

MASCULINITY AS A COLLECTIVE CONSTRUCTION

On masculinities, bodies and history

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Does masculinity have a history? Everything social has a history, and masculinity is a social phenomenon that has, like femininity, a long and surprising history. In fact, its changeability amazes those who see it as something stable and natural. Being a man in the 15th century was something very different from what it is to be a man today. But the history of masculinity also surprises those who are aware of its constructed nature, especially for the persistence of some of its most characteristic features. Now and in the past, masculinity has been in some way linked to the exercise of dominion and power, and this calls for forms that are stubbornly repeated in different contexts. However, viewed from the present, the most surprising thing may be how the relationship between masculinity and its bodily medium has changed over time. To put it another way, history shows us how much the strength of the link binding biology to gender has varied over time. In this article I will therefore discuss history, masculinities and bodies.

Masculinities in the world of the single sex

Critical awareness of masculinity has largely sprung from feminism. As we know, 20th-century feminist thought challenged the view of human beings that chained women to fulfilment of a supposed biological destiny. Affirming the socially constructed nature of

gender models was a venture with enormous consequences, one that affected femininity of course, but also masculinity. This masculinity supposedly linked to men's nature was in reality a set of social values that, just as they were created, could change and accompany the birth of a different, fairer society. The feminist project to transform gender was no easy challenge in a society that had made femininity and masculinity into immutable values. A modern society that believed in the existence of two sexes that were essentially, naturally and radically distinct and complementary. However, it was not always like this.

The transition to modernity opened up deep cracks in the way of understanding the world and human beings. Authors like Thomas Laqueur have explored with great lucidity the changes that came about at this crucial point in our history. His proposal does not aim to be a universal narrative that obscures the differences between some societies and others, but to serve to identify the broad trends that help to understand these far-reaching changes. The starting point for these changes, inherited from the past, was a hierarchical, radically misogynistic view that could be characterised as being of "a single sex". As might be expected, this single sex, male, had its highest expression in men and had a defective, imperfect version in women.

According to this view, all human beings were to be judged according to a single code of virtue, a series of values considered universally positive and at the same time typically masculine: courage, strength, piety, loyalty, restraint, keeping secrets... Thus, there was a single chain of human perfectibility. Male and female saints, for example, as historians like Bakarne Altonaga have made clear, had to conform to a single canon of perfection [1]. From this point of view, masculinity was the most complete expression of humanity. And femininity was not the inferior other, but simply inferior. It is not surprising that feminism in these pre-modern societies concentrated its efforts on combating misogyny and proving that women could also be human beings with dignity and examples of virtue.

In these societies, moreover, masculinity—and femininity—had a relationship with bodies that was far from what subsequently became dominant. In contexts that gave primacy to the spiritual side of human beings and where science was not the source of truth that it later became, bodies were more malleable, unstable phenomena. As Francisco Vázquez García has made clear, nature in these societies was not a purely biological domain governed by its own laws. It was a moral order that expressed the divine will. Sex was fundamentally a social rank, a condition, and the body had a more fluid, open character [2]. This must not lead one to think that this was a universe that was tolerant with difference or permissive with infringements of the gender order. On the contrary, rules and punishments were clear and severe. However, both rules and the punishments for breaking these rules obeyed a logic different from that which governs our view of gender today.

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Thus, centuries ago it was conceivable for bodies to undergo changes for the better—which from a misogynistic point of view meant shifting from feminine to masculine—through extreme physical effort, a change in the balance of the humours or sudden changes in temperature which could bring out the male sexual organs women had inside them [3]. On the other hand, the perception of being a man or a woman tended to be more performative than simply biological. This perception, which had more to do with doing than being, lay behind narratives like those of Christine de Pizan (1364–1430) when, a couple of years before her major work *La Cité des Dames* (The City of Ladies), she described her own transformation from woman to man. After being widowed at the age of twenty-five and having to support her family, Christine de Pizan was forced to earn her living in a men's world as a professional writer. She realised then that if women were weak, she had to become a man to survive. She overcame her fears and Fortune taught her how to be male. She felt stronger than before, her body rougher and more agile, her voice deeper: "You who hear me, I remain a man: I have been a man for more than thirteen years," she wrote [4]. In this way Christine de Pizan was talking to us about a way of being a man that seems strange in the light of today's dominant views. We can say that, in a context in which the difference between nature and nurture was so different from today, perceptions of gender, sexual difference and masculinity were also very different.

