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Non-Hegemonic Masculinity against Gender Violence

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Abstract

Using the case of men in favour of equality, this article shows various attempts by males to construct new ways of being men. This is because an ever-increasing number of men oppose the categorical imperatives of traditional masculinity and the idea that being a man implies exercising power at any price.

Through an exhaustive review of the literature on the topic, it will be shown that there is no such thing as one single form of masculinity. This means that there is no universal masculine model valid for all places, periods, social classes, ages, races and sexual orientations, but rather a heterogeneous diversity of male identities and ways of being men in human societies. It will also be investigated how the viewpoints discovered have generated a whole series of expressions of opinion speaking of different positions and approaches when dealing with or facing up to this situation of inequality. These might be grouped into optimistic views of change and those adopting a more pessimistic or negative position.

Furthermore, it will be seen how men can support equality between the sexes, and an education in such gender equality is fundamental in combating gender violence. In brief, a study of masculinity re-opens questions of gender, identities and sexualities within a framework of critical awareness that aims to destabilize not merely the system, but also the world of academe.

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1. Introduction

Gender is a dynamic concept and an analytic category that demonstrates two main ideas. Firstly, the stereotypes, ideologies, behaviours and lifestyles conventionally associated with feminine and masculine vary considerably from one culture to another. Secondly, women and men are not universal and unalterable essences, but rather specific

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existences, changing and far from uniform. More precisely, Kimmel (1997) argues that masculinity is a set of constantly changing meanings, which are constructed through relationships with ourselves, with others, and with our world. From this point of view, it is possible to agree with Millington (2007) that rather than seeking an essential definition of masculinity, one of the most important tasks in gender studies would be to analyse the differences between men and their varying relationships with masculinity and femininity. For their part, Berger, Wallis and Watson (1995) insist that masculinity should be seen as something always ambivalent, always complicated, always dependent upon the demands of personal and institutional power. Thus, masculinity is shaped not as a monolithic entity but rather as an interrelation of emotional and intellectual factors directly affecting men and women, in which other social factors like race, sexuality, nationality and class also have a part. Masculinity signifies different things to different men, at different ages, in different periods and different societies. Hence, fortunately, not all men are the same. Likewise, masculinity is not static or timeless, but rather historical; it is not the manifestation of an inner essence, but constructed socially; it does not bubble up into consciousness from biological foundations, but is created by culture (Kimmel, 1997).

2. Masculinity and Masculinities

The most significant pieces of work published in recent years on the topic of masculinity concur with gender studies of a feminist orientation to see male domination as a set of socio-cultural practices grounded in an ideology of power that justifies the scorning and oppression of women and of certain groups of men in the name of a heterosexual view of the world and the individuals in it. Perhaps the most outstanding are items by Badinter (1992); V. J. Seidler (1994, 2006); Killmartin (1994); Connell (1995); Kimmel (1996, 1997 and 2001); Kaufman (1997 and 1998); Bourdieu (2000); Valdés and Olavarría (1998); Bonino (1998 and 2001); Segarra and Carabí (2000); Castañeda (2002); Lomas (2003 and 2008); Gil Calvo (2006); Valcuende and López (2003), among others.

