MASCULINITY AND LGTBI POLICIES

Stick your masculinity up your ass

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Illustrator: Lara Lars

In recent years a series of discourses and reflections about masculinity have emerged. Historically, masculinity has been valued, something positive, something associated with power and above all associated with men. Feminism may have been the first movement to criticise the values associated with masculinity as patriarchal, oppressive and violent values, values that also limited men's options to one type of behaviour, a stereotyped, controlled gender role. This feminist critique opened the door to questioning masculinity as a positive value in itself, even opening up the question of what exactly masculinity was.

In this respect, one of the most interesting shifts in the identification of masculinity with men was that of Jack Halberstam in her famous book *Female Masculinity* in 1998 [1]. In this book Halberstam shows that throughout history there have been many women who lived with a male identity, appearance and attitude to life. This places in question whether masculinity is what men are; it is not that these women "imitated men", but that the traits and gestures of masculinity can be adopted by both men and women. On the other hand, there are men who do not take them on, and are not masculine (the camp gay, the drag queen, the transvestite and so on)..

Queer masculinity: the erasure of men?

This shift is interesting because it poses a big question: if masculinity isn't "what men are", how is it to be defined? On the other hand, if we cannot define masculinity, how do we define what "a man" is? These paradoxes are explored in depth by other queer theorists like Judith Butler, who explains that it is not so simple to define what a man is or what a woman is in essentialist, biological or "natural" terms [2]. The same is true of masculinity and femininity: if these roles are generated through the repetition of actions, attitudes or aesthetics in bodies without any prior essence—i.e. performatively—through mere ritualised repetition of these actions, this leaves concepts like *man*, *woman* or *masculine* and *feminine* without meaning or essence—though this is certainly not the same as saying that "women do not exist", as some people often claim in order to attack queer theory.

We have here a kind of circular argument: if we look up the words man, masculine or virility in the dictionary, it gives mutual, circular references between men and masculinity without ever defining what each of these things is. Even if we try to define it as the opposite to women, this does not work either, because there are plenty of masculine women, as Halberstam points out. This masculinity in women shows that there is no direct or natural link between masculinity and men.

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It is precisely this lack of an essential link between the two things that means men constantly have to reaffirm our masculine identity by demonstrating masculine roles with macho gestures, certain "male" aesthetics, rejecting feathers, women, queers, accepting all the products of the masculinity industry that are sold on television, in fashion, in culture and so on. In short, reinforcing the idea of the macho as something positive. There is enormous promotion of masculinity linked to consumerism and capitalism [3]. But if masculinity is too "narrow", capitalism has no difficulty in opening it up. Masculinity has been reformulated in recent decades, opened up to sell more products: metrosexuality was invented to encourage straight men to buy beauty creams, perfumes, bold clothes, to paint their nails, go to hairdressers—but certainly not to be confused with queers.

Contemporary reflections on masculinity appear in cultural studies, queer theory, feminism, sociology, psychoanalysis, texts on male violence, art and so on. All this has led to the development of so-called Men's Studies in US universities since the 1970s [4]. However, the same presupposition makes its way into most of the books on masculinity through the back door: masculinity is always related to men. This means all these studies analyse how men could live in a different way, behave differently, change their roles, experience their

sexuality differently, avoid toxic masculinity (there must be another, non-toxic, one) and so on. All this is referred to as alternative, critical or dissident masculinities, but really it continues to maintain the identification between masculinity and men. Therefore, the very interesting shift proposed by Halberstam leaves us with an empty gap [5]. That is to say, if masculinity is something independent of men, as shown by the lives and identities of masculine women, this indicates that there is no way of defining what masculinity actually is, and by the same token nor is there any way of defining what a man is.

In the late 1990s trans photographer and activist Del Lagrace Volcano conducted a very interesting experiment: while filming the scenes with a video camera, Volcano went up to different men on the streets of London to ask them an apparently simple question: "What does it mean to you to be a man? How would you define a man?" The interviewees were left in a kind of trance, unable to answer. Some tried to pass the test by babbling, not entirely convinced of what they were saying, "Well… someone with a penis and testicles." Volcano replied, "Well, there are trans men who don't have a penis or testicles… and there are cis men who have had these organs removed, and all of them are men." Faced with this response, most of the interviewees fled. The brave ones who stood their ground tried to carry on the discussion: "Maybe with certain traits—physical strength, beard, deep voice, bodily hair… but I'm not sure, there are women like that too, and men without any of that…" As you can see, it wasn't so simple.

So, is masculinity testicles, penis, high levels of testosterone, producing sperm, a hairy chin, XY chromosomes [6], certain gestures, is it in the body? Is it something mental, is it performative, is it constructed, is it social, is it cultural, is it something you exercise, like power [7]? Is queer theory going to "erase men" if it goes on asking these weird questions?

Bears: masculinity enters the gay scene

Is this lack of a masculine essence what obliges men to constantly reinforce or represent their masculinity through a range of paraphernalia. One example of excessive or supposedly natural masculinity is the bear subculture [8]. This community, which appeared in the late 1980s within the gay community, involves valuing certain traits of masculinity: facial and bodily hair, a heavy build, maturity. Until then the gay community had basically represented itself through slim or athletic men, hairless and young, which was also the image promoted by the market aimed at encouraging gay consumption. Fatter, older or hairier bodies were discriminated against in the gay community, while at the same time the straight community constructed an imaginary "gay man", identifying him with the effeminate body, with the camp gay, the drag queen, the queer.

