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Men and Women's Studies: Promise, Pitfalls, and Possibilities[1]

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Abstract

What has been the impact of Women's and Gender Studies on men? While for many years, men assumed that Women's Studies has nothing to do with their lives, this essay argues that one of Women's Studies signal contributions has been to make gender visible to both women and men. The consequences of this invisibility are explored, and some of the promises and perils of Women's Studies when applied to men's lives are explored.

Key words: Women's Studies, masculinities, gender.

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What is the position of men in Women's Studies? How do men engage with Women's Studies? I want to take the position that Women's Studies is *also* about men. Or, rather, that it makes *masculinity* potentially visible as a specific construction, and not simply the unexamined norm.

When I say Women's Studies is about men, I mean that women's studies has made men visible. Before women's studies, men were invisible — especially to themselves. By making women visible, women's studies also made men visible both to women and to men themselves. If men are now taking up the issue of gender, it is probably less accurate to say "Thank goodness they've arrived" the way one might when the cavalry appears in a western film, than to say, "It's about time?".

Of course, making men visible has not been the primary task of women's studies. But it has been one of its signal successes. The major achievement of women's studies, acting independently and as a force within traditional disciplines, has been making women visible through the rediscovery of long- neglected, undervalued, and understudied women who were accomplished leaders, artists, composers, and writers and placing them in the pantheons of significance where they rightly belong. In addition, women's studies has rediscovered the voices of ordinary women — the laundresses and the sales-girls, the union maids and the union organizers, the workers and the wives — who have struggled to scratch out lives of meaning and dignity. For this — whether they know it or not, whether they acknowledge it or not — women all over the world owe a debt.

But in making women visible, women's studies has been at the epicenter of a seismic shift in the university as we know it. Women's studies has made *gender* visible. Women's studies has demonstrated that gender is one of the axes around which social life is organized, one of the most crucial building blocks of our identities. Before women's studies, we didn't know that gender mattered. Twenty-five years ago, there were no women's studies courses in colleges or universities, no women's studies lists at university

presses across the country. By making women visible, women's studies decentered men as the unexamined, disembodied authorial voice of the academic canon and showed that men, as well as women, are utterly embodied, their identities as socially constructed as those of women. When the voice of the canon speaks, we can no longer assume that voice is going to sound masculine or that the speaker is going to look like a man.

The problem is that many men do not yet know this. Though ubiquitous in positions of power, many men remain invisible to themselves as gendered beings. Courses on gender in the universities are populated largely by women, as if the term applied only to them. "Woman alone seems to have 'gender' since the category itself is defined as that aspect of social relations based on difference between the sexes in which the standard has always been man", writes historian Thomas Lacquer. Or, as the Chinese proverb has it, "the fish are the last to discover the ocean".

I know this from my own experience: women's studies made gender visible to me. In the early 1980s I participated in a graduate-level women's studies seminar in which I was the only man among about a dozen participants. During one meeting, a white woman and a black woman were discussing whether all women were, by definition, "sisters" because they all had essentially the same experiences and because all women faced a common oppression by all men. The white woman asserted that the fact that they were both women bonded them, in spite of racial differences. The black woman disagreed.

"When you wake up in the morning and look in the mirror, what do you see?" she asked.

"I see a woman" replied the white woman.

"That's precisely the problem" responded the black woman. "I see a black woman. To me, race is visible every day, because race is how I am not privileged in our culture. Race is invisible to you, because it's how you are privileged. It's why there will always be differences in our experience".

As I witnessed this exchange, I was startled, and groaned, more audibly, perhaps, than I had intended. Someone asked what my response meant. “Well” I said, “when I look in the mirror, I see a human being. I’m universally generalizable. As a middle-class white man, I have no class, no race, no gender. I’m the generic person!”