In a now classic piece of work on the social organization of masculinity, Robert Connell (1995: 115 et seqq.) identified four different types of masculinity: hegemonic, subordinate, complacent and marginal. In the first case, hegemonic masculinity is the form embodying male domination and exercising power and authority over women (and other men), with all the consequences of oppression, violence and privileges. That is, hegemonic masculinity would represent the traditional archetype of virility and male stereotypes in accordance with a patriarchal culture. This concept of hegemony, derived from Gramsci's analysis of class relationships, refers to the cultural dynamic through which one group demands and maintains a position of leadership in social life. At any given time, one form of masculinity is prized culturally over others. Hence, hegemonic masculinity is defined as a configuration of generic practices that embody the currently accepted response to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchal attitudes, guaranteeing the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. In the second instance, subordinate masculinity is found on the fringes of traditional lifestyles, with behaviours and feelings conventionally attributed to women, so that it is considered inappropriate and effeminate by most men. This type of masculinity would comprise both male behaviours of a homosexual orientation and some other ways of being a man closer to the values normally seen as typical of women (a caring ethos towards people, an emphasis on feelings and emotions, solidarity with feminist stances and the like). In the third place, marginal masculinity refers to those groups of men who suffer social exclusion and have only very limited access to power (for instance, the black minority in the United States, North African immigrants in Europe, or indigenous tribes in Latin America). They are at the receiving end of all sorts of injustice and oppression in societies led by men who shamelessly exercise the most tyrannical and unjust forms of hegemonic masculinity. Despite this, they do not question male domination nor its behaviour patterns (especially those referring to relationships with women), nor do they distance themselves in any significant fashion from the misogynistic and violent tone adopted by patriarchal culture. Finally, complacent masculinity (which might even be termed accomplice masculinity) is the sort relating to men who have no significant access to power and lack any high financial or social status, but still enjoy the patriarchal dividends associated with the male sex, without ever questioning the justice of such privileges. Complacent masculinity is no more than an attenuated version of standard masculinity and a visible tip of the iceberg of hidden machismo (Castañeda, 2002).

Thus, there is no such thing as just one single kind of masculinity. This implies that no model of masculinity exists that is universal and valid for every place, period, social class, age, race or sexual orientation, but rather a diverse mix of male identities and ways of being men in our societies. Moreover, dominant version of masculine identity is not

an essence, but an ideology of power and the oppression of women which tends to justify male dominance. Furthermore, masculine identity, in all its versions, is learnt and hence can also be changed, to the extent that people are not passive beings when in the process of socially constructing their identities as humans. Rather, they are active agents, capable to a greater or lesser degree of adopting varying identities in the context of the diverse social practices in which they are involved. What would appear clear is that hegemonic masculinity is at the root of patriarchal tyranny, and the injustices and violence to which so many women (and so many men, too) are subjected around the world. Furthermore, it has nothing to do with any supposed essence of masculinity that condemns men to be as they are and to act as they act, but rather is an outcome of a cultural link between traditional forms of masculinity and power.

Pierre Bourdieu (2000) points out that male dominance is possible in so far as women are subjected not merely to cultural coercion but also simultaneously to a token violence aimed at encouraging acceptance of men's symbolic and cultural capital, that is, of their ways of seeing, understanding, and organizing the world. Thus, traditionally the education of women was directed towards the learning of the virtues of abnegation, resignation and silence. Hence, it taught them that to be a man is to be in a position of power. For Kimmel (1997), the hegemonic definition of virility is a man in power, a man with power, and a powerful man. Masculinity is associated with being strong, successful, capable and reliable, and with being in control. This culturally developed definition perpetuates the power of men over women and particularly over sexual and racial minorities. A male-centred view attributes to men the right to have hegemonic control, with the justification that Nature has given them an anatomical difference that determines cultural distinctions. Biological determinism is the justification for believing men to be stronger, more intelligent and more able. The mere existence of an external male organ gave an excuse for a sexual division of labour, and exclusion of women from citizenship and public affairs.

With regard to the masculinities noted above, Badinter (1992) when analysing the figure of the male in contemporary society recognizes four basic features in the male ideal. First, a "true man" lacks any femininity, and is obliged to renounce a part of himself by repressing his capacity for affection and his humane side, being forced to demonstrate that he is neither a baby, a woman or a homosexual. Second, manliness is measured by success, power and the admiration aroused in others. The requirement is superiority over other people. Appropriation of the public sphere involves an imperative to be successful in the eyes of other men. Thirdly, a man has an obligation to be wholly strong, independent, powerful, autonomous and unmovable, so as to show no sign of feminine weakness. He must maintain a totally firm attitude that may go as far as stubbornness. Fourthly, going farther along the line of being the strongest of all, he will use violence if necessary. Men may well be culturally violent because of a need to demonstrate their identity, which in reality may be weak. Constantly proving their masculinity, which may be doubtful, obliges them to give public demonstrations that can involve rash actions, abuses of power, humiliation and subjection of anybody he feels is a threat. In the end, such a man is better prepared for death than for marriage and the care of children, somebody whose affections have been amputated.

