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Men, Feminism, and Men's Contradictory Experiences of Power

MICHAEL KAUFMAN

In a world dominated by men, the world of men is, by definition, a world of power. That power is a structured part of the economies and systems of political and social organization; it forms part of the core of religion, family, forms of play, and intellectual life. On an individual level, much of what we associate with masculinity hinges on a man's capacity to exercise power and control.

But men's lives speak of a different reality. Though men hold power and reap the privileges that come with our sex, that power is tainted.¹

There is, in the lives of men, a strange combination of power and powerlessness, privilege and pain. Men enjoy social power and many forms of privilege by virtue of being male. But the way we have set up that world of power causes immense pain, isolation, and alienation not only for women but also for men. This is not to equate men's pain with the systemic and systematic forms of women's oppression. Rather, it is to say that men's worldly power—as we sit in our homes or walk the street, apply ourselves at work or march through history—comes with a price for us. This combination of power and pain is the hidden story in the lives of men. This is men's contradictory experience of power.

The idea of men's contradictory experiences of power suggests not simply that there is both power and pain in men's lives. Such a statement would obscure the centrality of men's power and the roots of pain within that power. The key, indeed, is the relationship between the two. As we know, men's social power is the source of individual power and privilege, but as we shall see, it is also the source of the individual experience of

pain and alienation. That pain can become an impetus for the individual reproduction—the acceptance, affirmation, celebration, and propagation—of men's individual and collective power. Alternatively, it can be an impetus for change.²

The existence of men's pain cannot be an excuse for acts of violence or oppression at the hands of men. After all, the overarching framework for this analysis is the basic point of feminism—and here I state the obvious—that almost all humans currently live in systems of patriarchal power that privilege men and stigmatize, penalize, and oppress women.³ Rather, knowledge of this pain is a means to better understand men and the complex character of the dominant forms of masculinity.

The realization of men's contradictory experiences of power allows us to better understand the interactions of class, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, and other factors in the lives of men—which is why I speak of contradictory experiences of power in the plural. It allows us to better understand the process of gender acquisition for men. It allows us to better grasp what we might think of as the *gender work* of a society.

An understanding of men's contradictory experiences of power enables us, when possible, to reach out to men with compassion, even as we are highly critical of particular actions and beliefs and challenge the dominant forms of masculinity. It can be one vehicle to understand how good human beings can do horrible things and how some beautiful baby boys can turn into horrible adults. It can help us understand how the majority of men can be reached with a message of change. It is, in a nutshell, the basis for men's embrace of feminism.

This chapter develops the concept of men's contradictory experiences of power within an analysis of gender power, of the social-psychological process of gender development, and of the relation of power, alienation, and oppression. It looks at the emergence of profeminism among men, seeking explanations for this within an analysis of men's contradictory experiences of power. It concludes with some thoughts on the implications of this analysis for the development of counterhegemonic practices by profeminist men that can have a mass appeal and a mainstream social impact.

Men's Contradictory Experiences of Power

Gender and Power

Theorizing men's contradictory experiences of power begins with two distinctions: The first is the well-known, but too-often overlooked,

distinction between biological sex and socially constructed gender. Derived from that is the second, that there is no single masculinity although there are hegemonic and subordinate forms of masculinity. These forms are based on men's social power but are embraced in complex ways by individual men who also develop harmonious and nonharmonious relationships with other masculinities.

The importance of the sex-gender distinction in this context is that it is a basic conceptual tool that suggests how integral parts of our individual identity, behavior, activities, and beliefs can be a social product, varying from one group to another and often at odds with other human needs and possibilities. Our biological sex—that small set of absolute differences between all males and all females—does not prescribe a set and static natural personality.⁴ The sex-gender distinction suggests there are characteristics, needs, and possibilities within the potential as females or males that are consciously and unconsciously suppressed, repressed, and channeled in the process of producing men and women. Such products, the masculine and the feminine, the man and the woman, are what gender is all about.⁵

Gender is the central organizing category of our psyches. It is the axis around which we organize our personalities, in which a distinct ego develops. I can no more separate "Michael Kaufman—human" from "Michael Kaufman—man" than I can talk about the activities of a whale without referring to the fact that it spends its whole life in the water.

Discourses on gender have had a hard time shaking off the handy, but limited, notion of sex roles.⁶ Certainly, roles, expectations, and ideas about proper behavior do exist. But the central thing about gender is not the prescription of certain roles and the proscription of others—after all, the range of possible roles is wide and changing and, what is more, are rarely adopted in a nonconflictual way. Rather, the key thing about gender is that it is a description of actual social relations of power between males and females and the internalization of these relations of power.

Men's contradictory experiences of power exist in the realm of gender. This suggests there are ways that gender experience is a conflictual one. Only part of the conflict is between the social definitions of manhood and possibilities open to us within our biological sex. Conflict also exists because of the cultural imposition of what Bob Connell calls hegemonic forms of masculinity.⁷ Although most men cannot possibly measure up to the dominant ideals of manhood, these maintain a powerful and often unconscious presence in our lives. They have power because they describe and embody real relations of power between men and women *and* among

men: Patriarchy exists as a system not simply of men's power over women but also of hierarchies of power among different groups of men and between different masculinities.

