MASCULINITY AS A COLLECTIVE CONSTRUCTION

Masculinity isn’t just a men’s thing

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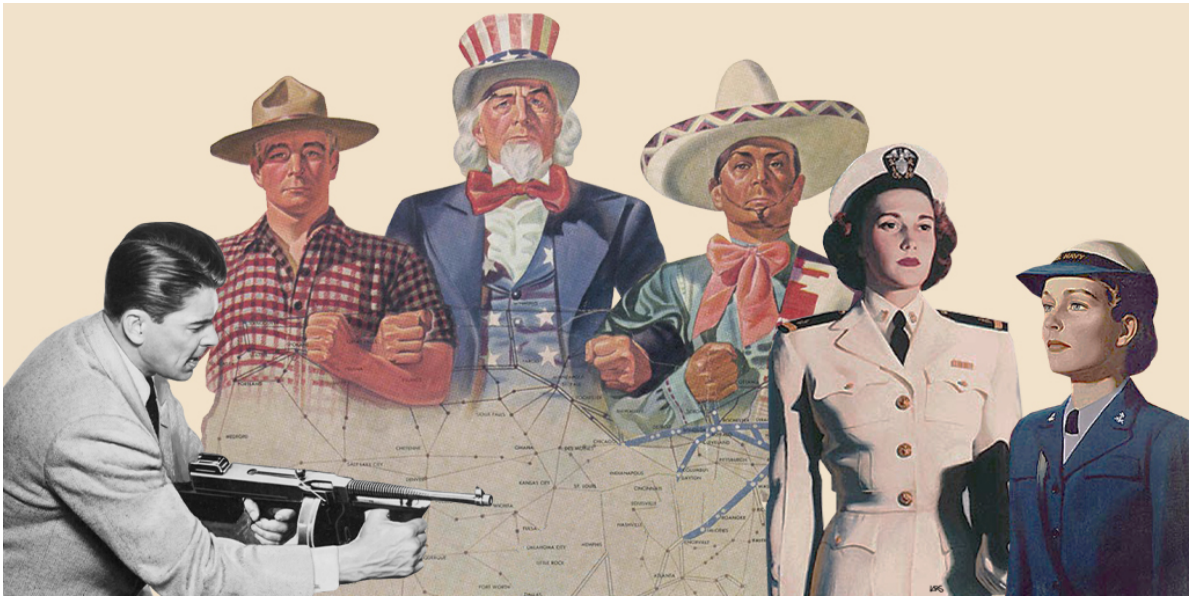

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Masculinity is a historical phenomenon. What we define as masculine or otherwise is a changing, unstable and plural social construct. Like any historical event, it is complex and involves the whole of society. Masculinity is a social value that is not only to do with men. Those brought up as men experience it at first hand, intimately, of course, but they are not the only ones who participate in it or define what is virile.

Contemporary masculinity began to take shape in the early 19th century. As Xavier Andreu has explained [1], during the liberal revolutions a new model of political organisation was constructed, but also a new society in which, among other things, a new ideal of masculinity was consolidated. This was the citizen who defends the nation with arms, fights for freedom, is brave and ready to sacrifice himself for this idea, while submission is an effeminate trait. Thus, defending liberty against absolutism became an affirmation of virility. Even though this militarisation of masculinity deepened the division between the sexes, in this same context many women also took part in the revolutionary struggle. They rallied to the cause and so acquired masculine qualities. They also became models for men, exhorting them to fight.

Masculinity was not therefore constructed out of nothing historically, but from a close interaction with other social values—like the defence of freedom against absolutism in this

case—which do not belong exclusively to men, but involve society as a whole. Thus, in this specific context, when virility is associated with the defence of liberty, when submission to an autocratic power becomes an emasculating trait, virility appeals to both men and women, to society as a whole. This is why it should not be surprising that women shared the values that made up virility and liberalism in an inter-related way and even took up arms, as well.