Sometimes, I like to think it was on that day that I became a middle-class white man. Sure, I had been all those before, but they had not meant much to me. Since then, I have begun to understand that race, class, and gender do not refer only to other people, who are marginalized by race, class, or gender privilege. Those terms also describe me. I enjoy the privilege of invisibility. The very processes that confer privilege to one group and not another group are often invisible to those upon whom that privilege is conferred. American men have come to think of ourselves as genderless, in part because gender privilege affords us the luxury of ignoring the centrality of gender. But women’s studies offers the possibility of making gender visible to men as well and, in so doing, creating the possibilities of alliances between women and men to collaboratively investigate what gender means, how it works, and what its consequences are.

While this story took place over 20 years ago, I was reminded of it recently when I went to give a guest lecture for a female colleague at my university – we teach the same course on alternate semesters, so she always gives a guest lecture for me, and I do one for her. As I walked in to the auditorium, one student looked up at me and said: “Oh, finally, an objective opinion!” All that semester, whenever my female colleague opened her mouth, what this student saw was “a woman”. Biased. But when I walked in, I was, in this student’s eyes, *unbiased*, on objective opinion. Disembodied western rationality – standing right in front of the class! This notion that middle class white men are “objective” and everyone else is “biased” is the way that inequalities are reproduced.

To speak personally, the perspectives of women’s studies have transformed both my research and my teaching. Women’s studies made it possible for me to do the work I do.

And for that I am grateful. Inspired by the way women's studies made gender visible, I offered a course called "Sociology of the Male Experience" in 1983 at Rutgers University, where I was then a young assistant professor. This was the first such course on men and masculinity in the state of New Jersey. Today, I teach that course as well as a course entitled "Sex and Society" at Stony Brook to over 350 students each semester. Now, as then, the course is cross-listed with women's studies. But I also teach our department's classical sociological theory course, the course on the historical development of social and political theory. In that course, students traditionally read works by Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Smith, Marx, Durkheim, Tocqueville, Weber, and Freud. This is probably the most intractably canonical "Dead White European Men" course we offer in the social sciences. But it has become impossible for me to teach the works of those "great men" without reference to gender – without noting, for ex ample, the gendered creation myths that characterize the move from the state of nature to civil society in the thought of Locke or Hobbes, or the chronic anxiety and loss of control attendant upon modern society documented by Tocqueville, Marx, Weber, or Freud. Moreover, I find that I cannot teach about the rise of nineteenth-century liberal individualism without including Frederick Douglass or Mary Wollstonecraft; nor can I teach about the late nineteenth-century critiques of individualism without reference to W.E.B. Du Bois or to Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

If women's studies has made gender, and hence men, visible, then it has also raised a question about men: where are they? Where have they been in women's struggles for equality? Taking my cues from women's history, I began to research men's responses to feminism. *Against the Tide* (1992) tries to provide part of the answer, a missing chapter from women's history: the chapter about the men who supported women's equality.

I'm sure you are saying to yourself: "A book about men who supported feminism? Now that will surely be the world's shortest book!" It turns out that in every arena in which

women have struggled for equal rights – education (the right to go to college or professional school), economic life (the right to work, join unions, receive equal wages), social life (the right to own property, have access to birth control, get a divorce), or political life (the right to vote, to hold elective office, to serve on juries) – there have been men, some prominent, many unheralded, who have supported them.

Men have been supporting women's equality at every step. And if men have been there, it means that men can be there and that they will be there. This legacy of men who supported women's equality allows contemporary men to join what I like to think of as the Gentlemen's Auxiliary of the Women's Movement. Neither passive bystanders nor the front-line forces – and especially not the leaders of those troops – men still have a pivotal role to play. Men can join this epochal struggle and provide support both individually and collectively. This strikes me as an utterly honorable relationship to feminism, quite different from an impulse I've encountered among newly enlightened men that goes something like, "Thanks for bringing all this to my at ladies. We'll take it from here". It also serves as an important corrective to many men's fears, which often boil down to "How can I support feminism without feeling like – or being seen as – a wimp?" To be a member of the Auxiliary is to know that the central actors in the struggle for gender equality will be, as they always have been, women.