These dominant ideals vary sharply from society to society, from era to era, and, these days, from decade to decade. Each subgroup, based on race, class, sexual orientation, or whatever, defines manhood in ways that conform to the economic and social possibilities of that group. For example, part of the ideal of working-class manhood among white North American men stresses physical skill and the ability to physically manipulate one's environment, while part of the ideal of their upper-middle class counterparts stresses verbal skills and the ability to manipulate one's environment through economic, social, and political means. Each dominant image bears a relationship to the real-life possibilities of these men and the tools at their disposal for the exercise of some form of power.

Power and Masculinity

Power, indeed, in the key term when referring to hegemonic masculinities. As I argue at greater length elsewhere,⁸ the common feature of the dominant forms of contemporary masculinity is that manhood is equated with having some sort of power.

There are, of course, different ways to conceptualize and describe power. Political philosopher C. B. Macpherson points to the liberal and radical traditions of the last two centuries and tells us that one way we have come to think of human power is as the potential for using and developing our human capacities. Such a view is based on the idea that we are doers and creators able to use rational understanding, moral judgment, creativity, and emotional connection.⁹ We possess the power to meet our needs, the power to fight injustice and oppression, the power of muscles and brain, and the power of love. All men, to a greater or lesser extent, experience these meanings of power.

Power, obviously, also has a more negative manifestation. Men have come to see power as a capacity to impose control on others and on our own unruly emotions. It means controlling material resources around us. This understanding of power meshes with the one described by Macpherson because, in societies based on hierarchy and inequality, it appears that all people cannot use and develop their capacities to an equal extent. You have power if you can take advantage of differences between people. I feel I can have power only if I have access to more resources than you do. Power is seen as power over something or someone else.

Although we all experience power in diverse ways, some that celebrate life and diversity and others that hinge on control and domination, the two types of experiences are not equal in the eyes of men, for the latter is the dominant conception of power in our world. The equation of power with domination and control is a definition that has emerged over time in societies in which various divisions are central to the way we have organized our lives: One class has control over economic resources and politics, adults have control over children, humans try to control nature, men dominate women, and, in many countries, one ethnic, racial, or religious group, or group based on sexual orientation, has control over others. There is, though, a common factor to all these societies: All are societies of male domination. The equation of masculinity with power is one that developed over centuries. It conformed to, and in turn justified, the real-life domination of men over women and the valuation of males over females.

Individual men internalize all this into their developing personalities because, born into such a life, we learn to experience our power as a capacity to exercise control. Men learn to accept and exercise power this way because it gives us privileges and advantages that women or children do not usually enjoy. The source of this power is in the society around us, but we learn to exercise it as our own. This is a discourse of social power, but the collective power of men rests not simply on transgenerational and abstract institutions and structures of power but on the ways we internalize, individualize, and come to embody and reproduce these institutions, structures, and conceptualizations of men's power.

Gender Work

The way in which power is internalized is the basis for a contradictory relationship to that power.¹⁰ The most important body of work that looks at this process is, paradoxically, that of one of the more famous of 20th-century intellectual patriarchs, Sigmund Freud. Whatever his miserable, sexist beliefs and confusions about women's sexualities, he identified the psychological processes and structures through which gender is created. The work of Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein, and Jessica Benjamin and, in a different sense, the psychoanalytic writings of Gad Horowitz make an important contribution to our understanding of the processes by which gender is individually acquired.¹¹

The development of individual personalities of "normal" manhood is a social process within patriarchal family relationships.¹² The possibility for the creation of gender lies in two biological realities, the malleability

of human drives and the long period of dependency of children. On this biological edifice a social process is able to go to work for the simple reason that this period of dependency is lived out in society. Within different family forms, each society provides a charged setting in which love and longing, and support and disappointment become the vehicles for developing a gendered psyche. The family gives a personalized stamp to the categories, values, ideals, and beliefs of a society in which one's sex is a fundamental aspect of self-definition and life. The family takes abstract ideals and turns them into the stuff of love and hate. As femininity gets represented by the mother (or mother figures) and masculinity by the father (or father figures) in both nuclear and extended families, complicated conceptions take on flesh and blood form: We are no longer talking of patriarchy and sexism, and masculinity and femininity as abstract categories. I am talking about your mother and father, your sisters and brothers, your home, kin, and family.¹³

By 5 or 6 years old, before we have much conscious knowledge of the world, the building blocks of our gendered personalities are firmly anchored. Over this skeleton we build the adult as we learn to survive and, with luck, thrive within an interlocked set of patriarchal realities that includes schools, religious establishments, the media, and the world of work.

The internalization of gender relations is a building block of our personalities—that is, it is the individual elaboration of gender and our own subsequent contributions to replenishing and adapting institutions and social structures in a way that wittingly or unwittingly preserves patriarchal systems. This process, when taken in its totality, forms what I call the gender work of a society. Because of the multiple identities of individuals and the complex ways we all embody both power and powerlessness—as a result of the interaction of our sex, race, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, intellectual and physical abilities, and sheer chance—gender work is not a linear process. Although gender ideals exist in the form of hegemonic masculinities and femininities and although gender power is a social reality, when we live in heterogeneous societies, we each grapple with often conflicting pressures, demands, and possibilities.

The notion of gender work suggests there is an active process that creates and recreates gender. It suggests that this process can be an ongoing one, with particular tasks at particular times of our lives and that allows us to respond to changing relations of gender power. It suggests that gender is not a static thing that we become, but is a form of ongoing interaction with the structures of the surrounding world.