During the liberal revolutions, but also in many other contexts, everybody, men and women, shared the fervour aroused by heroes and their great causes. Years later, Spain embarked on a war against the Moroccan empire. This became a conflict of national affirmation, one that became highly popular, and even the humblest classes shared this patriotic fervour. In this context, the figure of the heroic soldier who defends the nation and liberty against the supposed autocracy of the Moroccans is once again a celebrated figure. The return of the troops from Africa was celebrated in Barcelona with parades and receptions that attracted enthusiastic crowds. They represented an acclamation of victory, but also an affirmation of masculine, soldierly values. The fervour generated by the nation, victory and masculinity were experienced at the same time and were shared. The tears of emotion of both women and men on seeing the returned soldiers were the same tears. Moreover, women regretted not being men and not being able to go and fight. In Ferrer Ferrándiz's account, one woman bitterly lamented, "Ay, if I were a general" [2], when she saw the soldiers returning from the war. She shared the same fervour for national values and therefore felt frustrated at not being able to take part directly. In the same way, the cliché of the widow who has lost her husband in the war and dreams of replacing him, going herself to fight and avenging him is widespread in war literature and has been described in different contexts.

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Images of virile women with all the masculine qualities like bravery, authority, majesty and determination are no exception in this first liberal period or during the African war. It has been pointed out, for example, how brave, warlike heroines proliferate in the context of national liberation struggles as an example of virility. The exceptionality of the "race" or nation (depending on the period) is exemplified by exceptional, particularly heroic, virile women [3]. Thus, the exercise of virility depends not so much on a specifically male body, but on other social vectors where it is involved, such as "race" or national belonging. The exercise of virility is not the sole responsibility of men.

AIn the early 20th century short novels were written in episodes, sold at newspaper stands and became very popular. Those with warlike themes were particularly successful. These novels described and therefore affirmed and redefined masculinity. The man who had to avoid weakness, be a hero, determined, brave and self-sacrificing. Women were not excluded from this process. The selfless woman who loved, accompanied and admired this

man was often the heroine of these novels. However, this woman did not love just any man—only the man who suitably fulfilled the masculine ideal. She loved him not for his distinctive qualities, but to the extent that he excelled in the performance of a successful virility. Why do women in literary and cinematic fiction never fall in love with the hero's friend (the Sancho Panza to Don Quixote, the countermodel who highlights the successful masculinity of the hero), even though they are often more interesting and accessible than him? They fall in love with the "masculinity", not the "man". In this popular literature, the feminine view, this love and recognition offered by women to this standard masculinity, helps to affirm and reproduce it. More recently Halberstam, in her book *Female Masculinity* [4], has also explained the different ways in which women have incarnated masculinity in the 19th and 20th centuries, from women who lived as men to those who in the early 20th century were described as "inverted" and lived with their female partners.

Thus there are numerous examples of how women have personified virile values, aspired to them, became excited by them and loved those who personified them. Over the years women have experienced masculinity at first hand and actively constructed it. It may therefore be useful to decouple masculinity from the male body and see it as a social value shared by both men and women.

Masculine values beyond the difference between the sexes

However, when we say that masculinity is a shared social value we are not only referring to how women sometimes appear as masculine, sharing virile values, but to how masculinity relates to other social and identity phenomena that apparently have nothing to do with gender; values like the nation or the state are signified through the images and values of manhood.

For example, at the height of imperialism or during the world wars people talked about strong and weak nations, nations that had to be independent, determined, brave, triumphant. Is this not a rhetoric that talks about the nation in terms of the value of masculinity? Images of men and virile values portray an abstract phenomenon of which we have no direct, specific experience, the nation. It must be personified to make it familiar to people, so that they can identify with it. Nations have often been represented through female images, like the well-known images of women portraying the republic or nation, but it is also habitual to think of nations in male terms. However, this gender connotation often passes unnoticed, because historically the masculine has been constructed as the universal rather than being gender-marked.

Nevertheless, detailed analysis from a gender perspective leads to the conclusion that, historically, nations have often been imagined and talked about in masculine terms. The nation takes on personal, specifically virile, attributes when it has to be strong, determined, independent and self-sufficient, be brave and resist. Likewise, this subtly virile rhetoric is reproduced in other social contexts. For example, political communication is often based on values that, although they are presented a neutral, are blatantly masculine. A sanitised soldierly masculinity, purged of its most aggressive components, is on display when

political debate is a battle, when imposing one's own opinions becomes essential to show authority, when recognising doubts, inter-dependence, vulnerability and the other side's arguments become impossible because this would be a sign of weakness, or when accumulating power is seen as a merit.

