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Epistemology of Critical Studies on Men and Masculinity: Perspective of a Boy from France, After 25 years of Research on These Topics

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Since the creation of men's groups in the '70s, French critical studies on men and the masculinities have followed diverse pathways. While they're sometimes presented within a binary scheme opposing masculinism and profeminism, the intervention intends to provide another typology that goes beyond this ideological, non heuristic vision in order to identify transversalities and the obvious or subtle mechanisms of gender relations and what French speakers call "rapports sociaux de sexe" (Trans. "gendered social relations")."

Since women can't achieve equality, the end of male domination and the disappearance of gender without men, and since many of them want to put an end to soliloquies, this intervention aims at historicizing the critical studies on men, and contextualizing their analytical paradigms. In short, I intend to grasp both convergences and divergences in these analytical frameworks, and to deconstruct the masculine just as feminist women have been doing with "the eternal feminine."

Androcentrism--1st and 2nd Degree: The Study of Men from a Gender Perspective, Androcentrism and the Hidden Masculine

For a long time, while deconstructing the forms of domination that women suffered, gender sociologists, especially feminist sociologists, have been struggling against the androcentrism in social sciences. This androcentrism (what might be called the 1st degree of androcentrism) made us think of the male as being normal, general, and the female as being particular, specific. Delphy (1998), Devreux (1985), and Guillaumin (1992) have amply demonstrated in their works the epistemological biases of our different disciplines, and their effects.

There have not always been two sexes in sociology. Instead, we dealt with, on the one hand, a general being bearing the characteristics of humanity, actually the representative of that humanity, coinciding with male gender, and on the other hand, a specific gendered being, the woman. (Devreux, 1985, p. 23)

Androcentrism involved texts, authors, and entire disciplines unable to treat what men and women experienced, suffered, or thought with the same care. Moreover, our societies often equated men with culture, and women with nature (Mathieu, 1991). In an essentialized and complementarist vision of the hierarchical difference between the sexes, only the so-called "natural" qualities of women were vaunted: sensitivity, gentleness, beauty, and caring dispositions. Not without resistance, the fields of feminist studies and gender studies have gradually developed into producing an analysis based on "rapports sociaux de sexe" ("gendered social relations") and gender

relations (Battagliola, Bertaux- Wiame, Ferrand, & Imbert, 1990).

Gender is defined here as the socio-political system that builds and organizes the pseudo naturalness of social categories for sex (“biological” sex) as well as their hierarchy, by legitimizing heteronormative male domination. Analyses in terms of “rapports sociaux de sexe” focus on male domination and its developments, on the respective social positions of men and women. Gender relations are concerned with the heteronormalization of individuals defined as men and women, the dominance over so-called minority sexualities.

We now need to deepen and extend these reflections. On the one hand, if the general framework of gender relations and “rapports sociaux de sexe” is still largely characterized by male domination, some kinds of gendered social mobility can be observed in various social spaces or segments of social classes (see below), showing some forms of inversion, by-passing, localized power struggles, exclusions or avoidance, which now must also be considered. In other words, domination does not perpetuate itself identically. The last forty years have also been marked by women’s struggles, along with those of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transsexuals. We should embrace them within the gender analysis. On the other hand, sociological studies on women, their lifestyles, the violence they are subjected to, the articulation of professional and domestic work, etc., have been proliferating. This multiplicity of women’s studies, which also deal with men, but from a particular standpoint, allows researchers to better define general and specific forms of domination, but tends to provide less information on what men really experience, especially their socialization through virile and egotistical certainties. Paradoxically, this has reinforced a particular form of androcentrism defined by Welzer-Lang & Pichevin (1992) as:

... the androcentrism is also part of a collective mystification in which men focus on activities in the public sphere, power struggles, competition, the venues, places and activities where they interact (real, virtual or imaginary) with women, while trivializing or hiding the means through which the masculine is constructed, and the actual relations among them. (p. 11)

Thus, we are now in a new situation that can be described as “androcentrism level 2.” There are, on one part, women’s studies that make explicit their lifestyles, their social conditions, and at the other end, a silence and/or a concealment of men’s experiences, habits, dreams. A silence and/or concealment propped up even by researchers who carefully avoid referring to themselves as gendered beings. We will probably soon have to rework as well this strong current bias that can be described as gynocentrism or maternalism, which focuses exclusively on women and/or the feminine, and obscures the social production of the masculine. What I think is the most deleterious effect of this androcentrism level 2 is the risk of renaturalizing and re-essentializing male gender.

