

MASCULINITY AND POWER

Men: subjects of power and subjects of desire

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Faced with the expansion of feminism... what happens to men?

“When contemporary feminism was at its most intense, many women insisted that they were weary of giving energy to men, that they wanted to place women at the center of all feminist discussions. Feminist thinkers, like myself, who wanted to include men in the discussion . . . were the feminists who could not be trusted because we cared about the fate of men.”

hooks, b. (2004) *The Will To Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*.
New York: Atria

The advance of feminism in recent years has been a political and social event with far-reaching effects. As women have mobilised in large numbers in different countries in recent years, feminism has gained a place in the most everyday aspects of social life, in a commonsense tectonic shift. Today many more people consider themselves “feminist”, something that came up against resistance and awkwardness among much of the population until quite recently. The hegemony of feminism is made clear by its ability to break out of academia, books, lectures, more militant milieux and political organisations; in short, it has found the power to become a popular phenomenon. Many more women, from our grandmothers to teenagers of the trap or reggaeton generation, realise that feminism is something to do with them. Inevitably, this rapid expansion of the frontiers of feminism gives rise to a question: and what about men? What does feminism have to do with them? What are their place and their role in a revolution that sets out to change everything?

This question takes on political relevance not only because many men find themselves faced with it, but also because it is a question that some political forces are answering in a reactionary way. The new (and old) far right are in effect recruiting an army of men angry about feminism, which they describe as an excluding project that has declared war on men. The anti-feminist discourses of present-day conservative and reactionary forces, which in Spain and elsewhere are attracting a predominantly male electorate, point to feminism as one of the principal enemies to combat and seem to want to swell their numbers by reaffirming a wounded masculinity that is fighting for its right to exist. It is important to point out that for discourses of this kind to succeed there must already be a breeding ground for them. The political far right gives shape to, explains, guides and offers direction to male discomfort, unease or anger at a time of great confusion for many men.

This is a context in which it is important to consider masculinity and analyse what kind of imperatives and norms govern men’s behaviour, what cracks and faults are opening up in male domination, what kind of failures now face those who want to go on being “real men” and how male identity is being reconstructed or reconfigured in the 21st century. In recent years discussions of masculinity have gained weight within the social sciences, with male studies gaining ground in the academic sphere. And, though much more timidly, the question is just starting to open up of how far, at a time when feminism has now won the right to exist in institutions, public policy needs to include a specific view of masculinity in order to make progress in gender equality.

However, these questions and issues also generate tensions within feminism. Feminisms—in the plural—do not agree with one another over the role men should play in theoretical analysis, in gender policy or in the social project we refer to when we say “feminism”.

Identitarianism and its fissures

Perhaps it is time to formulate a radical critique to free feminist theory from the obligation to construct a single, unchanging basis . . . The

identity
of the feminist subject should not be the basis of feminist politics.

Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.

The recent exponential advance of feminism has not stopped its internal plurality from making itself evident. In fact, current debates such as that on how to include trans rights in the feminist agenda reveal profound ideological differences. Nor is it surprising that just as its subject expands (in that more people have become part of feminism and use the term) feminism is increasingly debating what “feminism” actually is, arguing from different standpoints that not everything fits under the label of feminism.

There are inertias characteristic of the present moment. The inability of certain feminisms to include trans people reveals an identitarian retreat or closing up regarding the subject—supposedly obvious and clearly defined—of “women”, reviving the debates about identity among the different feminist currents at the end of the last century. While some feminisms try to argue for including trans rights in their agenda, under slogans like “trans women are women”—i.e. broadening the category of “women”—this position does not settle the current debate. Are not all trans people part of the subject of feminism? Will feminism leave trans men (many of whom have experienced female socialisation or lived in the world as women for years) out of their political subject? Is feminism going to make the right of access for trans people (many of whom do not identify as either men or women) conditional on a clear gender identity? Ever since the appearance of queer positions like that argued by Butler in the 1990 [1] the approach was much more radical: maybe feminism should give up having an identitarian subject and accept that any “representation” of women involves redrawing a category that always generates exclusion. So, the question asked by some feminisms for some time is: is feminism perhaps a struggle by and for women only?