> Hegemonic masculinity helps to maintain power relations, especially in relation to the oppression of women, but also other forms of social hierarchy. Decoupling masculinity from the male body allows a complex analysis of how gender structures our society

Like this, when the pandemic came along, it was confronted in a spontaneous, banal way through the values typical of manhood. First of all, in public discourse—not only in politicians' speeches—the pandemic was posited as a war against the virus, which was the enemy to defeat. Much of the rhetoric has revolved around "unity" versus "disunity" and "us" against the enemy, an "us" that had to resist. Communication regarding the pandemic transmitted specific values: unity, determination, courage, discipline, strength, resistance and not giving in. Apart from this more explicitly military discourse, which was rightly criticised, other, perhaps more subtly virile, values served to make sense of the health crisis situation. Appeals were made to virtues like scientific ability, intelligence, efficiency and good organisation, reason, intellectual ability or calm and sang-froid in the face of adversity. Values which, even if they seem "general" or "universal", are also related to the construct of masculinity.

From the 19th century onwards, another male model was also making room for itself alongside the military one: the gentleman, the modern, efficient, scientific man, the civilised man par excellence. Intelligent and rational, he was able to dominate modern science. Largely defined in contrast to "barbaric", "backward" colonised men, whether Indian or African, incapable of scientific thought, hard work and rational organisation. Science has certainly been essential to overcoming the pandemic, of course, but above and beyond practical efficiency, the values linked to this rational, restrained masculinity have also served to cope with and signify the crisis situation society has experienced. Once again these values, shared by all, both male and female, are not neutral in gender terms, but specifically masculine.

Thus, rather than considering the women who have, exercised, admired, loved or participated in masculinity as a curiosity or a mere anecdote, it can be accepted that masculinity has been a social value that has historically impregnated and structured society. This should be no surprise because virility today is constructed in relation to other social vectors from which it is practically inseparable, like nation, empire, state and social class. In this respect, Tosh defines two ways of interpreting the concept of hegemonic masculinity: the minimalist approach, which would set out to analyse male identity and how

men adhere or not to gender norms, and the maximalist one, involving analysis of the construction of masculinity not only in opposition to femininity and identity, but also overlapping to a great extent with the class hierarchy, the nation and other forms of social power.

This broader perspective analyses how hegemonic masculinity helps to maintain power relations, especially in relation to the oppression of women, but also other forms of social hierarchy. For example, how certain models of masculinity help to maintain certain class relations or certain national hierarchies [5]. Thus, the study of masculinity helps to understand gender models, but also the construction of citizenship, the emergence of the welfare state or the nation [6]. Therefore, decoupling masculinity from the male body allows a complex analysis of how gender structures our society in areas that apparently have nothing to do with the difference between sexes.

Is it possible to imagine a rhetoric that speaks to interdependent nations that need each other, of weak leaders who cannot do everything on their own, who need help and cooperation? Or, for example, returning to the pandemic, recognition of the suffering of physical pain and illness, anxiety, fear, pain over the death of family members or friends played a relatively small part in public discourse, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, even though it was the essential experience of many people both then and now. Shared, public validation of this pain would have offered relief to those who were the most directly affected. However, this vulnerability is not part of the repertoire of masculine values that structures our society. Nor does care play a pre-eminent role, even though it has been an essential part of dealing with the pandemic. Nor do the need to be protected, cared for and people’s obvious dependence on each other come into the catalogue of traditional manhood, which has certainly had major practical consequences: the low social value placed on care leads to low pay for those who work in it, even though it is a basic social need.

In her definition of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, Connell defined gender as a system, a network of power relations, not just an identity pinned to individuals. Thus, masculinity should be seen not as a form of identity for people who live as men, but as a network that organises our society, privileging some values over others, regardless of who exercises them, and structures society in a banal, implicit way. Of course, this analysis of masculinity as a shared social value cannot ignore what this means in terms of power relations. In this respect, the above perspective can help to understand why traditional masculinity is so robust and affirmed so efficiently: it is reproduced in a banal way when we talk about men and women, but also when we talk about nations, politics and pandemics.

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Questioning masculinity has been very hard because it involved not only questioning men's identity, but also all the meanings attached to this: nation, state, empire and class difference. This gives longevity to a form of masculinity that is oppressive above all for women. Only a significant change in the banal masculine values by which everybody lives can lead to profound social change. "Men" are protagonists in this process, of course, but everybody needs to play a part in it. In particular because masculinity is implicitly everywhere, even if it goes unnoticed. Thus, thinking about masculinity can be effective if it is shared, organised collectively; a social movement and not just a process linked to the specific personal growth of men. Thinking about masculinity implies thinking about power relations between men and women and also other forms of social hierarchy. In this examination of masculinity, which is not just a men's thing, the tools of feminism are essential.

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