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Am I a Man or A Feminist? Constructing Positive Male Feminist Thought

Cory Aragon

Abstract

Male Feminists find themselves in the weird position of opposing entrenched patriarchal gender hierarchies while effectively reinforcing them. The question arises, am I a man or a Feminist? This question is seated in a seemingly oppositional relationship between the culturally masculine, the culturally male, and the positive theory of Feminist thought.

In this paper, I attempt to provide a way of being both a man and a feminist. In the first section, I try to debunk the common notion of many Feminist separatist movements that the culturally male and masculine are destructive to the feminist cause. After showing that the separatist agenda is both unattainable and self-defeating, I proceed to lay the groundwork for a positive construction of Male Feminist Thought by initially explaining what this project is NOT intended to be. Once I have laid out some of the common ways that male Feminists undermine the feminist cause, I move on from my negative account to a positive account. My positive account utilizes Larry May's Progressive Male Standpoint while emphasizing the need for continual critical reflection in order to build a theory of Male Feminist Thought that is both male and Feminist.

I.

Am I a Feminist or A Man?

During the second year of my Doctorate program in Philosophy, I had the privilege of taking a Feminist Theory course offered by the Sociology Department. This course was not the first experience I had with Feminist thought, as I had previously taken a number of courses that focused primarily on Feminist literature. But each of these previous courses were offered by the philosophy department, taught by a philosopher, and were mostly populated by burgeoning philosophers. While we explored, discussed, and critiqued the Feminist literature and how it pertained to theories of ethics, meta-ethics, epistemology, language, or democracy, we did so within the comfortable setting of a philosophy class with a privileged methodology guiding our discourse. This methodology, The Adversary Method, privileges discursive practices that are argumentative, competitive, and aggressive. Further, the Adversary Method, has been critiqued for promoting masculine values while sacrificing the real relationships of the members of the discourse (Moulton 1983). Well versed in the Adversary Method (and aspiring to be a great adversary), I found (and find) myself most comfortable in constructing arguments, giving reasons, and critiquing (read: tearing down) the arguments and reasons of others.

However, my previous experience with Feminist philosophy, coupled with Feminist critiques of the Adversary Method, made me unsure about my own practices and made me more acutely aware of my interaction with other Feminists and women. I began to wonder not only how Feminist theory and its associate critical perspective could inform my work, but also how it would assess my daily actions and life in general. I became increasingly worried and guilty for participating in the patriarchal structure that limited not only the lives of women and those that belong to the culturally feminine, but also my own life. I became quite wary of my ability to be a Feminist.

I carried this wariness into the first lecture of the Sociology department's Feminist Theory course. I found myself—normally a talkative student—silenced. I did not know how to interact with the other students in the class without arguing with them. However, I was much more aware now that the argumentative style to which I was so well acquainted could be construed as combative and even violent. Further, I was worried about being overly aggressive given that I was a male in a Feminist course—my aggressive actions could effectively reify the patriarchal structure that the members of the class and I were seeking to undermine. For the first few weeks of the course, I was virtually paralyzed. I sat, observed, and ran through counter-arguments in my head. Eventually, I found my place in the classroom and began contributing to the conversation, however, I found myself to be a constructive contributor rather than a destructive adversary. And while I was still one of, if not the most, argumentative in class, I was able to find a new form of constructive Feminist interaction while keeping the critical perspective so important to philosophy.

I realize now that my silence in the classroom was caused by my awkward positioning as a male *and* a Feminist; by my not knowing what it meant to be both male *and* Feminist, and the “proper” place within Feminism for a male, afforded me debilitating awareness of my masculinity and the privilege it afforded me. The privileges of my being a male and exhibiting the culturally masculine seemed to me to undermine any attempt of being truly Feminist—how could I truly commit myself to the Feminist cause of combating the patriarchal structures that grants me these privileges? Again, a wariness of my ability to be a Feminist set in; however, this wariness was not debilitating. Rather, this wariness was empowering—it allowed me to see that the male voice within Feminism can provide an important standpoint on the relationship of gender oppressor and oppressed, giving way to a more progressive system of male thought that

can, in turn, support and work towards Feminist aims. In this paper, I will show how I can be both a man and a Feminist, constructing a progressive form of Male Feminist Thought.

II.

Why Male Feminist Thought?

