra men's groups during 1980-81¹⁸.

First, straight left men in particular criticise men's groups for their middle class composition and, following on from this, their self-indulgent preoccupation with personal life. They suggest instead that men concerned with sexual politics should act against sexist practices in the workplace, trade unions, political organisations and so forth. I agree that the middle class composition of men's groups is a matter for concern. Tolsen notes in *Limits Of Masculinity* that because working class men are less able than middle class men to secure masculine prerogatives through economic control, they adopt a more aggressive style of masculinity. If this is the case, and it certainly fits in with my experience, then there exists the possibility that men's groups might simply amount to a class manoeuvre, attack-

¹⁷ Ibid, 144.

¹⁸ For some background on Canberra men's groups, see my article in *Gay Community News*, November 1981, 34-5.

ing the more blatant sexist practices of working class men whilst ignoring the more insidious ones of middle class men.

For all this, I don't think that the middle class composition of men's groups invalidates their activities any more than the middle class composition of the gay and feminist movements invalidates their activities. Sexual oppression cuts across all classes. The criticism rings of male defensiveness: if sexual politics cannot be dismissed altogether, then at least it can be kept in its place as the problem of women and gay men. The alternate strategy offered implicitly rejects the point made repeatedly by the feminist and gay movements over the last decade, that the personal is political. This is not to argue that men should refrain from working against sexist practices within the unions and other places. Rather, it is to suggest that this is not enough. Men need to work through sexism as a set of practices and ideas which they themselves literally embody, much in the manner of the authors of *Unbecoming Men*, before launching into anti-sexist struggle 'out there' in the public sphere.

Another criticism of men's groups, this time from gay men, is their reluctance to confront the relationship between the oppression of women and gay men and, as a corollary, their basic homophobia. David Fernbach in *The Spiral Path* comments on the hesitant and fraught exploration of homosexuality by straight men in men's groups, especially compared with women in the feminist movement¹⁹. The books discussed in this article confirm these observations. Homosexuality is marginalised as an aspect of the gender system.

The Canberra experience has been somewhat different. The main reason for this, I suspect, has been the active involvement of gay men in men's groups. The groups formed on the university campus in 1980 were largely initiated and sustained by gay men, albeit with the active involvement of heterosexual men. Of the two community based groups operating in Canberra now, one is evenly balanced and the other is mainly heterosexual. The experience of gay and heterosexual men working together has been creative and also subversive. We've discussed common ground between straight and gay masculine cultures. This is an important project. As the difficulties of a common lesbian and male homosexual front make abundantly clear, male chauvinism is not the exclusive preserve of straight men. We've also discussed the discontinuities and oppressive relationship between the two cultures. Heterosexual men have been forced to confront their sexuality and the nature of their relations with other men in a way that is usually, in this society, required of gay men only. Some men, both self-identified gays and self-identified straights, have found the groups a sympathetic and gentle forum for working through their homosexuality.

Finally, feminists have criticised men's groups

¹⁹ Fernbach, David, *The Spiral Path: A Gay Contribution To Human Survival*, Gay Men's Press, London, 1981, 80.

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²⁰ Ibid, 88.

'The power of 'macho' men is established not only through their domination of women but also through their domination of other men, especially effeminate men.'

The limitations and possibilities of men's groups are perhaps best illustrated by case study, and I'll conclude this article with an account of the trajectory of my own 1981 men's group. The group was formed in March 1981 and was constituted, by agreement, as a 'closed' group of seven men. Three of these men were involved in men's groups during the previous year. Meetings took place about every ten days or so. At first we did not have much to do with each other outside of meetings but contact increased substantially with time. The most important activities of the group centred around discussion and games. On one occasion we talked, one at a time, of our sexual history and our construction as sexual beings. On another occasion we gave away our original plans for the evening and dealt with one man's trauma upon leaving his job. Later the same night we created havoc on a school oval working out a skit about men and militarism for the Hiroshima Week anti-nuclear march. Once we did a workshop centred around competitions; this produced disturbing reverberations for some of us over the next few days. Another evening we passed with massage. A couple of times we ended up going somewhere for a bop. In the course of these activities the relations which developed within the group seemed important; gentle, caring and supportive.

There are limits to this pattern of activity and we reached them towards the end of the year. Some of us wanted the group to create some theatre together. Others wanted it to continue in the same form. As it happened members spun off into a wide range of activities which depended, to a considerable extent, on groundwork laid during the previous year. One member joined the feminist theatre troupe, Fools Gallery; another formed a Gay Youth Group; one member is working on a theatre project about sexual politics in Nazi Germany; two men are involved with the Gay Contact Service, several with the organisation of the 8th National Conference of Lesbians and Homosexual Men in Canberra; and I'm writing this article. We still get together as a group about once a month. Mostly, though, our contact is informal or in other contexts. The men's group in its original form has probably served its purpose, yet the relationships, support network, ideas and strategies developed within the group remain important parts of our lives.

Michael Gilding

as simply a new form of male bonding. They ask, with good reason, how men can be expected to 'give up power'. Men's groups, they suggest, are at best an irrelevant ego trip, at worst reactionary cells against feminist gains. The American experience of men's lib demonstrates that the latter at least is true.

Nonetheless I think that men's groups also contain radical possibilities. On a number of occasions in this article I've mentioned the failure of the books reviewed to explore contradictions within masculinity. It seems to me that this point is crucial in terms of understanding the phenomena of men's groups and their potentialities. Men are not a homogeneous group. It is often said that competitiveness is a masculine value. It might be added that men are constructed in competition with each other. The power of 'macho' men is established not only through their domination of women but also through their domination of other men, especially effeminate men. This is the basis for the most obvious form of domination among men, the oppression of gay men. It is also the basis for divisions among straight men. 'Soft heterosexuals', as Fernbach describes them, can have a hard time in the masculinity stakes. This is not to deny that the same men might be sexist or homophobic. Indeed Fernbach argues that soft heterosexuals comprise the core of poofta-bashers because of their masculine insecurity and need to prove themselves²⁰. Still, the point remains that there are divisions among heterosexual men. These divisions provide room for manipulation and exploitation by those groups most oppressed within the gender system, women and gay men. They also form the basis for the alienation of some heterosexual men from dominant masculinity and, as a corollary, radical sexual politics for these men.

I am not making a case against separatist politics. In fact men's groups are very much the product of separatist politics. Men, whether gay or straight, who found that feminist analysis touched chords in their own lives, also found themselves increasingly unable to explore the points of contact except with other men. This in itself was a valuable experience. Obviously men's groups do not necessarily have the same interests as the male gay movement and they have even less in common with the women's movement. Nonetheless there is room for convergent struggle and strategic alliance.

TO SUMMARISE MY ARGUMENT, THERE can be no doubt that men's groups contain reactionary potential from a variety of perspectives, socialist, male gay and feminist. Nor can there be any doubt concerning their limitations. In no way are they analogous to the gay or feminist movements. Yet it is important not to devalue their radical potential. This potential is based on real contradictions within masculinity, contradictions which must be exploited rather than denied in challenging the gender system.

²⁰ Ibid, 88.