My masculinity is a bond, a glue, to the patriarchal world. It is the thing that makes that world mine, that makes it more or less comfortable to live in. Through the incorporation of a dominant form of masculinity particular to my class, race, nationality, era, sexual orientation, and religion, I gained real benefits *and* an individual sense of self-worth. From the moment when I learned, unconsciously, there were not only two sexes but a social significance to the sexes, my own self-worth became measured against the yardstick of gender. As a young male, I was granted a fantasy reprieve from the powerlessness of early childhood because I unconsciously realized I was part of that half of humanity with social power. My ability to incorporate not simply the roles, but to grasp onto this power—even if, at first, it existed only in my imagination—was part of the development of my individuality.

The Price

In more concrete terms the acquisition of hegemonic (and most subordinate) masculinities is a process through which men come to suppress a range of emotions, needs, and possibilities, such as nurturing, receptivity, empathy, and compassion, which are experienced as inconsistent with the power of manhood. These emotions and needs do not disappear; they are simply held in check or not allowed to play as full a role in our lives as would be healthy for ourselves and those around us. We dampen these emotions because they might restrict our ability and desire to control ourselves or dominate the human beings around us on whom we depend for love and friendship. We suppress them because they come to be associated with the femininity we have rejected as part of our quest for masculinity.

These are many things men do to have the type of power we associate with masculinity: We've got to perform and stay in control. We've got to conquer, be on top of things, and call the shots. We've got to tough it out, provide, and achieve. Meanwhile we learn to beat back our feelings, hide our emotions, and suppress our needs.

Whatever power might be associated with dominant masculinities, they also can be the source of enormous pain. Because the images are, ultimately, childhood pictures of omnipotence, they are impossible to obtain. Surface appearances aside, no man is completely able to live up to these ideals and images. For one thing we all continue to experience a range of needs and feelings that are deemed inconsistent with manhood. Such experiences become the source of enormous fear. In our society, this fear

is experienced as homophobia or, to express it differently, homophobia is the vehicle that simultaneously transmits and quells the fear.

Such fear and pain have visceral, emotional, intellectual dimensions—although none of these dimensions is necessarily conscious—and the more we are the prisoners of the fear, the more we need to exercise the power we grant ourselves as men. In other words, men exercise patriarchal power not only because we reap tangible benefits from it. The assertion of power is also a response to fear and to the wounds we have experienced in the quest for power. Paradoxically, men are wounded by the very way we have learned to embody and exercise our power.

A man's pain may be deeply buried, barely a whisper in his heart, or it may flood from every pore. The pain might be the lasting trace of things that happened or attitudes and needs acquired 20, 30, or 60 years earlier. Whatever it is, the pain inspires fear for it means not being a man, which means, in a society that confuses gender and sex, not being a male. This means losing power and ungluing basic building blocks of our personalities. This fear must be suppressed for it itself is inconsistent with dominant masculinities.

As every woman who knows men can tell us, the strange thing about men's trying to suppress emotions is that it leads not to less but to more emotional dependency. By losing track of a wide range of our human needs and capacities and by blocking our need for care and nurturance, men lose our emotional common sense and our ability to look after ourselves. Unmet, unknown, and unexpected emotions and needs do not disappear but rather spill into our lives at work, on the road, in a bar, or at home. The very emotions and feelings we have tried to suppress gain a strange hold over us. No matter how cool and in control, these emotions dominate us. I think of the man who feels powerlessness who beats his wife in uncontrolled rage. I walk into a bar and see two men hugging each other in a drunken embrace, the two of them able to express their affection for each other only when plastered. I read about the teenage boys who go out gay-bashing and the men who turn their sense of impotence into a rage against blacks, Jews, or any who are convenient scapegoats.

Alternatively, men might direct buried pain against themselves in the form of self-hate, self-deprecation, physical illness, insecurity, or addictions. Sometimes this is connected with the first. Interviews with rapists and batterers often show not only contempt for women but also an even deeper hatred and contempt for oneself. It is as if, not able to stand themselves, they lash out at others, possibly to inflict similar feelings on another who has been defined as a socially acceptable target, possibly to

experience a momentary sense of power and control.¹⁴ We can think of men's pain as having a dynamic aspect. We might displace it or make it invisible, but in doing so we give it even more urgency. This blanking out of a sense of pain is another way of saying that men learn to wear a suit of armor, that is, to maintain an emotional barrier from those around us in order to keep fighting and winning. The impermeable ego barriers discussed in feminist psychoanalysis simultaneously protects men and keeps us locked in a prison of our own creation.

Power, Alienation, and Oppression

Men's pain and the way we exercise power are not just symptoms of our current gender order. Together they shape our sense of manhood, for masculinity has become a form of alienation. Men's alienation is our ignorance of our own emotions, feelings, needs, and potential for human connection and nurturance. Our alienation also results from our distance from women and our distance and isolation from other men. In his book *The Gender of Oppression*, Jeff Hearn suggests that what we think of as masculinity is the result of the way our power and our alienation combine. Our alienation increases the lonely pursuit of power and emphasizes our belief that power requires an ability to be detached and distant.¹⁵

Men's alienation and distance from women and other men takes on strange and rather conflicting forms. Robert Bly and those in the mythopoeic men's movement have made a lot out of the loss of the father and the distance of many men, in dominant North American cultures anyway, from their own fathers. Part of their point is accurate and simply reaffirms important work done over the past couple of decades on issues around fathers and fathering.¹⁶ Their discussion of these points, however, lacks the richness and depth of feminist psychoanalysis that holds, as a central issue, that the absence of men from most parenting and nurturing tasks means that the masculinity internalized by little boys is based on distance, separation, and a fantasy image of what constitutes manhood, rather than on the type of oneness and inseparability that typifies early mother-child relationships.