Michael Kaufman (1997) states that too differing degrees there are more and more men who suffer distress through trying to follow and take on impossible patterns of virility. In other words, patriarchal culture is not a problem for women alone. The great paradox of the patriarchal culture is that harmful forms of masculinity in a society dominated by men are prejudicial not just for women but also for men themselves. That is, the tyranny of the model also affects men. Hence, Carlos Lomas (2008) says that stressing the unperceived effects of male power on men and the high moral and emotional cost of machismo in their lives, not only those of women, constitutes a very useful strategy when inviting them to join in the egalitarian utopias of feminism and to collaborate in the rebellion against patriarchal (dis)order. On these lines, Michel Foucault (1972) stated that power is tolerated only if it hides a substantial part of itself. Such a concealment of the power of men is possible because it puts forward no justification of itself, being conceived of as a legitimate and neutral power, exercised on behalf of civilization and the progress of humanity, and based on human reason and the natural order of things. This is the trick: what is masculine is rational, universal and neutral, and only what is feminine has the stigma of gender. Similarly, Bourdieu (2000) wrote that the strength of the masculine order was to be found in the fact that it dispensed with any justification: the male-centred view was imposed as neutral and felt no need to put forward statements intended to legitimize itself. The social order functions as a vast symbolic machinery tending to ratify the male dominance on which it is founded. This domination in the cultural and social order is supported by the fallacy of the superiority of the male nature and ends up by making the sexual division

of labour seem natural (and desirable, just, and inevitable) and by perpetuating an unjust distribution of tasks and expectations between women and men. According to Bourdieu, the learning of this habit, that is, learning the ideologies, lifestyles, norms and expectations that everybody has as a function of their living conditions, is not only a cognitive, but rather above all, a bodily apprenticeship, to the extent that the meanings in this learning process are constructed from the body. Hence the most significant social coercions do not act on the intellect, but rather on the body, and it is in the body where the cultural meanings linked to sexual differences and the differences in power associated with these sexual differences are inscribed in a particularly effective way.

2.1. Discourses on Inequality.

The attitudes noted up to this point have triggered a series of expressions of opinion about the different positions and approaches possible when coming to terms with this situation of inequality. They can be grouped into two sets. On the one hand, there are optimistic opinions about change. On the other, there are those adopting a more pessimistic or negative stance. In the first grouping, as long ago as the 1960s one view stood out, talking about the “revolving door” phenomenon (Young and Willmott, 1957). This expression was used to describe a hypothesis which stated that as women came out more and more into the public arena, working outside their households, men would gradually go back into the home to take up some of the space they left vacant. More than fifty years later, there seems to be very little evidence that might corroborate this hypothesis. Within this rhetoric of “gradualist optimism” (McMahon, 1999) certain types of new men have been described who might be seen as an indication of a change towards equality. Hence, for instance, one kind of new man has appeared who legitimizes the feminine side of men, understood as meaning sensitive, emotional and receptive, and who thus would be able to go into the domestic context, considered properly feminine. There is also the figure of the new father, with stronger emotional ties to his children, or of the new family man who is disenchanted with the world of work, and sets higher store on spending more time at home.

As against these, other opinions are expressed that generally see difficulties in the way of change. So, for instance, there is the rhetoric of the format of the labour market, implying that it is economically more viable for him to work outside the home, for her inside. This is at the basis of many European equality policies aimed at involving men, if not so much in household chores, at least in caring for their children. The rhetoric of the world of symbolism and the roles it assigns states that men’s realization of their social identity is justifiably in the public space, outside the home. The rhetoric of male confusion speaks of the disconcertment and paralysis of men when faced with vertiginous changes in women’s status, which they cannot assimilate. Chodorow (1978) and Benjamin (1996) use a rhetoric of the defensive and fragile male psyche to locate males’ problem as being in their lack of emotions, which leads them to defensive attitudes and attempts to dominate women because they are perceived as threatening.