Masculinities in modern times

Thus, modern societies introduced new ways of seeing masculinity and masculinities. This is not a question of inequality and the hierarchical principle disappearing, far from it. Modern societies are founded both on the principle of equality and on the practical exercise of inequality. But the rules of the game certainly changed. While views of what we have called "a single sex" have not disappeared, they have lost some of their currency. They have given way to a view of gender based on two complementary, incomparable natures, each with its own virtues and faults. Two separate worlds. This new paradigm denied the possibility of comparing women to men on the basis of a shared code of values and faculties: "Woman is worth more as a woman and less as a man," stated Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "When she makes a good use of her own rights, she has the best of it; when she tries to usurp our rights, she is our inferior" [5]. The so-called feminine and masculine natures were constructed at that time: the man was active, strong and rational; the woman, passive, weak and emotional. The virtues of one sex were therefore the faults of the other. The sexes were essentially different and incompatible with what Thomas Laqueur described [6]. In fact, these two worlds, each with its own code and its own laws, neither superior nor inferior to one another, were a perverse fantasy that concealed and propped up power relations that could no longer be admitted in the context of a theoretical defence of universal rights.

In parallel, the sexualisation of the public and private spaces was radicalised, so guaranteeing the male monopoly of public and political life. Under the new logic, women

were excluded from these spaces and these rights, not because they were inferior but because they were different, and respect for their nature required them to devote themselves to feminine tasks. The domestic sphere was set aside for them. New gender discourses offered a solution to the contradiction of denying women's political and civil rights in a kind of renegotiation of the terms of the "sexual contract" [7]. Meanwhile, science took on an unquestionable authority in setting the boundaries between the sexes. The body became something beyond question and natural laws, through those who interpreted them—biologists, doctors and scientists in general—set out to govern the social world, too. Natural mandates were decreed in the name of science and were therefore sacred, and the natural mission of women was motherhood. Masculinity, in all its plurality and internal hierarchies, was also indissolubly linked to the body and to a biological fact, both supposedly immutable.

This was certainly not a uniform, linear process; on the contrary, it is a complex story. The transition to modernity was not organised to order. But some trends in changes were consistent and proved decisive in the field discussed here. Of particular interest is the fact that the naturalisation and extreme biologisation of masculinity created the fantasy that virility was an immutable essence, linked to bodies with certain characteristics. Like this the naturalisation of masculinity covered up the tracks of the power relationship of which it formed part. Contradicting this view to show the cultural, constructed nature of masculinities is still a work in progress.

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History has made a significant contribution to this critical task and continues to do so, by showing that what it means to be a man has changed over time and from one context to another. In this respect, it is especially illustrative to see how attributes associated with masculinity in one context are attributed to femininity at other times—and vice versa. For example, as shown by María Sierra, Darina Martykánová and Víctor M. Núñez García for the Spanish case, it is interesting to see how the virile passion of the tormented romantics, even that of romantic scientists, was feminised as the 19th century progressed, as masculinity was rationalised and stripped of emotions [8]. Or how the lofty exquisiteness of aristocratic men of the *Ancien Régime* became feminine artificiality in the process of constructing bourgeois masculinity. Or how the value of chastity, a universal moral virtue in societies with a religious world view, became—together with modesty, an essential attribute for the honest 19th-century woman. Or, in short, how the very term 'virtue', related to 'virile' and associated with the bravery of the warrior, shifted over time into the feminine universe, to finally merge into it.