While I believe the male voice could play a beneficial role within Feminist thought, I am confronted with a number of powerful and persuasive Feminists that do not agree. The Radical Lesbian Feminist movement is perhaps the most outspoken form of separatist Feminism. Radical Lesbian Feminists argue that all interaction with males and the masculine effectively reinforces the system of patriarchy that binds all women—"Men, [Radical Lesbian Feminist's] claimed, are the oppressors and the beneficiaries of patriarchy, and masculinity is intrinsically violent and woman hating" (Clatterbaugh 1990:42). Rather than working within the patriarchal structure to undermine the privileges afforded the masculine, Radical Lesbian Feminists advocate the complete withdrawal from that system, disengaging all and everything masculine. The Radical Lesbian Feminist movement would rather not be Feminist than interact with men; as Bette S. Tallen states, "[i]f being a Feminist means 'working it out' with men, count me out" (1990:256). Instead, the Radical Lesbian Feminists advocate lesbianism as a political choice that builds solidarity among women while freeing them from the sexual domination of men. The message of the Radical Lesbian Feminists is one of realization and transcendence:

It is the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness with each other, which is at the heart of women's liberation, and the basis for the cultural revolution. Together we must find, reinforce, and validate our authentic selves (RADICALESBIANS 1997:157).

Thus, men and the masculine should not only be challenged for the privilege afforded them, they should be completely avoided. Only when women completely separate themselves from men and the masculine can they find their true selves.

However, the separatist agenda of the Radical Lesbian Movement should not be sought by responsible Feminist thinkers. There are a number of reasons why calls for separatism should be dismissed. First, separatism is unrealizable—while the privileges afforded men and the masculine can and should be challenged, it is impossible to avoid all men and the masculine. Even Radical Lesbian Feminists have to operate within the patriarchal system that characterizes all societies and cultures. To appropriate the words of John Donne, "No Radical Lesbian is an island." Second, the Radical Lesbian Feminist's call for separatism ignores the revolutionary power hidden within male and female Feminist solidarity, even if only a strategic move by Feminists—the incorporation of men into the Feminist movement—lends the movement greater social and political status owing to the privileged positions of men. Further, the Feminist movement might be more "believable" to men if advocated by a man or by a person exhibiting the culturally masculine (May 1998:146). For both of these reasons, separatist Feminist movements appear undesirable on a practical level.

But there is also a principled reason for rejecting separatist Feminist agendas. In her extremely influential work in gender theory, Judith Butler develops the concept of gender as performance. This concept claims that all gender is a set of individual performances put on by an individual influenced and constructed by the social norms that inform gender identity. These performances construct the gender identity of the individual and are played out on the individual's body. Thus, all gender are social "*fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (2004:110, emphasis in text). Instrumental in the construction of

these social fabrications are socially constructed gender norms; these gender norms ostensibly set the stage on which corporeal manifestations of gender performance can take place. Gender performances are confined to the social reality that the gender norms dictate; and this social reality is built on a foundation of sexual difference and heterosexual coupling. Thus, all gender performance takes place within the social context of gender binaries constructed to encourage the view that sexual difference and heterosexuality are biological or natural categories rather than merely privileged social constructs. To exist outside the confines of these gender binaries is to not fully exist—

it is not possible to exist in a socially meaningful sense outside of established gender norms. The fall from established gender boundaries initiates a sense of radical dislocation which can assume a metaphysical significance (2004:27).

The gender binaries that construct our gender identity also serve as the foundation of our stable personal identities. We must, then, seek to transform ourselves through challenging these gender binaries, reforming the gender norms that inform both our gender and personal identities, even if this challenge means upsetting the stability these norms provide us.

Now, one might think that this theory of gender lends itself nicely to the Radical Lesbian Feminist separatist agenda—the way that women challenge and break down the hierarchical gender binaries that characterize heterosexist patriarchy is by refusing both to interact with the perpetrators of this gender hierarchy and to participate in the heterosexual coupling that grounds the hierarchical gender binaries. In fact, this strategy is exactly what is called for in some separatist movements.

However, this strategy reinforces hierarchical gender binaries by either (a) privileging the feminine in the original binary, or (b) creating a new hierarchical binary. In the case of (a), separatist movements will often reaffirm traditional gender norms through the privileging of women in a reconstructed gender hierarchy. Here, separatists claim that only women and revalued women's experiences can transform gender binaries. These separatists basically aim at turning the gender hierarchy on its head, giving women and the culturally feminine the privileged position. This problem is not as troubling for Radical Lesbian Feminists as it is for more simplistic separatist movements. But Radical Lesbian Feminists sometime implicitly make this claim when they affirm that women can occupy all of the positions of the gender hierarchy while holding on to something that is inherently feminine. Unfortunately, this approach does not work—it maintains a problematic hierarchical gender binary where individuals (even if lesbian) struggle to comply with socially constructed gender norms.