THE DIFFERENT CURRENTS WORKING ON THE MASCULINE

The discussion on studies of men and masculinity is usually thought to be held by four

trans-disciplinary schools of thought (Clatterbaugh, 1997; Messner, 1997) and various corresponding groups of men who support them. I would like to revisit this typology, for two main reasons.

First, it was built at a historical moment that I think is in the past. For instance, 1997 was a special time: first because of the scarcity of men challenging male domination, whether explicitly or not. In addition, gender wars often underlaid relations between male and female identified persons. Queer movements challenging heteronormativity had not emerged yet. There was no unity and scant if any discussion among these activists committed to overcoming the traditional forms of masculinities on a daily basis. Present time gender relations are quite different. It was a typology of emerging trends, poorly represented in many countries. Incidentally, this was the time when I and a few friends created the European Network of Profeminist Men. As if to say yes, a male political stance (for men) is possible supporting and building upon the achievements of women's struggles. Yes, we must discuss. Although, in retrospect, we tended to address more women than other men. This probably explains the network's limited success, while it nonetheless provides a set of seminal texts in several languages on the Internet (<http://www.europrofem.org>).

A second reason prompting me to revisit the classification issued in 1997 is the function of a typology. What do we use it for? If we leave apart the usual display of forces in which men show off and symbolically measure the size of their male organ in order to proclaim themselves the best, thus perpetuating a permanent war, a typology, an ideal-type, as the sociologist Max Weber would put it, is a theoretical construct *a posteriori* that should serve as a tool for thought. It is a screwdriver to help deconstruct and understand the masculine. A toolkit that allows one to historicize the progression of studies on men and masculinity, the discussions and critical feedback that accompanied them.

In other words, the categories in my typology are not mutually exclusive. One can take part in an awareness group and be a radical profeminist, or discover the virtues of emotions by crying with other men and still be reactionary, and so on.

Six Transdisciplinary Schools of Thought

Whereas Clatterbaugh (1997) focused on four schools of thought, I now identify six poles. Let me describe how they respectively problematize the topic.

Symmetric masculinism. Often termed "masculinism," the first current tends to present men's and women's situations as symmetric. Supported in France by Associations of divorced fathers, and personalities like Eric Zemmour (2006), it tends to blame male difficulties such as school failure, violence, suicide, etc., on women and, especially, on feminism. This current thus argues that men are as much victims of female violence as women are of male violence, relying upon victimological studies, in particular a study by Statistics Canada and a Swiss social work diploma dissertation requalified as a Ph.D. (Torrent, 2003). This trend basically recommends a return to the patriarchal values of times gone by, arguing that this model of gender

generated less anxiety for everyone. Recently, on the occasion of the “Congress on Male Condition—Men’s Words” a new branch of this movement emerged, which while presenting men’s and women’s situations as symmetrical, including with regards to discriminations, defines itself as “hominist.” If the call to the First Congress was particularly reactionary, some later texts have been more ambiguous, when some participants acknowledged male domination and its effects in terms of violence against women, and recognized the contribution of feminism.

Therefore, this approach is not homogeneous, not to mention the conceptual difficulties in defining the term “masculinist,” formerly used by all self-help groups of men in France and Quebec in their first steps toward the deconstruction of “compulsory virility,” as is perfectly explained by our colleagues from Quebec, in their recent collective work (Deslauriers, Tremblay, Genest Dufault, Blanchette, & Desgagnés, 2010).