The distance from other men is accentuated, in many contemporary heterosexual men's cultures at least, by the emotional distance from other males that begins to develop in adolescence. Men might have buddies, pals, workmates, and friends, but they seldom have the level of complete trust and intimacy enjoyed by many women. Our experience of friendship is limited by the reduced empathy that becomes the masculine norm.¹⁷ As

a result we have the paradox that most heterosexual men (and even many gay men) in the dominant North American culture are extremely isolated from other men. In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, many of the institutions of male bonding—the clubs, sporting events, card games, locker rooms, workplaces, professional and religious hierarchies—are a means to provide safety for isolated men who need to find ways to affirm themselves, find common ground with other men, and collectively exercise their power.¹⁸ Such isolation means that each man can remain blind to his dialogue of self-doubt about making the masculine grade—the self-doubts that are consciously experienced by virtually all adolescent males and then consciously or unconsciously by them as adults. In a strange sense, this isolation is key in preserving patriarchy: To a greater or lesser extent it increases the possibility that all men end up colluding with patriarchy—in all its diverse myths and realities—because their own doubts and sense of confusion remain buried.

It is not only other men from whom most men, and certainly most straight men, remain distant. It is also from women. Here another important insight of feminist psychoanalysis is key: Boys' separation from their mother or mother figure means the erection of more or less impermeable ego barriers and an affirmation of distinction, difference, and opposition to those things identified with women and femininity. Boys repress characteristics and possibilities associated with mother/women/the feminine, unconsciously and consciously. Thus Bly and the mythopoetic theorists have it all wrong when they suggest that the central problem with contemporary men (and by this they seem to mean North American middle-class, young to middle-aged, white, straight urban men) is that they have become feminized. The problem as suggested above is the wholesale repression and suppression of those traits and possibilities associated with women.¹⁹

These factors suggest the complexity of gender identity, gender formation, and gender relations. It appears that we need forms of analysis that allow for contradictory relationships between individuals and the power structures from which they benefit. It is a strange situation when men's very real power and privilege in the world hinges not only on that power but also on an experience of alienation and powerlessness—rooted in childhood experiences but reinforced in different ways as adolescents and then adults. These experiences, in turn, become the spur at the individual level (in addition to the obvious and tangible benefits) to recreate and celebrate the forms and structures through which men exercise power.

But as we have seen, there is no single masculinity or one experience of being a man. The experience of different men, their actual power and privilege in the world, is based on a range of social positions and relations. The social power of a poor white man is different from a rich one, a working-class black man from a working-class white man, a gay man from a bisexual man from a straight man, a Jewish man in Ethiopia from a Jewish man in Israel, a teenage boy from an adult. Within each group, men usually have privileges and power relative to the women in that group, but in society as a whole, things are not always so straightforward.

The emergent discourses on the relation between oppression based on gender, racial, class, and social orientation are but one reflection of the complexity of the problem. These discussions are critical in the development of a new generation of feminist analysis and practice. The tendency, unfortunately, is often to add up categories of oppression as if they were separate units. Sometimes, such tallies are even used to decide who, supposedly, is the most oppressed. The problem can become absurd for two simple reasons: One is the impossibility of quantifying experiences of oppression; the other is that the sources of oppression do not come in discreet units. After all, think of an unemployed black gay working-class man. We might say this man is exploited as a working-class man, oppressed as a gay man, oppressed and the victim of racism because he is black, suffering terribly because he is out of work, but we are not going to say, oh, he's oppressed *as a man*. Of course he is not oppressed as a man, but I worry that the distinction is rather academic because none of the qualities used to describe him is completely separable from the others. After all, his particular sense of manhood, that is, his masculinity, is in part a product of those other factors. "Man" becomes as much an adjective modifying "black," "working-class," "out of work," and "gay" as these things modify the word "man." Our lives, our minds, our bodies simply are not divided up in a way that allows us to separate the different categories of our existence. This man's experiences, self-definition(s), and location in the hierarchies of power are codetermined by a multitude of factors. Furthermore, because masculinities denote relations of power among men, and not just men against women, a man who has little social power in the dominant society, whose masculinity is not of a hegemonic variety, who is the victim of tremendous social oppression, might also wield tremendous power in his own milieu and neighborhood vis-à-vis women of his own class or social grouping or other males, as in the case of a school-yard bully or a member of an urban gang who certainly does not have structural power in the society as a whole.

Our whole language of oppression is in need of overhaul for it is based on simplistic binary oppositions, reductionist equations between identity and social location, and unifocal notions of the self. What is important for us here is not to deny that men, as a group, have social power or even that men, within their subgroups, tend to have considerable power, but rather that there are different forms of structural power and powerlessness among men. Similarly, it is important not to deny the structural and individual oppression of women as a social group. Rather it is to recognize, as we have seen earlier, that there is not a linear relationship between a structured system of power inequalities, the real and supposed benefits of power, and one's own experience of these relations of power.

Men and Feminism

An analysis of men's contradictory experiences of power gives us useful insights into the potential relation of men to feminism. The power side of the equation is not anything new and, indeed, men's power and privileges form a very good reason for men to individually and collectively oppose feminism.