Owing to this fairly obvious problem, many separatist Feminists, especially Radical Lesbian Feminists, argue that separatism allows for women to transcend these problematic hierarchical gender binaries. In other words, when women adopt the political position of being a Radical Lesbian Feminist, they are not recasting themselves in a privileged position in the same old gender binary. Rather, they are choosing not to participate in and, consequently, to transcend these hierarchical gender binaries. But this gives rise to a new problem, (b) above. In her critique of Monique Wittig's Radical Lesbian Feminism, Butler writes,

even as Wittig describes the lesbian in relation to this binary opposition of “man” and “woman,” she underscores the fact that this being beyond opposition is still a way of being related to that opposition, indeed a binary relation at that...postulating a sexual identity “beyond” culture promises to set up yet another pair of oppositions that, in turn, suggest another hierarchical arrangement (2004:32).

The creation of this 'transcendent' gender beyond the cultural gender binaries in place does not, in fact, undermine and transcend gender hierarchies. Instead, it creates a new binary opposition between the exiting gender binary of 'man' and 'woman' and the transcendent gender of 'lesbian.' Again, the separatist agenda undermines itself by reifying hierarchical gender binaries, even if in a new form of the binary.

It should be clear that there is good reason to think that separatist Radical Lesbian Feminism is not only unrealizable but also self-defeating. Moving on from the separatist agenda, we can begin to look at men and the masculine as an inherent part of gender construction and the critical analysis of these gendered constructions by Feminists as imperative for the dissolution of harmful gender hierarchies.

III.

What Male Feminist Thought IS NOT

In working towards developing a theory of Male Feminist Thought, it is important to note what this theory is NOT. First, Male Feminist Thought is not like the mythopoetic men's movement that holds tightly to "nostalgia for the time when men were men and women knew their place" (Kahane 1998:227)—it is not a guise for the outright reclaiming of extremely oppressive forms of gendered behavior. Nor is Male Feminist Thought merely an occasion for men who claim to be feminist to complain about supposed double-standards held by feminist women (see Morgan 2001). Also, Male Feminist Thought is not meant to abdicate Feminist Thought from women or female thinkers. It is not meant to use the Feminist critical perspective to subvert the aims of Feminist thinkers. Further, it is not an attempt to resubordinate women through the appropriation of Feminist thought to "see what is in it for us, to identify our interests as men, and only act where we see such interests" (Brod 1998:199). In sum, developing Male Feminist Thought is not an attempt by men to steal Feminist theory, reify gendered structures of power, or use Feminism as a means to male-interested ends.

In his essay, "Male Feminism as Oxymoron," David J. Kahane lays out four (ideal) forms of problematic Male Feminist knowledge. The four ideal types of dangerous male Feminists are (1998:224-227):

(1) The Poseur

This form is characterized by a superficial knowledge of Feminist thought, seeing it as a useful tool in accomplishing ends that are generally uninformed by Feminism. The poseur is highly unlikely to have turned Feminist critiques back onto his own behavior, while still bragging about his Feminist commitments. The poseur is only interested in Feminist activity as it helps him, as peripheral movement that may help him seek gendered ends. I like to think of the poseur as the guy who mentions he took a women's studies class as a pick-up line.

(2) The Insider

This form is characterized by a general commitment to the Feminist movement. The insider has studied Feminism quite a bit and thinks of himself as a good Feminist. However, he is unable to apply Feminist thought to his daily interactions. He usually does not pick up on the ways his gendered existence affects those around him. The insider generally does not recognize his own situation as one of privilege and power and that he is only being tolerated owing to this privilege and power. Despite his good intentions, the insider is usually a walking contradiction, undermining his Feminist claims with androgenous action. In this case, I think of a friend of

mine that likes to proclaim that he is a Feminist despite making comments more typical of an overly masculine boy.

(3) The Humanist

This form is characterized by a greater awareness of how patriarchy has influenced men's positions of privilege and power. The humanist recognizes how his maleness has afforded him special social benefits and is generally concerned with addressing them. Further, the humanist is especially concerned with seeking the transformation of gendered politics not only for women, but also for men. But as Kahane points out, the humanist, while strongly committed to Feminist cause is too focused on the improvements Feminism can provide for men. This focus in no way entails the transformation of gendered structures of power and oppression. I think many theories in the pro-Feminist or pro-Feminist movement make the same mistakes as the humanist.