The trans issue is one of the fissures where the question of the subject of feminism arises and the contradictions of an identitarian feminism become tense. However, another of these fissures is now opening up over the question of men. If the feminist struggle is to confront a gender system that indoctrinates women and men differently, prescribing different social behaviours and destinations for them—what we call “gender”—to what extent can this system be combated without combating all gender mandates? Are men not just as subject as women to a structural system that categorises and traps individuals in gender identities? Moreover, can women possibly liberate themselves from the patriarchal gender system if men are not liberated too? How can some feminisms that say they want to “abolish gender” treat the question of masculinity as a separate problem that has nothing to do with feminism and is not essential to advance towards a gender-free society?

As if including men as objects of patriarchy were blurring their responsibility for their dominant role and inevitably meant

underrating their privileges

As if including men as objects of patriarchy—also subjected and trapped by gender mandates—were blurring their responsibility for their dominant role and inevitably meant underrating their privileges. This creates a paralysing dilemma: either we are the object of a patriarchal structure and therefore passive victims of its mandates, impositions and forms of violence—a position reserved for women—or we are agents responsible for such domination and its violence and therefore not objects of domination. But is this inevitably the case? Are men the agents of patriarchy but not its victims? Do men invent—as outside creators or makers—patriarchy or do they instead form part of this system, are products of it and remain trapped inside it?

Power and structure

“The structure imposes its coercions on both sides of the relationship of domination, and therefore on the dominators themselves, who can benefit from it without ceasing to be, as Marx put it, «dominated by their domination»”

Bourdieu, P. (2000) *Masculine Domination*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Current identitarian discourses tend to have a depoliticising effect to the extent that the structural weight of patriarchy as a system of domination disappears. Being a system or structure means precisely that all the subjects that form part of it are subjected to the system, subsumed, produced by it—so both men and women are therefore objects of a domination [2]. The radical nature of feminism as a social theory rests essentially on this question: analysis of a very ancient, powerful and insidious social structure of which we are all part. The contemporary feminisms that are focused on safeguarding and patrolling the frontiers of their political subject and need to consolidate a strong identity for “women” are helping to construct frameworks in which women can only take the role of victims, as objects of a system of domination, and men seem to have to take the role of agents who, as they are neither objects nor victims of patriarchy, appear to acquire the status of subjects outside the structure and not responsible for it. A paradoxical way of dissolving gender power and the importance of patriarchy, consisting of denying its structural nature.

bell hooks is one of the representatives of working-class black feminism and also one of those who has fought hardest against the identitarian—or “separatist” in their own words—feminisms determined to ignore the negative impact of patriarchy on men.

“Separatist ideology encourages women to ignore the negative impact of sexism on men. It accentuates polarisation between the sexes . . . Men oppress women. Rigid sexist role patterns harm people. These two facts coexist. Male oppression of women cannot be excused by recognising that men are, in a way, also harmed by rigid sexist roles.”

Or, in other words, the recognition of men as products of a gender system and therefore dominated by a structure does not mean releasing them from responsibility for maintaining and perpetuating the patriarchal system. The problem lies precisely in setting up theoretical frameworks in which the role of the structural and individuals’ possibility of agency (and therefore their responsibility) are mutually exclusive. Theoretical frameworks that, by the way, are also no use in understanding that women’s status as the principal victims of a patriarchal society does not mean that women themselves cannot take an active role and might also collaborate in sustaining gender mandates towards both women and men. Identitarianism leads to an advance of the moral and a retreat of the political: it needs pure, innocent victims and aggressors not subject to any power, exaggerating men’s individual agency—at the expense of the structural—and women’s passive victimisation as objects with neither agency nor responsibility.

New men: self-made or subjects of desire

“Masculinity cannot see through itself; there is generally no reflection or describable rationality behind much of what men do.”

Rita Segato [\[3\]](#)

In the context of this debate on identity and at a time of increasing retreat into identitarianism, discourses about “new masculinities” have spread among certain feminisms, discourses that have in recent years gained increasing visibility in the media, social networks and publications. Many of these messages appeal to men’s responsibility in a system that grants them privileges and a higher position than women. The aim is to reach out to men’s conscience and make them see their advantages over women, make them realise that they have been and remain unfairly rewarded and recognise their privileges. They are also invited to make this journey for themselves, to do it alone, not to depend on women, not to bother the feminists, to learn, to “study” feminism for themselves, to deconstruct their masculinity. This kind of discourse appeals essentially to men’s reason—conscience, awareness or even the “study” of feminism—and will or intention.