But we do know that an increasing number of men have become sympathetic to feminism (in content if not always in name) and have embraced feminist theory and action (although, again, more often in theory than in action). There are different reasons for a man's acceptance of feminism. It might be outrage at inequality; it might result from the influence of a partner, family member, or friend; it might be his own sense of injustice at the hands of other men; it might be a sense of shared oppression, say because of his sexual orientation; it might be his own guilt about the privileges he enjoys as a man; it might be horror at men's violence; it might be sheer decency.

Although the majority of men in North America would still not label themselves profeminist, a strong majority of men in Canada and a reasonable percentage of men in the United States would sympathize with many of the issues as presented by feminists. As we know, this sympathy does not always translate into changes of behavior, but, increasingly, ideas are changing and in some cases, behavior is starting to catch up.

How do we explain the growing number of men who are supportive of feminism and women's liberation (to use that term that was too hastily abandoned by the end of the 1970s)? Except for the rare outcast or iconoclast, there are few examples from history where significant numbers of a ruling

group supported the liberation of those over whom they ruled and from whose subordination they benefited.

One answer is that the current feminist wave—whatever its weaknesses and whatever backlash might exist against it—has had a massive impact during the past two and a half decades. Large numbers of men, along with many women who had supported the status quo, now realize that the tide has turned and, like it or not, the world is changing. Women's rebellion against patriarchy holds the promise of bringing patriarchy to an end. Although patriarchy in its many different social and economic forms still has considerable staying power, an increasing number of its social, political, economic, and emotional structures are proving unworkable. Some men react with rearguard actions while others step tentatively or strongly in the direction of change.

This explanation of men's support for change catches only part of the picture. The existence of contradictory experiences of power suggests there is a basis for men's embrace of feminism that goes beyond swimming with a change in the tide.

The rise of feminism has shifted the balance between men's power and men's pain. In societies and eras in which men's social power went largely unchallenged, men's power so outweighed men's pain that the existence of this pain could remain buried, even nonexistent. When you rule the roost, call the shots, and are closer to God, there is not a lot of room left for pain, at least for pain that appears to be linked to the practices of masculinity. But with the rise of modern feminism, the fulcrum between men's power and men's pain has been undergoing a rapid shift. This is particularly true in cultures where the definition of men's power had already moved away from tight control over the home and tight monopolies in the realm of work.²⁰

As men's power is challenged, those things that came as a compensation, a reward, or a lifelong distraction from any potential pain are progressively reduced or, at least, called into question. As women's oppression becomes problematized, many forms of this oppression become problems for men. Individual gender-related experiences of pain and disquietude among men have become increasingly manifest and have started to gain a social hearing and social expression in widely diverse forms, including different branches of the men's movement—from reactionary antifeminists, to the Bly-type mythopoetic movement, to profeminist men's organizing.

In other words, if gender is about power, then as actual relations of power between men and women and between different groups of men

(such as straight and gay men) start to shift, then our experiences of gender and our gender definitions must also begin to change. The process of gender work is ongoing and includes this process of reformulation and upheaval.

Rising Support and Looming Pitfalls

The embrace of feminism by men is not, surprisingly, entirely new. As Michael Kimmel argues in his insightful introduction to *Against the Tide: Profeminist Men in the United States, 1796-1990. A Documentary History*, profeminist men have constituted a small but persistent feature of the U.S. sociopolitical scene for two centuries.²¹

What makes the current situation different is that profeminism among men (or at least acceptance of aspects of feminist critiques and feminist political action) is reaching such large-scale dimensions. Ideas that were almost unanimously discounted by men (and indeed by most women) only 25 years ago now have widespread legitimacy. It does not help to overstate the progress that has been made; many individuals remain staunchly propatriarchal and most institutions remain male dominated. But changes are visible. Affirmative action programs are widespread, many social institutions controlled by men—in education, the arts, professions, politics, and religion—are undergoing a process of sexual integration even though this usually requires not only ongoing pressure but often women's adapting to masculinist work cultures. In various countries the percentage of men favoring abortion rights for women equals or outstrips support by women. Male-dominated governments have accepted the need to adopt laws that have been part of the feminist agenda. (One of the most dramatic instances was in Canada in 1992 when the Conservative Party government completely recast the law on rape—following a process of consultation with women's groups. The new law stated that all sexual relations must be explicitly consensual, that “no means no” and that it takes a clearly stated and freely given “yes” to mean yes. Again, in Canada, one thinks of the way that feminist organizations insisted on their presence—and were accepted as key players—at the bargaining table in the 1991 and 1992 round of constitutional talks.) All such changes were a result of the hard work and impact of the women's movement; this impact on institutions controlled by men shows the increased acceptance by men of at least some of the terms of feminism, whether this acceptance is begrudging or welcome.

For those men and women interested in social change and speeding up the type of changes described above, some serious problems remain:

Although there are ever-increasing sympathies among men to the ideas of women's equality, and although some institutions have been forced to adopt measures promoting women's equality, there is still a lag between the ideas accepted by men and their actual behavior. Although many men might reluctantly or enthusiastically support efforts for change, profeminism among men has not yet reached mass organizational forms in most cases.