(4) The Self-flagellator

This form is characterized by an in-depth understanding and internalization of Feminist thought. But the self-flagellator focuses far too much on his guilt or complicity in reifying gendered systems of power. The self-flagellator risks self-indulgence and even paralyzation by focusing too much on his direct role in the oppression of women. As Brod may suggest, the self-flagellator will not have the "energy" to sustain a (pro)Feminist movement (1998:199). It is important to note that these forms are ideal constructions, and that most Feminist men (including myself) have found or will find themselves fitting into one to all four of these categories at different stages in the development of their Feminist thought.

In avoiding these four problematic manifestations of Male Feminist knowledge, Male Feminist Thought must remain extremely wary of turning Feminism into something for men to use to become better people, either superficially or substantively. Instead, Male Feminist Thought must remain strongly committed to the Feminist aim of combating patriarchy and working primarily towards gender justice, with men's role in seeking this aim an important focus within Feminist thought.

IV.

What Male Feminist Thought IS

A positive construction of Male Feminist Thought must do more than merely avoid the problematic forms of Male Feminist knowledge mentioned above; it must also seek to build a critical feminist framework by which both men and women can deconstruct masculine privilege and challenge institutionalized patriarchy.

Building on the foundation of Feminist Standpoint Epistemology, male Feminists have begun to develop a "Progressive Male Standpoint" (May 1998). In arguing for this Progressive Male Standpoint, Larry May suggests that this model of Male Feminist Thought has four dimensions: (1) knowledge of privilege afforded and oppression rooted in masculinity is found in personal experience, (2) knowledge is generated through critical reflection on that experience, reflection that focuses on male gender roles and women's oppression, (3) there is moral motivation to change the conditions that characterize patriarchy, and (4) there are practical proposals that may be more believable by men when presented by male Feminists (May 1998:136). The Progressive Male Standpoint, therefore, claims that men have particularized knowledge of gender oppression owing to their unique experience as oppressor in the current gender hierarchy. This particularized knowledge, arrived at through both experience and critical reflection from a feminist perspective, allows male Feminists to create a politics to change their role in reifying prevalent systems of patriarchy while working with women Feminists to undermine these

systems. Further, men situated in the Progressive Male Standpoint have the moral motivation to endorse and act on their progressive politics, working to encourage men to analyze their own experiences of privilege and roles as oppressors of women. This standpoint gives male Feminists a theoretical, epistemological, and political foundation for seeking gender equity.

Progressive Male Standpoint is necessary for a responsible and positive formulation of Male Feminist Thought. Male Feminist Thought must be situated in the actual experiences of men participating in their privileged gender roles while remaining critically reflective of these experiences. For Male Feminist Thought to remain sustainable, it must include:

- (i) a willingness to conceive of oneself as ethically complex and incomplete; (ii) an openness to criticism and a propensity to self-criticism; and (iii) engagement in activist friendships and community (Kahane 1998:228).

Male Feminist Thought is characterized by knowledge and politics grounded in a Progressive Male Standpoint. At the same time it is engaged in a continual critical process of knowledge and politics, by those occupying that standpoint. Male Feminist Thought, then, is always partial and fluid, continually reshaped and reformed by critical male experience. Further, Male Feminist Thought is necessary in building fuller theories of gender oppression and institutional patriarchy.

Male Feminist Thought should not be construed as singular or essentialist. Men occupy many different social positions and have differing levels of power in society. These social positions lead to different experiences of masculinity and patriarchy. Male Feminist Thought must challenge presumptions of hegemonic male experience and unified masculinity. Breaking down the assumptions that there is one correct way to exhibit masculinity, even within a feminist perspective, Male Feminist Thought can illuminate the way that *masculinities* are variously constructed by social positions that differ along the axes of race, class, sexuality, and able-bodiedness. Progressive Male Feminist Thought must come to accept, understand, and critique multiple male standpoints, working towards an inclusive and empowering system of thought to combat patriarchy, in all its forms, as well as racism, classism, heterosexism, and ableism.

V.

Conclusion

Feminist men find themselves in the weird position of being both ally and enemy. They find themselves in a difficult critical space in which Feminist thought illuminates forms of oppression that predominate society while at the same time depicts males and the masculine as bad or evil. However, the responsible male Feminist can work towards a progressive and positive theory of Male Feminist Thought. Male Feminist Thought allows men to revalue their subjectivity, understand their experiences within patriarchal systems of oppression, and work towards gender equity, while remaining critical of their individual roles in reifying and undermining masculine privilege. Further, Male Feminist Thought can illuminate the different experiences of masculinity and the different conceptions of masculinity held by men in various social positions. The proliferation of masculinities and femininities can effectively undermine current presumptions of hegemonic gender experience as well as hierarchical gender binaries.

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