“Men are aggressors because they want to be,” said a well-known expert on masculinity and violence in a televised debate on gender violence and its causes. According to this view, some men want to be privileged while others, those with feminist awareness and intention, understand the injustice from which they benefit and voluntarily choose to give up their benefits. The mainstream discourse on privilege even works by seeing the problem in strictly economic or economist terms: men have to lose what they have built up over history for women to gain what they have been denied. It is no coincidence that if the problem is posed as a matter of costs and benefits, where progress towards an egalitarian society seems to involve a zero-sum logic—some gain and others lose—subjects are seen as rational and able to calculate. The problem is that the most accessible discourses on masculinity are bringing back the classic masculine subject characterised by reason and intention, a subject that feminist theory has been questioning for decades.

Since the 1980s and 1990s, different currents in contemporary philosophy have criticised modernism, with feminist theory playing a fundamental role in this critique. If one thing has played a central role in questioning the validity of the modern political project, it is the profound criticism of the subject of this project by the different strands of feminism. An invalid subject, self-created out of reason and intention. This is therefore a self-constructed subject free from the shackles, dependencies and needs that can only be dealt with socially and collectively. The gap or distance separating this subject from others is measured by their supposed ability to appear on the social space and live in it without others. The Robinson Crusoe of liberalism, the self-made man of neoliberalism, the family man of the American dream, the *homo economicus* of capitalism or the “mushroom man” of the market society are all manifestations of a single modern masculine myth. Feminisms have criticised this false autonomy and self-sufficiency of the liberal subject, unmasking this false subject by recalling that this subject did not come out of nowhere or make itself, by showing that the individual relies on invisible work by women, has someone to look after them, has a mother tongue, has a childhood, has a family, has a mother, has a community. This subject has been placed in doubt in many ways, but always unmasking the falsity of a disembodied, fleshless subject. According to the psychoanalytical perspectives pursued by part of feminist theory, the trap consists precisely of this fiction or transparency and pure awareness of a subject self-created out of reason and intention, a subject that does not seem to be limited by the opacity of the unconscious or desire.

In the light of feminist thoughts on the subject, a critical reading is needed of some contemporary discourses on the new masculinities that seem to be reinventing the “self-made man”, this time as a new feminist man able to become aware of his privileges and deconstruct his masculinity in a heroic exercise that he undertakes on his own. Understanding the weight of the patriarchal system probably means accepting that masculinity is not something men invent for their own benefit, but a collective construction running right across society. Deconstructing this hegemonic form of masculinity is not and cannot therefore be a task men undertake on their own, or one that men take on collectively, without an active role by women and without both men and women taking aim at the institutions that sustain and reproduce sexism and gender mandates. If feminism cannot have a closed-in identitarian subject restricted to women, this is because even if all women joined together in a global feminist assembly to agree on how to defeat patriarchy

we would not succeed in dismantling the gender system. Not without men, not without also attacking and dismantling the patriarchal forms of masculinity. Nor will men succeed in this task alone. Reviving the liberal concept of the individual who can do anything does no more than prop up once more the classic form of the subject sustained by traditional masculinity. We can't do it alone and neither can they. Moreover, any feminist policy that aims to bring about a social transformation must treat both women and men as subjects that are not always aware of what they are doing or what they want, and are victims of their own opacity.

In this respect, there is a need for policies of desire, making other possible masculinities desirable and doing so collectively, recognising the important role to be played by women in a normatively heterosexual society. Undertaking this task means committing ourselves at the same time to freedom for women and freedom for men who are, in a patriarchal system, slaves with advantages, who receive perks from power—but still ultimately slaves. Can there be anything more motivating and transformational than all of us becoming involved in a political project to overcome inequalities, which means working together for our own freedom? This is a framework in which far-right discourses cannot recruit men against women, where we escape from liberal logics that always see freedom for some as a limitation on the freedom of others. It is in this perspective that discourses on masculinity can mean a major step forward in transforming our society.

REFERENCES

- 1 — Judith Butler wrote *Gender Trouble* in 1990, questioning the need for a subject in feminism and suggesting that any attempt by feminism to represent “women” must be rejected.
- 2 — This idea is explained very well by Pierre Bourdieu in *Masculine Domination*.
- 3 — Segato, Rita (2019). Interview in *El Salto*: “Men need to be shown that expressing power through violence is a sign of weakness”. [[Available online](#)].



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