This brings us to the implications of the analysis of this chapter to the issue of profeminist organizing by men. Stimulated by the ever-widening impact of modern feminism, the past two decades have seen the emergence of something that, for lack of a better phrase, has been called the men's movement. There have been two major currents to the men's movements.²² One is the mythopoetic men's movement. Coming to prominence in the late 1980s (in particular, with the success of Robert Bly's *Iron John*), it is actually the latest expression of an approach dating to the 1970s that focuses on the pain and costs of being men or of a masculinist politic dating almost a hundred years that sought to create homosocial spaces as an antidote to the supposed feminization of men.²³ A second has been the less prominent profeminist men's movement (within which I count my own activities) that has focused on the social and individual expressions of men's power and privileges, including issues of men's violence.

Unfortunately, the dominant expressions of these two wings of the men's movement have developed with their own deformities, idiosyncrasies, and mistakes in analysis and action. In particular, each has tended to grapple primarily with one aspect of men's lives—men's power, in the case of the profeminist movement, and men's pain, in the case of the mythopoetic. In doing so, they not only miss the totality of men's experience in a male-dominated society, but miss the crucial relationship between men's power and men's pain.²⁴

The profeminist men's movement starts from the acknowledgment that men have power and privilege in a male-dominated society. Although I feel strongly that this must be our starting point, it is only a beginning, for there are many challenging issues: How can we build mass and active support for feminism among men? How can we encourage men to realize that support for feminism means more than supporting institutional and legal changes but also requires personal changes in their own lives? How can we link the struggles against homophobia and sexism and to realize in practice that homophobia is a major factor in promoting misogyny and sexism among men?

Within these questions are a set of theoretical, strategic, and tactical problems. If our goal is not simply to score academic or political debating points or to feel good about our profeminist credentials, but, alongside women, to actually affect the course of history, then, I would suggest, it is critical to take these questions very seriously. For me, several points emerge from this analysis.

Whether a man assumes that his most pressing concern is working in support of women's equality and challenging patriarchy, in challenging homophobia and encouraging a gay- and lesbian-positive culture, or in enhancing the lives of all men, our starting point as men must be a recognition of the centrality of men's power and privilege and a recognition of the need to challenge that power. This is not only in support of feminism, but it is a recognition that the social and personal construction of this power is the source of the malaise, confusion, and alienation felt by men in our era as well as an important source of homophobia.

The more we realize that some form of homophobia is central to the experience of men in most patriarchal societies, that homophobia and heterosexism shape the daily experiences of all men, and that such homophobia is central to the construction of sexism, the more we will be able to develop the understanding and the practical tools to achieve equality. The profeminist men's movement in North America, Europe, and Australia has provided men with a unique opportunity for gay, straight, and bisexual men to come together, to work together, to dance together. Yet I do not think that most straight profeminist men see confronting homophobia as a priority or, even if a part of a list of priorities, as something that has a central bearing on their own lives.²⁵

The notion of contradictory experiences of power, in the plural, provides an analytical tool for integrating issues of race, class, and ethnicity into the heart of profeminist men's organizing. It allows us to sympathetically relate to a range of men's experiences, to understand that men's power is nonlinear and subject to a variety of social and psychological forces. It suggests forms of analysis and action that understand that the behavior of any group of men is the result of an often contradictory insertion into various hierarchies of power. It belies any notion that our identities and experiences as men can be separated from our identities and experiences based on the color of our skin or our class background. It therefore suggests that struggling against racism, anti-Semitism, and class privilege, for example, is integral to a struggle to transform contemporary gender relations.

We must follow the lead of the women's movement in asserting the importance not only of both personal and social change but of the relationship of the two. As men we need to advocate and actively organize in support of legal and social changes, from freedom of choice to child-care programs, from new initiatives to challenge men's violence to affirmative action programs at our workplaces. We must support and help build such changes not only at the level of macropolitics but in our own workplaces, trade unions, professional associations, places of worship, and communities. We must see these matters not simply as "women's issues" but issues that confront and affect us all.

Such work not only involves providing verbal, financial, and organizational support to the campaigns organized by women; it also requires men organizing campaigns of men aimed at men. Efforts such as Canada's White Ribbon Campaign²⁶ are critical to break men's silence on a range of feminist issues, to encourage men to identify with these concerns, and to productively use the resources to which men have disproportionate access. Such efforts must be carried out in dialogue and consultation with women's groups—and with respect for the leadership that women provide in this work—so that men will not come to dominate this work. At the same time we should not shrink from the importance of men taking up profeminist issues as our own: As perpetrators of violence against women, for example, men must be reached if we are to stop the problem—and because of sexism men can better reach other men.

At the same time as we engage in social activism, we need to learn to scrutinize and challenge our own behavior. This does not mean sinking into guilt or joining those men within the profeminist community who like the feel of a good hairshirt. After all, guilt is a profoundly conservative, demobilizing, and disempowering emotion. Rather it means understanding that our contribution to social change will be limited if we continue to interact with women on the basis of dominance; it will be limited if we do not actively challenge homophobia and sexism among our friends and workmates and in our ourselves. Change will be limited if we do not begin to create the immediate conditions for the transformation of social life, especially striving for equality in housework and child care.

Struggling for personal change can be done only if we are able to break our isolation with other men, something experienced most acutely by straight men but also by gay men. After all, uncontested assumptions about what it means to be a man combined with deep-set insecurities about making the masculine grade are essential props of the current patriarchal system and a basic reason why we construct and reconstruct personalities

shaped by patriarchy. So developing a social action approach is entirely consistent with—and perhaps ultimately requires—men developing support groups. Such groups allow us to look at our individual process of gender work, how we have all been shaped by our patriarchal system. It allows us to examine our own contradictory relationships to men's power. It allows us to overcome the fear that prevents most men from speaking out and challenging sexism and homophobia. It can give us a new and different sense of strength.