But women's studies has done more than make the study of gender possible; it has made it necessary. The issues raised by women in the university and outside it have not "gone away" or subsided now that women have been offered a few resources and an academic room of their own. Women's studies has not been content with one room while the rest of the university goes about its androcentric business, any more than the women's movement has been convinced of its political victory because 100 percent of the U.S. senators from California in 2010 are women.

Gender as a power relation is the “it” that men “just don’t get” in the current discussion. Women’s studies scholars have demonstrated that masculinity and femininity are identities that are socially constructed in a field of power. Gender, like race and class, is not simply a mode of classification by which biological creatures are sorted into their respective and appropriate niches. Gender is about power. Just because both masculinity and femininity are socially constructed does not mean that they are equivalent, that there are no dynamics of power and privilege in operation. The problem with bringing men into this discussion about gender and power is that these issues are invisible to men.

Men are often confused about the question of power because some feminist insights do not resonate for men as they do for women. In its simplest formulation, feminism offered women a symmetry between their analysis of the world and their individual experiences. First – feminists argued – at the social level women were not “in power”? This was an empirical observation, easily apprehended by anyone who cared to look. Every board of trustees of every university, every board of directors of every law firm and corporation, every legislature at every level in every state in the country – all were illustrations that women, as a group, did not have the power. Second, this aggregate analysis provided a social analogue for women’s individual experience: women were not in power and women did not feel powerful.

To apply this symmetry to men’s lives, however, missed something crucial in men’s experiences. Certainly, at the political and institutional levels men are in power. But when that syllogism is presented to men – that individually, then, men must feel powerful – most men respond as if you came from outer space. “What are you talking about?” they say. “I have no power at all! My wife bosses me around. My kids boss me around! My boss bosses me around! I’m completely powerless!” This is a critical blind spot. All the economic, social, and political power in the world has not left individual men feeling powerful. The argument that men are powerful does not address the felt experience of most American

men. Antifeminists and men's rights advocates do address that felt experience: "You're right, men have no power", they say. "Women have the power, in custody battles, in alimony, in the draft. Men are the real victims of reverse discrimination?" And mythopoetic male bonders respond to that experience as well. "You're right" they say. "We have no power. Let's go off to the woods and get some. Here's the power ritual, the power drumming, the power chant?"

But power is not a quality one can acquire by trooping off to mythic summer camp for a weekend with the boys. At the individual level, power is experienced as a person's ability to do the kinds of things in his or her life that he or she wants to do. At the social level, power is an expression of the distribution of rewards and resources in a society; as such it is the property of groups, not of individuals. A gendered analysis must bridge these two levels, addressing both men's aggregate power and men's individual feelings of powerlessness. Much of the thinking about men has focused on opposite sides of the issue: antifeminists have seen individual men as powerless; many feminists have defined socially constructed masculinity as the drive for power, domination, and control.

I began the historical research for my book, *Manhood in America* (1996) guided by this perspective. Surely masculinity was nothing if not the drive for domination. Men were possessed with a craving for power and control. But the historical record has revealed a different picture: American men do not experience manhood as a drive for domination. Manhood is actually more about the fear of others dominating us, having power or control over us. We have constructed a vision of masculinity that sees others, especially other men, as frightening potential aggressors. We are afraid that others will see us as less than manly, weak, timid, and frightened. We are afraid of not measuring up to some vaguely defined notions of what it means to be a man; we are afraid of failure. Acting masculine becomes a way to ward off the fears that we will not be seen as manly by other men, or by ourselves.