The gay was a kind of squealing extraterrestrial, cross-dressing, pink-wearing; an interior decorator or hairdresser identified with the feminine and very different from the codes of heterosexuality and its maximum exponent, masculinity. The appearance of the bear subculture brought about an interesting shift in this identification between gay and effeminate. That is to say, heterosexuals were now discovering something very worrying, that highly masculine-looking men, heavily built, hairy, with plenty of facial hair, in any job

(butchers, lorry drivers, builders, plumbers and so on) could also be gay. The gay came closer, too close, to heterosexuality. Though this was subversive at the time, over the years it also led to a reappearance of this traditional masculinity within bear subculture. This means that part of the community went back to the most macho, feather-phobic aspects of the patriarchal tradition, scorning effeminate men and drag queens

> If masculinity isn't "what men are", how is it to be defined? On the other hand, if we cannot define masculinity, how do we define what "a man" is? Is the lack of a masculine essence what obliges men to constantly reinforce or represent their masculinity

Masculinity's attempt to present itself as something natural is clearly visible in a paradox that came out in *Bear Magazine* (a well-known part of bear culture). The subtitle of the magazine was "masculinity without the trappings", giving the impression that bears were natural masculine types in themselves, with no need for accessories or additions. But curiously enough, inside the magazine was full of "trappings", i.e. ads for jeans, lumberjack shirts, braces, caps, walking boots, belts and more, that is, a heap of trappings that were just the ones to construct (bear) masculinity, and a whole range of cosmetics to be a "real man". This supposedly "natural", wild [9], man looking as though he had just stepped out of a Canadian forest cabin, was really manufactured by all these objects and gestures (or by the absence of gestures: the rigid, inexpressive man who never dances is also masculine), it was his "embodiment" that turned you into a masculine character, in this case a bear.

Freud or the subject lost in the toilets

From a different standpoint, psychoanalysis had already pointed out these impossibilities. What Freud revealed is something tremendously subversive: it is impossible in the symbolic order, i.e. for the subject, to define what a man is and what a woman is; the subjects are lost in the face of this impossibility. While "man" and "woman" are apparently two places, they are places that can never be written down, they are places that are unknowable. They are apparent opposites lacking essence (the appearance of essence comes from its opposite, but having two "opposed" elements does not tell us anything about what each element is, like the symbols designed to symbolise "men" and "women" on the doors of toilets: is a man a pipe? Is a woman a skirt?) so that for psychoanalysis there are only subjects, and they are all lost in their relations with sex. This impossibility is shown precisely in the appearance of the subconscious and the discomfort Freud identifies in all sentient beings regarding their sexuality—there is something that "doesn't work".

Freud probably never set out to be a subversive anti-binary activist, and in fact much of his writing is marked by the patriarchy of his time. Nevertheless, he was able to point out this paradox, this impossibility whereby the heterosexual myths of a harmony between the sexes, the real man, the real woman, no longer stand up. All the discourses of the

heterosexual comedy are questioned by a multiple, uncontrollable, random desire (polymorphous perversity, as small children's desires were called) that goes far beyond genitality and the assumed relations between the sexes [10] and by the impossibility of knowing what a man or a woman is.

Anal penetration and masculinity

Some years ago Sejo Carrascosa and I decided to conduct a study [11] of anal sex between men and the traditional contempt for men who took up a passive or receiving posture. Our interest was aroused when we realised that much of homophobic discourse and anti-gay violence is full of references to anal sex, i.e. being penetrated as something negative, horrible and degrading. Expressions like "he was shafted", "stick it up your ass" and the like are at the basis of this homophobic contempt. However, it was not clear why a simple, innocent action like being penetrated in a bodily orifice should unleash this kind of panic or violence against men who did these things.

To understand this phenomenon of hate, we reviewed perceptions of anal sex in different periods and cultures. For example, in classical Greece, while anal sex between men was not frowned on, it was considered unworthy for a nobleman, one from the upper class, to enjoy it in a passive position. In the middle ages the Catholic Church introduced the concept of sodomy to penalise sexual relations of this kind as the behaviour of infidels, and murdered thousands of people in its religious frenzy. In the 19th century the human sciences, psychology and psychiatry pathologised anal sex with a medical criterion of illness, linked to perversion and improper use of the sexual organs that make up an identity; through this sexual practice the concept of "homosexual" was created as a subjective, sick essence.

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We found that through this whole story ran a criterion of the penetrability or impenetrability of bodies, which in turn generated the very notion of masculinity and femininity. In other words, what defines a body as "masculine" is that it is impenetrable, regardless of whether this body has female or male sexual organs. And in turn what defines the female body is that it can be penetrated. Thus, for example, a man who is penetrated is assimilated to the female or a woman. This explains in part the hatred and violence towards these passive men, those considered to have betrayed the masculine position or who have lost their masculinity by the fact of being penetrated. This study gave us a more complex view of masculinity as something separate from genitality and sexual identity, and more directly linked to the body as penetrable or impenetrable.

Conclusion

As we have seen, masculinity is a concept that is very difficult, if not impossible, to define. Through it run different power relations, relations of class, race [12] and gender, and most importantly, we do not know whether it is a concept to be rescued, recovered or rehabilitated by defending a less toxic masculinity, trying to make it an alternative, or whether, to the extent that it remains linked to patriarchal power and what we call "men" and their privileges, it should be deactivated as a concept, abandoned as a subjective or sexual identification. We leave this question open to discussion when forging feminist policies, and also for men themselves to reflect on our privileges and how we are responsible for keeping masculinity as something positive and desirable, despite its devastating effects.

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