As may be observed, in general many of these viewpoints, as noted before, have an underlying notion of men as “emotionally illiterate”, that is, having little capacity to express feelings, emotions, empathy and the like, as compared with women. As Kaufman (1995) put it, in more specific terms acquisition of hegemonic masculinity (and of many forms of subordinate masculinity) is a process through which men come to suppress a whole range of emotions, needs and possibilities, such as the pleasure of caring for others, receptiveness, empathy and compassion, felt to be incompatible with male power. These emotions are ruled out because they might restrict the capacity and desire for self-control or for domination over the humans surrounding them, upon whom they in fact depend in love and friendship. They are suppressed because they come to be associated with the femininity that has been rejected in the search for masculinity. It is true that in the dominant models of masculinity there is a genuine horror of contamination by the feminine, because in reality, if not in claims then in practice, it is very easy to drift away from what is a model that is impossible and fictitious, but none the less real, setting an unattainable goal. A model that is watched from within the family, in the street, at work, and already in adolescence, as Kimmel points out, we learn that our peer groups are a sort of gender police, constantly threatening to reveal us as effeminate, as not much of a man. A boy while he is still in the world of women is not a man; a man who has sexual relationships with other men is less than a man; a man who ceases work moves away from the model of masculinity, just as does a man who shows his feelings. It is precisely an analysis of certain of these contexts of sociability that will allow comprehension of the mechanisms of reproduction of masculinity. However, when this model of masculinity is spoken about it must not be forgotten that it is a constructed in a specific society and given period of time. It must be remembered that alongside this

dominant model there are other ways of understanding masculinity. More than that, day-to-day practice does not necessarily have to coincide automatically with this model.

This is what Val de Almeida (2000) points out when stating that the use of the notion of “hegemonic masculinity” appears to be central, that is, not the male role, but a particular variety of masculinity subordinating other forms. If the split between the categories of “man” and “woman” is one of the central features of patriarchal power and its dynamics, in the case of men the crucial division is between hegemonic masculinity and various subordinate masculinities. Hence it ensues that masculinities are constructed not only by power relations, but also by their interrelation with division of labour and with the patterns of emotional linkages. Thus, it is empirically shown that the culturally praised form of masculinity corresponds to the characteristics of only a small number of men.

In this underlying definition shaping discourses, what is hidden is two fundamental aspects needed to understand what goes on in the relationship between men and domestic life. One is what place in life women and men have in the domestic sphere and what type of activity occurs there. The other is the sorts of relationships and activities that occur outside it. One consideration of gender from this viewpoint would lead to an analysis of power relations. These manifest themselves primarily in two contexts (Kimmel, 2001). The first is patriarchal public life, this referring to the institutional mechanisms of society which favour the presence of men in all positions of political and financial power. The other is patriarchal domestic life, which refers to the emotional and family mechanisms of society, which reproduce in the private sphere of the power which men exercise in the public sphere. Both of these are sustained by an implicit or explicit threat of violence. What is true is that the association between masculinity and violence is especially striking. As Forman (1999) argues, violence has been part of the significance of masculinity, part of the way in which men have mediated, demonstrated and proved their identity. Without any other cultural mechanism by means of which youngsters can manage to see themselves as men, they have taken violence as the way to become adult males. Hence violence against women has been generalized as much in the north as in the south. Its forms and scope may vary, but it is more and more interpretable as a reaction, a tantrum by men who feel that patriarchal privilege, whether domestic, public, or both is being eroded and wish to restore it.

Once this point is reached, it is possible to look back and reconsider the concentrations of the Prometheus group. The occupation of space is a minority activity, uncomfortable and difficult; social support is scarce, despite the unfortunately continuous opportunities arising to demonstrate week after week against violence towards women.