In all this, in our public work, in our challenges to sexism and homophobia, to racism and bigotry in our daily lives, we must not shrink from a politics of compassion. This means never losing sight of the negative impact of contemporary patriarchy on men ourselves even if our framework sees the oppression of women as the central problem. It means looking at the negative impact of homophobia on all men. It means avoiding the language of guilt and blame and substituting for it the language of taking responsibility for change.

Such a politics of compassion is only possible if we begin from the sex-gender distinction. If patriarchy and its symptoms were a biological fiat then not only would the problems be virtually intractable, but punishment, repression, blame, and guilt would seem to be the necessary corollaries. But if we start with the assumption that the problems are ones of gender—and that gender refers to particular relations of power that are socially structured and individually embodied—then we are able to be simultaneously critical of men's collective power and the behavior and attitudes of individual men *and* to be male affirmative, to say that feminism will enhance the lives of men, that change is a win-win situation but that it requires men giving up forms of privilege, power, and control.

On the psychodynamic level—the realm in which we can witness the interplay between social movements and the individual psyche—the challenge of feminism to men is one of dislodging the hegemonic masculine psyche. This is not a psychological interpretation of change because it is the social challenge to men's power and the actual reduction of men's social power that is the source of change. What was once a secure relationship between power over others, control over oneself, and the suppression of a range of needs and emotions is under attack. What had felt stable, natural, and right is being revealed as both a source of oppression for others and the prime source of pain, anguish, and disquietude for men themselves.

The implication of all this is that the feminist challenge to men's power has the potential of liberating men and helping more men discover new

masculinities that will be part of demolishing gender altogether. Whatever privileges and forms of power we will certainly lose will be increasingly compensated by the end to the pain, fear, dysfunctional forms of behavior, violence experienced at the hands of other men, violence we inflict on ourselves, endless pressure to perform and succeed, and the sheer impossibility of living up to our masculine ideals.

Our awareness of men's contradictory experiences of power gives us the tools to simultaneously challenge men's power and speak to men's pain. It is the basis for a politics of compassion and for enlisting men's support for a revolution that is challenging the most basic and long-lasting structures of human civilization.

Notes

1. Although it may be somewhat awkward for women readers, I often refer to men in the first person plural—we, us, our—to acknowledge my position within the object of my analysis.

2. My thanks to Harry Brod who several years ago cautioned me against talking about men's power and men's pain as two sides of the same coin, a comment that led me to focus on the relationship between the two. Thanks also to Harry and to Bob Connell for their comments on a draft of this article. I'd particularly like to express my appreciation to Michael Kimmel both for his comments on the draft and for our ongoing intellectual partnership and friendship.

3. Although there has been controversy over the applicability of the term *patriarchy*—see, for example, Michele Barrett and Mary MacIntosh's reservations in *The Anti-Social Family* (London: Verso, 1982)—I follow others who use it as a broad descriptive term for male-dominated social systems.

4. Even the apparently fixed biological line between males and females—fixed in terms of genital and reproductive differences—is subject to variation, as seen in the relatively significant number of males and females with so-called genital, hormonal, and chromosomal abnormalities that bend the sharp distinction between the sexes—rendering men or women infertile, women or men with secondary sex characteristics usually associated with the other sex, and women or men with different genital combinations. Nonetheless, the notion of biological sex is useful as shorthand and to distinguish sex from socially constructed gender. For an accessible discussion, particularly on the endocrinology of sex differentiation, see John Money and Anke A. Ehrhardt's, *Man & Woman, Boy & Girl* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972).

5. The sex-gender distinction is ignored or blurred not only by reactionary ideologues or sociobiologists (of both liberal and conservative persuasion) who want to assert that the current lives, roles, and relations between the sexes are timeless, biological givens. At least one stream of feminist thought—dubbed cultural feminism or difference feminism by its critics—celebrates to varying degrees a range of supposedly timeless and natural female qualities. Similarly, those influenced by Jungian thought, such as Robert Bly and the mythopoetic thinkers, also posit essential qualities of manhood and woman-

hood. Even those feminists who accept the sex-gender distinction often use the term *gender* when what is meant is *sex*—as in “the two genders” and “the other gender” when in fact there are a multiplicity of genders, as suggested in the concepts of femininities and masculinities. Similarly, many feminist women and profeminist men refer erroneously to “male violence”—rather than “men’s violence”—even though the biological category “male” (as opposed to the gender category “men”) implies that a propensity to commit violence is part of the genetic mandate of half the species, a supposition that neither anthropology nor contemporary observation warrants.

6. For a critique of the limits of sex role theory, see, for example, Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell, and John Lee, “Hard and Heavy: Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity,” in *Beyond Patriarchy: Essays by Men on Pleasure, Power and Change*, edited by Michael Kaufman (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987).

7. R. W. Connell, *Gender and Power* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

8. *Cracking the Armour: Power, Pain, and the Lives of Men* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 1993).

9. C. B. Macpherson, *Democratic Theory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).

10. Although I am referring here to men’s contradictory relationships to masculine power, a parallel, although very different, discussion could also be conducted concerning women’s relationship to men’s power and to their own positions of individual, familial, and social power and powerlessness.