Radical profeminism. The second trend is supported in France by a self-proclaimed “radical” fringe, sometimes called “radical profeminism.” The only prospect it offers to men, as dominants, is to support women and feminism and keep silent about men’s difficulties, which are seen as slight, secondary, and negligible (Dufresne, 2002; Stoltenberg, 1989; Thiers-Vidal, 2010). Any other attitude, including the statement of some men’s difficulties, is seen as the attempt of “contested males” to regain power. Men are summoned to “account” to feminists. In this perspective, “subjects” as men do not exist. They are reduced to the function of enabling male domination upon women.

For sometimes evoking the “suffering” of men, including men who use violence against women, I found myself characterized as a “false friend of feminists” by boys who, as anti-specists (i.e., animal rights activists), however hold forth on the pain of mussels ... and oysters (Do they have a nervous system? Do they suffer? Can we eat them?).

This current is more ideological than really anchored in the research field, and I sincerely believe that in denying the subject, it leads to a totalitarian vision. What’s more, let me confess here, in this place where men are supposed to speak about themselves, a very personal feeling: I think—so goes male vanity—that I’m worth as much as (and hopefully more than) a mussel!

Pragmatic profeminist. The third approach, is often defined as “liberal profeminist” (Clatterbaugh, 1997; Messner, 1997), and is more pragmatic. Given the negative connotations of the term “liberal” in France (since it means to support capitalism and rich countries imperialism), I propose calling it “pragmatic profeminism.” Authors in this current acknowledge male domination and the correlation of male violence and homophobia as a framework, notably in relations among men. But they also analyze the problems faced by boys and the obvious difficulties some have in adapting, in a comprehensive way and most often in terms of rapports sociaux de sexe and gender relations. This approach offers the training of interventionists in social work and the socio-educational area, as well as specific interventions with boys and men.

This school of thought includes works by Raewyn Connell, Gilles Tremblay, Michael Kimmel, Michel Dorais, Gilles Rondeau, Christine Castelain-Meunier, Germain Dulac, Yves Raibaud, André Rauch, etc. Some of them are available in a synthetic volume I coordinated in Toulouse in 2000—*Nouvelles Approches des Hommes et du Masculine* and in *Masculinités: État des Lieux*, which we just published in France with Chantal Zaouche Gaudron.

In problematizing the “male resistance to change,” this current, to which my work belongs, rejects a deterministic approach that postulates the identical reproduction of male domination (Bourdieu, 1998). Men and women are also the agents (subjects) of their individual and collective history. It is therefore possible to intervene among men, to accompany and help them, all of them, to adapt to the new gender contract that refuses male domination and its consequences in terms of violences, discriminations, exclusions. This attitude presupposes that men too have an interest in this change. Or that they have no choice but to adapt.

Within this school of thought, Macdonald (2005, 2008), whose works I discovered thanks to Gilles Tremblay, refers to the “salutogenic approach.” What a term! I prefer calling it, “*dynamic*.” Dynamic as opposed to a static approach that reduces dominants to beings obsessed with the perpetuation of domination, utterly deprived of empathy and indifferent to the effects of the viriarchal system of male domination. Dynamic in its opposition to Badinter’s “soft males” (1986). Dynamic in order to show that men also do change and are agents in the changes of “rapports sociaux de sexe.”

However, as John Macdonald stated, salutogenic here opposes “psychogenic,” the pathologizing of masculinity. We will therefore probably have to use a hybrid formula, salutogenic/dynamic, in order to be understandable.

Gilles Tremblay reminds us that “being based on the study of strengths and capabilities also developed by men, the “salutogenic/dynamic” approach provides an adequate framework to address the positive aspects of masculinities (Macdonald, 2005, 2010). Tremblay sees this approach as a perspective since it is not a theoretical construct as such, but rather implies a way of highlighting certain aspects of the research topic. Its relevance is no less political. A better understanding of these positive aspects leads to the exploration of means through which men engage in their well-being. The salutogenic/dynamic approach singles out the “toxic” elements in masculinities. It therefore contrasts with a previous vision of men as a homogenous and globally problematic social group (Crawshaw, 2009). The relevance of the salutogenic/dynamic approach also relies on its targeting not only individual behavior but the environments enabling and sustaining men’s health and well-being as well.