Their most effective, as the group itself recognizes, is in the private context, in a limited environment, of leisure or work, of the various members involved, generally in education, health or administration fields. Their perception is that the most effective actions are small details in daily life, such as campaigns in schools, or not laughing at sexist jokes or even criticizing them. These work better than occupying public spaces or weekly public demonstrations, which have an impact only when some politician joins the campaign.

Evidently the weight of hegemonic approaches is very strong. This is so much the case that it can be said to be accepted not merely by many men, but by society in general, which moreover criticizes the actions of these groups of men because they interfere in women’s affairs. It is implicit that society in general sees male violence is something to be taken as possible, real and inevitable, affecting the private sphere. There is a tacit implication that the public display of non-hegemonic masculinity is socially inconceivable, which leads some men to become invisible in the public arena. This lack of social visibility has a repercussion in the shape of a retreat into other spaces if they wish their actions to be effective and have more social impact.

In another context (Fernández, 2010), an attempt was made to situate this group within new social movements. Amongst other reasons, this was because of their strategic rationality, since, while having well-defined objectives, and co-ordinating their will and actions towards them, they control their own self-reflexion. This is because they act on themselves, maybe with the secret hope of achieving effects on their surroundings. However, perhaps the most significant thing is that they constitute a project alternative to the dominant model. What they attack, what they combat are problems linked to modern capitalism and mass culture, which means questioning the established forms of power. They bring into question whether public spaces should be the property of men, or perhaps even of one sort of men. This obliges males to make some distinctions in the gradations existing in spaces as also in the way of being, acting and staying in each of them, as pointed out by Del Valle (1997), this being vitally important for women. What they are putting in question is masculinity itself.

3. Masculinity, Always in Crisis

As Mark Millington (2007) wrote, masculinity is always, or potentially always, in crisis, in the sense that it is always open to challenge, always anxiously seeking to reinforce itself, always having to adapt, but never what it claims to be. As a consequence of this, the archetype of hegemonic masculinity has less and less cultural prestige, and a lower exchange value in democratic societies and in the home. Thus, private or public display of behaviours and styles shaped by machismo is more and more often the object of irony and criticism.

In this context of a crisis in masculinity, some men insist on exhibiting and defending a dominant and exclusivist masculine identity, associated with the values and privileges of a given class, race or ethnic group, given beliefs, ostentatious and obligatory heterosexuality and, of course, hegemony over women with the aim of reducing the personal and social impact of the changes brought about by feminism. Men can support equality of the sexes, both at work and at home, not just because it is “correct” and fair but also because of what it will bring them as men. In the context of a modernity that is tending to rethink sex, love and eroticism within a framework of enquiry into human identity (Giddens, 1992), it can be seen that the appearance of “new masculinities” is inaugurating a utopia with horizons of equality, democracy, autonomy and dialogue based on compromise, agreement, rational argumentation and the human will. The emergence of these “new masculinities” is detectably changing the life of women and men (although to different degrees according to the society and social group concerned). They see together how dialogue and agreement in their relationships of affection is at the root of greater interpersonal freedom and heightened wellbeing.

It is other men, those who aspire to be a match for their circumstances, who involve themselves in fairness at home, who are open to emotions and other ways of understanding the world, who care for their children, and who have finally realized that being men may perhaps equate to being human. These are invisible men because they are not in the news, indeed they do not wish to be, nor are they leaders, nor do they achieve public success, nor are they in the limelight, nor do they cheat, rape or kill. To sum up, they are men who, as Kimmel (2002) says, have realized that if men are able to be surgeons and chefs, they have to be able to sew and to cook, as well. This is not an easy task, as it is possible only if a man understands that he has no other enemy but himself, or rather, as Carabí (2000) puts it, the construction of himself that he has inherited. It is not an easy task, because the influence of social symbolism and masculine imagination that is still dominant in men is stronger than would be desirable and affects the structure of male individuals’ being. Thus, opposing the hegemonic forms of masculinity is still rated very low in most social contexts. In other words, deconstructing the culture of which hegemonic masculinity forms part turns out to be a complex process because hierarchical routines of gender, race and sexual orientation are woven into the economic, social and political system in which it is still a benchmark. Hence, helping men to shed the load of so many centuries of oppressive masculinity and assisting them to find other ways of being men in the world, distancing them from the obscene exercise of power and from violence, bringing them closer to the world of affections and emotions, and of the ethics of caring, is the most urgent and unavoidable task if it is desired to build a world in which nobody will be subject to oppression or scorn because of sexual or cultural origin. Some people may perhaps have the feeling that these changes require abandonment of any form of authority and even some loss of virility. Nothing is less true, even if everything seems to point that way. On the contrary, those who have the courage to try out other ways of being men, who do not travel the well-worn ways of oppression of women and other men, should realize that they are breaking out of a cage in which they have been shut up since their earliest childhood (and in which so many men remain comfortably enclosed). They should realize, finally, that in this task of liberation men must rid themselves of many of the guidelines that may have made them very “manly”, but very poor humans.