11. See Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California, 1978); Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1977); Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love* (New York: Random House, 1988); and Gad Horowitz, *Repression: Basic and Surplus Repression in Psychoanalytic Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).

12. This paragraph is based on text in Kaufman, *Cracking the Armour*, op. cit.; and Kaufman, “The Construction of Masculinity and the Triad of Men’s Violence,” in *Beyond Patriarchy*, op. cit.

13. I am not implying that the nature of the relations or the conflicts are the same from one family form to another or, even that “the family” as such exists in all societies. See M. Barrett and M. McIntosh, *The Anti-Social Family*, op. cit.

14. See, for example, the accounts in Sylvia Levine and Joseph Koenig, eds., *Why Men Rape* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1980) and Timothy Beneke, *Men on Rape* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1982).

15. Jeff Hearn, *The Gender of Oppression* (Brighton, UK: Wheatsheaf, 1987).

16. For numerous sources on fatherhood, see Michael E. Lamb, ed., *The Role of the Father in Child Development* (New York: John Wiley, 1981); Stanley H. Cath, Alan R. Gurwitt, and John Munder Ross, *Father and Child* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982). Also see Michael W. Yogman, James Cooley, & Daniel Kindlon, “Fathers, Infants, Toddlers: Developing Relationship” and others in Phyllis Bronstein and Carolyn Pape Cowan, *Fatherhood Today* (New York: John Wiley, 1988); and Kyle D. Pruett, “Infants of Primary Nurturing Fathers,” in *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, vol. 38, 1983; and for a different approach, see Samuel Osherson, *Finding our Fathers* (New York: Free Press, 1986).

17. Lillian Rubin, *Intimate Strangers* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1984). See also Peter M. Nardi, ed., *Men’s Friendships* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1992).

18. Kaufman, *Cracking the Armour*, op. cit.

19. The mythopoetic framework is discussed at length by Michael Kimmel and Michael Kaufman in chapter 14 of this volume.

20. One fascinating account of total patriarchal control of the home is Naguib Mahfouz's 1956 book *Palace Walk* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990).

21. Michael Kimmel and Tom Mosmiller, eds., *Against the Tide: Profeminist Men in the United States, 1776-1990. A Documentary History* (Boston: Beacon, 1992).

22. A third is the antifeminist and, at times, unashamedly misogynist, men's rights movement, which does not concern us in this chapter.

23. In the 1970s and early 1980s, books and articles by men such as Herb Goldberg and Warren Farrell spoke of the lethal characteristics of manhood—in particular in the ways it was lethal against men. By the time Robert Bly's *Iron John* made it to the top of the best-seller lists at the end of 1990, vague analyses had crystalized into a broad North American movement with a newspaper, *Wingspan*, men's retreats, groups, drumming circles, regional newsletters, and a string of books that has yet to abate.

There are some positive and potentially progressive aspects to this approach and the work of the thousands of men who participate in some sort of men's group within this framework. One is the simple, but significant, acknowledgment of men's pain; another is the participation of men in men's groups and the decision by men (usually, but not always, straight men) to break their isolation from other men and seek collective paths of change.

On the other hand, as Michael Kimmel and I argue at length elsewhere in this volume, the theoretical framework of this movement virtually ignores men's social and individual power (and its relation to pain), ignores what we have called the mother wound (following the insights of feminist psychoanalysis), crudely attempts to appropriate a hodgepodge of indigenous cultures, and pulls men away from the social (and possibly the individual) practices that will challenge patriarchy. My thanks to Michael for the formulation of masculinist politics creating new homosocial space.

24. Although categorizing these two wings of the men's movement makes a useful tool for discussion, there are no hard and fast boundaries between the two. A number of the men (more so in Canada than in the United States) attracted to Robert Bly and the mythopoetic movement are sympathetic to feminism and the contemporary struggles of women. Meanwhile, most men pulled toward the profeminist framework are also concerned about enhancing the lives of men. Men, particularly in the latter category, are concerned with the impact of homophobia on all men.

25. My favorite story about the reluctance of many straights to identify with the need to publicly challenge homophobia is told by a colleague who, in Toronto in the early 1980s, was teaching a course on social change. At the student pub after class one night, one of the students was lamenting that he didn't live in another era. It would have been great to live in the late 1930s, he said, so he could have gone off and fought in the Spanish revolution. My colleague said, "Well you know, dozens of gay bathhouses were raided by the police this week and there have been big demonstrations almost every night. You could join those." The student looked at him and said, "But I'm not gay," to which my colleague responded, "I didn't know you were Spanish."

On the relationship of homophobia to the construction of "normal" masculinity see Michael Kimmel, Chapter 7, this volume, and Kaufman, *Cracking the Armour*, op. cit. Also see Suzanne Pharr, *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* (Little Rock: Chardon Press, 1988).

26. The White Ribbon Campaign focuses on men's violence against women. A small group of us began the campaign in late 1991 and within a week tens of thousands of men across Canada (hundreds of thousands a year later) wore a white ribbon for a week as a pledge they would not "commit, condone or remain silent about violence against women." The campaign, aimed to break men's silence and to mobilize the energy and resources of men, enjoys support across the social and political spectrum and has begun to spread to other countries. To receive an information packet on the campaign (\$2) please write: The White Ribbon Campaign, 220 Yonge Street, Suite 104, Toronto, Canada M5B 2H1 or telephone (416) 596-1513 or fax (416) 596-2359.

Theorizing Masculinities

Edited by
Harry Brod
Michael Kaufman

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