In fact our colleague Macdonald develops the “dialectic” approach to social gender relations. It reminds older folks among us of old discussions: the theoretical problem underlying the issue of intervention with men relaunches an old debate among the Marxist-Leninists of the ’70s on the links between “principal contradictions” (the capital/labor contradiction) and “secondary contradictions” (among which male domination of women). We now know the cost to humanity of such Leninist positions

proposing the total submission of the dominants to the dominated and the vanguards (at the time political, and nowadays religious or sexual) supposedly representing them. “Black feminism,” queer movements or the debates provoked by the fall of apartheid in South Africa certainly provide more heuristic references about the alliances between the dominants and the dominated.

Men, unlike women and homosexuals, are dominated by the very domination they impose on women and people claiming non-heteronormative sexualities (Bourdieu, 1990). They’re alienated by male domination and can never completely escape the singular subjectivity (Zaouche Gaudron, 1997). However, their privileges are now increasingly being challenged by social struggles and social reorganization (Welzer-Lang, 2004). Men regardless of their social situations, whether they fall into the categories of Big-Men or not (Godelier, 1982), are summoned and forced to adapt to the contemporary anthropological age contesting the patriarchal and viriarchal¹ foundations of today’s societies.

My hypothesis is that they veer, hesitate between resistance to changes required by social struggles, which are today supported by national (state feminism) and international (European mainstreaming) policies, and forms of change, metamorphoses, and progressively reshaping gender boundaries. The “renegotiations of the gender contract,” of what seems normal or not to do, say, think, live, fantasize when one is constructed and socialized as a man, become more diversified according to the topics studied, social positions occupied (social classes), spaces (the city and its neighborhoods vs the rural), space-time frames (private vs professional).

Mythopoetic approach. Groups focused on personal development such as the Mythopoetic approach, as well as some self-help groups promoting “personal growth” among which those influenced by Robert Bly and the New Age movement. These reontologize the masculine and the feminine and seek traditional masculinity through archetypes and fantasies. They’re mostly North American and barely visible in France. Unlike Clatterbaugh (1997), I do not think this approach is limited to essentialist groups. From the first French self-help groups named “pas rôle d’hommes” in the ’70s, to new groups that regularly form and break up, among which groups of libertarian (and radical) young males whose macho, virile attitudes are challenged by female friends, all these groups are part of a social support process for men.

They are diversely shaped spaces, where questions and doubts can be exchanged, where the guilt of being a man, and thus a dominant, can be explained. While guilt has never changed the world (and boys), we know, that it’s often the first stance coming

¹ Nicole Claude Mathieu (1991) criticizes the concept of *patriarchy*. In particular because the legal limitations of Fathers’ Rights have been among the first achievements of last generations feminists, since 1972 in France. Still, while fathers may no longer be omnipotent, this power remains in the hands of men (whether they’re fathers or not). Thus, the use of the term *viriarchy* (referring to male power, unrestricted to fatherhood), even in non-patrilineal or -patrilocal societies.

with the changes in men's attitudes. Giving way to empathy, coming in contact with feminist women is often the first step into gender deconstruction.

The "Réseau Hommes Québec" or "Réseau Hommes" in France, Switzerland and Belgium, started by Guy Corneau, Michel Aubé and Robert Blondin, are better known and more represented in France. These are awareness groups specifically addressing men. Their aims are generous: men trying to share experience by speaking about themselves, finding the words, exploring their own repertoire of emotions, trying to feel more comfortable with their masculinity, "to understand themselves a little better and to love themselves a little more," all with a view to better relations between men and women. They oscillate between a desire to understand male alienation as a product of "rapports sociaux de sexe" and male domination, and the influence of personal development movements. Taking advantage of the popularity of Guy Corneau (1989), they bring together very wide-ranging male figures, from young men looking for new patterns of activism to men who are just empirically trying to live their masculinity better. Whereas these networks have successfully been supporting the massive changes men are going through, one also remarks that unlike the previous and later groups, they have been somewhat ineffectual in terms of theoretical models and/or in challenging male domination.