What we call masculinity is more a defensive hedge against revealing those fears than it is the offensive and intentional initiation of aggression.
John Steinbeck wrote in *Of Mice and Men*:

> Funny thing [Curly's wife] said. "If I catch any one man, and he's alone, I get along fine with him. But just let two of the guys get together an' you won't talk. Jus' nothin' but mad? She dropped her fingers and put her hands on her hips. 'You're all scared of each other, that's what. Ever'one of you's scared the rest is goin' to get something on you. (Steinbeck, 1937, 57 ss.)

My reading of American history documents this theme. American masculinity has been propelled not by a drive for domination, but by fears of failure and fears that other men will "get something on you?' In this sense, homophobia is the animating condition of American man hood. I do not mean homophobia in its current limited sense as the irrational fear of homosexuals or the fear of homosexual impulses in ourselves. It is those fears as well, of course, but it is also something deeper: homophobia is the fear of other men. It is this fear that propels many men to engage in the drive to dominate and to control. Homophobia keeps us isolated from one another, and eager to use what few resources we do have – racism, sexism, heterosexism, nativism – to dominate others lest they dominate us first. Such domination serves only as a hedge, keeping fears only temporarily at bay. If those other "isms" – racism, sexism, and the like – are compensatory mechanisms by which men can shield themselves from their fears of other men, then those who advocate equality for women, for people of color, for gays and lesbians, must also address men's deeper-seated homophobic fears. Since admitting fear is itself emasculating, these fears lie deeply buried in the hearts of men. We cannot even admit their presence, let alone work collectively to challenge the mechanisms that have placed those fears there.

Homophobia is part of our earliest experiences; it is inscribed into our psyches and becomes as familiar as our skin. Imagine, for example, a play ground where a dozen five-year-old boys are happily playing. By asking one question, I would wager that I could immediately start a fight among boys. The question? “Who’s a sissy around here?” One of two things will likely happen. Two of the boys may square off, each pointing his finger at the other and shouting, in turn, “He is!” “No! He is!” before they come to blows. Or all the boys may gang up on the smallest, youngest, weakest boy and point at him in unison, shouting, “He is! He is!” Faced with a challenge that will haunt him for the rest of his life, he can either fight it out against overwhelming odds or take the more rational route and run away. Since this will forever brand him a coward, the manly response would probably be the less rational one.

Does anyone recall the 1992 Academy Awards presentations? As veteran actor Jack Palance came to the podium to accept the award for Best Supporting Actor in City Slickers, he observed that many Hollywood producers believed that at the age of seventy-one he was washed up as an actor, that he was past his prime. Then he dropped to the stage and commenced a set of one-armed push-ups. When he stood up and returned to the micro phone, he clutched his Oscar tightly and notified a couple of hundred million viewers that he could “still get it up”. “When does it end?” I groaned, wincing a bit from the pathos of a man old enough to be my grandfather still with something to prove.

When does it end? And why does it start so young? Why does it seem that men always have to prove their manhood? Why is masculinity such a relentless test, never assured, always in doubt? How is it that a man can spend a lifetime collecting the props that signify successful manhood – wealth, power, status, women – and have it all unravel in a flash because of a trivial innuendo? Why do men spend their lifetimes in pursuit of signs of strength, power, resolve, and courage, when our inner sense of manhood is ultimately so

fragile? These are the questions that my participation in women's studies has led me to ask. And these are questions that are, at once, both scholarly and political.

Like studies of race and class, women's studies has made gender visible as a power relation, as an expression of the unequal distribution of rewards and resources in society. Women's studies connected that analysis to the social movement – feminism – that was about reallocating those rewards and resources more equitably so that women might make choices, widen their sphere of action, and claim their voices, their agency, and their lives. In the process, women's studies came to understand that those voices, agencies, and lives are very different among different women. Women, differently situated , in society by race, class, age, sexuality, or region of the country, experience their lives in different ways. We have come to acknowledge that a singular construction of women's experience is inadequate.