According to Castañeda (2002), gay men are an example of being in the vanguard of a new masculinity, as they are more favourable to developing their affective life and expressing their emotions. Sexual diversity tries to cross the frontier between the masculine and the feminine, which every sexist society imposes so as to meet traditional representations. As Castañeda sees it, in a gay or lesbian couple there is no predetermination of who will take the car to the repair shop and who will do the dishes, as mostly this has to be negotiated. The significant thing is that such couples are the only type of family wide open to negotiation. However, Bourdieu sees matters less positively, noting that sometimes even gay and lesbian people reproduce the dominant mechanisms of stereotypes, as they were surely

raised as heterosexual. Sometimes they apply to themselves oppressive principles, reproducing the dichotomies they have learnt. Even so, Castañeda (2002) says that social changes like the struggle for women and sexual diversity suggest that machismo will disappear, not because it seems unjust or disagreeable, but rather because it is obsolete, being an obstacle to social, economic and work relationships in the modern world. Machismo is obviously incompatible with a democratic society, since the macho renders no accounts, provides no explanations, accepts no criticisms. Similarly, being homosexual does not mean fighting for the right to intimacy, but rather for the freedom to be what one is every day, against oppression: homophobia, racism, misogyny, intolerance from religious hypocrites and one's own hatred (since people are carefully trained to hate themselves).

4. Conclusion

An attempt has been made to show how the traditional archetype of masculinity, visible man, this still hegemonic way of being men, which in reality is based on the exercise of force and power, on hiding feelings, on ostentatious heterosexuality, is fortunately no longer the only possible way of being a man (or even any longer the most desirable). In general, it has been shown how in many hegemonic opinions there is an underlying view of men as “emotional illiterates”. As Kaufman (1995) says in more specific terms, acquisition of hegemonic masculinity (and of many subordinate forms) is a process through which men end up suppressing a whole range of emotions, needs and opportunities, including the pleasure of caring for others, receptiveness, empathy and sympathy, felt to be inconsistent with male masculine. They are suppressed because they come to be linked with the femininity that has been rejected in the search for masculinity.

Using the case of men for equality, an attempt has been made to show certain male initiatives to construct other ways of being men, in which tenderness, the value of dialogue and an urge for justice have pride of place. Although it is no easy task, one in which it is not possible to count on support from anybody, but in which the prejudice of the majority is certain, more and more men are coming to oppose the categorical imperatives of traditional masculinity and the idea that being a man implies exercising power at any price, and avoiding feelings and emotions. As seen above, study of masculinity raises questions of gender, identities and sexualities once again in a sharply critical framework, with the aim of destabilizing not just the system, but also the world of academe. The old paradigm no longer works or is ceasing to work, whilst a new paradigm, even if its outline can already be made out, is yet to be defined. The greatest contribution to this topic lies in offering new explanations in a conceptual framework bringing together gender and sexuality; meanings and opposition to give rise to new significations. Hegemonic masculinity is an unattainable model defining hierarchies as a function of an inexistent type of man. As has been shown, real men, who wish to be such, lack visibility.

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