Gay groups. Another type of men's group, or trend in critical thought on men, is often forgotten in our typologies: the "gay groups" along with their commercial and association networks. Their omission highlights the heterocentrism on the part of men studies, which can only deconstruct masculinity in its heterosexual expression. A common current form of liberal homophobia is demonstrated in accepting this sphere, even mentioning the GLBT movement, but eventually not granting gays the status of men that would enable us to include them in our deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity. We agree that we fight against all forms of domination, alienation, oppression. So there's no reason why they should be left outside our analysis.

Still ... supporting the struggles of our fellow gay, bi, trans, inter men, or spreading our own analyses as gay, bi, trans, inter men, collectively thinking the disappearance of gender ... should not cut us off from the critical dimension of our reflection. Gays are also men, constructed, socialized as such. They engage into gender relations and "rapports sociaux de sexe" with women and men. When I read in the classifieds "queens and effeminate abstain," first I feel sorry for myself as I'm obviously losing an opportunity (I'm trying to be funny), but more seriously I think that homophobia, which I defined in 1994 as "the stigma towards the qualities or flaws attributed to the other gender," is not contained outside the pseudo gates of the gay community. In short, an integrative work of deconstruction needs to be achieved at this level.

And since I am dealing with sexualities, I must say that it seems equally vital for all men, whatever the color of their love and their sexuality to deconstruct the heteronorm, to question the heteronormative basis that is so strongly alienating all men. One can consult the excellent work on the historical conditions that led to the creation of a heterosexual culture (Tin, 2008). As a corset of manhood, mental prison, straitjacket of Eros, a major purveyor of violence against women and men not conforming to

domineering virility, the heteronorm limits our potential, our ambitions, and our desires. Let me give simply two examples. Why, in a male/female relation, should the man always be seen as active and the woman as passive? The reverse (or both together) works just as well! When will we challenge our symbolic representations of male body fluids, especially sperm? How can we even contemplate egalitarian relationships when so many men, along with women, still see their sperm as dirty. Who in this room has ever tasted his sperm? And why not? Each of us answering for himself, will clear a path toward the resolution of our difficulties in fully accepting ourselves as human beings.

Masculinities. I propose to call the sixth current that we are trying to unify here “Masculinities.” It intends to be more pragmatic and unifying in involving academic researchers, social workers, and equal rights advocates.

It assumes the knowledge on homophobic male domination as its theoretical framework. The group or class of men dominates the group or class of women. And this nascent school of thought pragmatically assumes either explicitly or implicitly that we are, during this transition period, trying to resolve the contradictions inherent to this domination, including those persons who are socialized as men (still) experience — to varying degrees.

This movement involves both men and women. It also relies on a variety of strategic options for dealing with men’s realities. It includes academics claiming a pragmatic profeminist, or sometimes radical profeminist approach, and even some reclaiming the term “masculinism,” as was used by the first men’s groups (ARDECOM, HOM INOS), before Louise Vandelac associated it with clearly reactionary content in the ’90s. As I said before, equal rights activists and social workers are as well involved in this movement, as proven by their presence at this conference. Among them, many prosaically position themselves in the school of thought of Masculinities thus acts as a federator, as it integrates the intersectionality of fields, of men’s lifestyles, of the many different situations experienced by men of various ethnic, cultural, social, and political backgrounds. The emerging studies on masculinities are forging a new generation of researchers, including men, women and trans, from different theoretical schools. The next item on its agenda should be to develop an association network for social workers, trainers and activists. Good practices are still to be built and shared. Especially in order to reach out to men feeling dispossessed, disoriented, who shouldn’t be overlooked in our analyses. To draw attention to them, like it or not, is our duty.

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