A history with a bright future

The history of masculinities as a specific branch of knowledge has a short history, but has already borne significant fruit, with enormous liberating potential. This applies to women, too. Subjecting masculinity to analysis enriches women's history because it deals with the relational nature of gender, destabilising the supposedly immutable nature of sexual difference. It is also of interest because it challenges the view of men as the ultimate, universal and neutral subject, as opposed to women, who are defined purely by their gender status. Historical study of masculinities has been a good ally of women's history, because it also sheds light on the women's position in the past. Thus, how society sees fatherhood, work, matrimonial duty, honour, the use of public space or the role attached to violence in the definition of acceptable masculinity are decisive factors in the life of women. This was true in the past and continues to be the case.

Early feminist demands in the area of violence or research into paternity, to give two significant examples, call attention to the relevance of these issues to women's well-being. It is enough to remember how Olympe de Gouges worded the eleventh point of her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen* in 1791. In this critical version of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, the original proclamation that "Every [male] citizen can speak, write and publish freely" was turned into a feminist demand for responsible fatherhood and a denunciation of the social stigma attached to single mothers: "The free communication of thoughts and opinions is one of the woman's most precious rights," it stated, "As this freedom ensures the legitimacy of fathers in relation to children. Every [female] citizen may therefore say freely 'I am the mother of a child that belongs to you,' without a barbaric prejudice forcing her to conceal the truth." Thus, in short, far from being an alternative threatening to distract attention from the long-ignored past of women, the study of masculinities can and must be a strong ally.

While this is true, it is no less so that the history of masculinities is a methodologically diverse field which, since its origins in the eighties, has been pursued within very different historiographical currents. These include that of a renewed political history, cultural history, the history of sexuality and queer studies. This plurality is no coincidence. While the history of masculinities cannot be understood separately from gender, the latter as an analytical tool cannot in itself explain everything to do with the meaning of being a man. In fact, studying masculinities means plunging into a network of power relations touching on class, nation, sexuality, race, religion and age that privilege some masculine groups over others.

The historical study of subordinate masculinities, those that are marginalised or rejected in relation to conventional masculinities, has generated a vast bibliography internationally. In this academic field, important work has been done in relation to topics as relevant as the birth of homosexuality and transsexuality as categories of identity, the construction of working-class masculinity, the repression of homosexuality, especially during and immediately after the Franco dictatorship, Roma masculinity, the relation between masculinity and modernity, masculinities in nationalist movements and so on. Nevertheless,

it is still true that there are many topics that have not yet received the historiographical attention they deserve. However, the studies that do exist do make it clear, not theoretically but through the experience of specific human groups and individuals, that masculinities have a history—in fact many histories.

We need to carry a critical view to the heart of normative narratives, in the conviction that all gender identities are flawed. Gender is always a fraud, even though it is a fraud able to manufacture—highly efficiently—strong identities and solid social hierarchies

Apart from expanding this diverse map of masculinities over time, the challenge remains of analysing these masculinities through different bodies. There is much to be explored in the masculinity expressed through bodies defined as women, and also through countless other bodies. There can be no doubt that including other genders in gender history is an essential step to understanding masculinities in the past and in the present. And this inclusion in itself implies a transformation of the universe into which it is incorporated. But nor does the task end there. There is also a need to question the underlying logic of this binary thought in contexts where stability and order appear more rigid. Enquiry needs to take in places where the norm appears to display no fissures or contradictions, seeking to destabilise that which calls itself normality. We need to carry this critical view to the heart of normative narratives, to the heart of identities protected by certainties with feet of clay. This must be done in the conviction that all gender identities are flawed. In the conviction that gender is always a fraud, even though it is a fraud able to manufacture—highly efficiently—strong identities and solid social hierarchies.

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