The same is true for men. Women's studies has made gender visible to men, but it is not a monolithic, singular construction. There are many masculinities, many different definitions of masculinity, many different voices. These constructions of masculinity have taken shape on a contradictory terrain — a terrain of privilege conferred by gender, yet equally a terrain of inequality and powerlessness organized by race, or class, or sexuality, or ethnicity, or religion. Masculinity is about power, but it is the power of men as a group over women as a group, and additionally it is about the power of some men over other men. It is about the construction of masculinities within that field of power — the ways in which racism or homophobia, for ex ample, construct the identities of both white men and men of color, of both heterosexual and homosexual men. Thus we speak of masculinities to denote this variety of men's experiences, and also of a hegemonic masculinity, a normative standard against which every other masculinity may be measured.

Many men resist the insights of women's studies because they do not understand how it relates to their experiences of not feeling powerful. They are told they are in power and

must be aware of holding that power; yet they do not feel powerful. One of the most crucial tasks facing women's studies and the men who support it is to bring men into the discussion, to develop pedagogical techniques that will analyze men's power as a social group and simultaneously acknowledge men's individualized feelings of powerlessness, for it is only by acknowledging these feelings that we will be able to bring more men into the discussion. The ensuing conversation will further strengthen women's studies. Any metallurgist can tell you that the way to strengthen a metal, to make it stronger, more resilient, and more reliable, is not to add more of the same metal to it but to add different metals to it — to make an alloy. I would argue that diversity in women's studies, like diversity in the university, is certainly such a source of strength.

Men can learn so much from women's studies. And whether men acknowledge it or not, we need women's studies – desperately. All across the country, men are saying that they want to live more emotionally responsive lives, that they want their interior lives to play an increasingly important role, that they want to be more responsive lovers and better friends both with women and with other men. Virtually all men say they want to be better fathers than their own fathers were. In every arena – the university, the workplace, the home – it has been women who have advocated precisely those changes that will allow us to live the kinds of lives we say we want to live. At home, women demand that we share housework and child care, in the workplace women campaign for family – friendly workplace policies, such as flex time, parental leave, on-site child care. These are not women's issues – these are *parents*' issues. And to the extent that men seek to be better fathers and better partners, men, too, have to make them our issues.

On campus and in the workplace women campaign for an end to sexual harassment and an end to date and acquaintance rape. Surely, as long as women fear us, they cannot claim the sexual and emotional and intellectual agency that makes us desire them in the first place. If we want the kinds of relationships we say we want – relationships with women

who are passionate, strong, sexy, women who are in every way our equals in desire – then we will want to join with feminist women in their struggles against these abuses of power. When women's studies makes gender visible to women, it not only reveals the ways in which women's lives have been obscured by traditional scholarship, but also provides to women a model of how engaged research, passionate pedagogy, and critical thought can be brought to bear to enlarge the range of opportunities open to them. And when women's studies fulfills its promise of making gender visible to men – or, even more acutely, makes it possible for men to make gender visible to other men – it also opens up the possibilities for men to live healthier, more emotionally responsive, more nurturing and compassionate lives, lives animated by a passion for equality and justice.

In 1917 a New York City writer named Floyd Dell wrote an essay in the popular magazine "The masses" entitled *Feminism for Men*. In it, Dell outlined how gender inequality also impoverished men's lives:

> When you have got a woman in a box, and you pay rent on the box, relationship to you insensibly changes character. It loses the line excitement of democracy. It ceases to be companionship, for companionship is only possible in a democracy. It is no longer a sharing of life together – it is a breaking of life apart. Half a life – cooking, clothes, and children; half a life – business, politics and baseball. It doesn't make much difference which is the poorer half. Any half, when it comes to life, is very near to none at all (Dell citend in Kimmel and Mosmille, 1992, 361-362).

In the first line of this essay, Dell underscores the promise of feminism. "Feminism is going to make it possible for the first time for men to be free", he writes. Women's Studies has provided the opportunity for men to glimpse that possibility. And for that, we men will always be grateful.

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