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Considering Men, the Evolving Discourse on Masculinities Reflections on “Masculinities: Violences, Variations, and Visions”

(*Universitas*, Volume 2, Issue 2)

Robert Heasley

It has been twenty-five or so years since scholars first took up the mantle of critically examining masculinities in what are now considered classic works by Jack Sawyer, Joe Pleck and Harry Brod. These scholars made persuasive arguments for considering men in the equation of understanding gender. Drawing on a feminist analysis they called into question the perception that biology explains all and that the oppression of women was a de-facto result of how men and women are made, either by God or by nature. Today there is little support for the early essentialist arguments. Men, it turns out, do have a gender that is more than the sum of their physical parts. Indeed, how boys become men and the meanings society associates with masculinity are not only constructed, but highly regulated, broadly interpreted, and situationally located.

There is, as we have recently come to realize, no one masculinity. Rather, there exists a set of perceptions, beliefs, arguments and practices that leads to a hegemonic form of male-ways-of-being to which both meaning and value is given. It is the form, and not the person, that is the generic male. There is a particular historically constructed masculinity that arranges our everyday lives, from learning to live with, (even when we don't want to accept it), male induced violence, to not seeing the variations of masculinity that are possible, or that non-violence is an alternative representation of masculinity. Indeed, we have too often accepted male acts of violence as a condition of being born male, a biological fact—the way we accept women's menstrual cycles as a condition of being female.

The reflections in “Masculinities: Violences, Variations, and Visions” edited by Phyllis Baker and Harry Brod in the Fall 2006 issue of *Universitas* (Vol 2; Issue 2) add substantially to the ever-expanding discourse on the subject of masculinity and particularly those masculinities that are associated with violence. We have a long history of witnessing devastating violence enacted by men without questioning masculinity itself. Whether the form such violence takes is the shootings at colleges and school grounds in our own country, the advancement of war in nations around the world (and the accompanying readiness of men to perform as soldiers, regardless the cause), or the recruitment of boy-children in places like Darfur who are trained as killers even before they can read, we witness the potential for, and reality of, men's violence. Such actions are likely to be addressed as a product of non-gender related factors such as depression, age, religious conflict, or politics. Regardless of location, the violence the world experiences in its more constant causal form, is the violence produced and reproduced generationally by men. Along with this, there has historically been a level of acceptance and accommodation to the status quo of men's lives; such accommodation takes place in the absence of vision of possible masculinities or a discourse on the variations of experiences of masculinities and masculine settings.

The articles appearing in *Universitas* share a common thread—identifying the themes and conditions in men's lives that accentuate forms of violent masculinities, addresses variations in

men's (and women's experience) of the masculine, and introduces visions of possible ways to re-think (and re-experience) masculinities. In "Hypermasculinity and Violence as a Social System," Thomas Scheff identifies the effects of alienation and repression of emotions embedded in cultural practices where violence is most prevalent. Scheff lays the groundwork for what Philip Culbertson in "Men's Quest for Wholeness: The Changing Counseling Needs of Paheka Males," sees as the quest for wholeness—for connection of the self from its parts to its purpose, that cannot take place in a person or group where alienation and emotional repression define men's experience. If one does not witness, experience, or feel integration with society as a whole—not just with a part of society—not just with other men of similarly alienated identities, but with women, with children, with gays and lesbians, with old and young, with rich and poor—then it is easy to isolate, to be manipulated, to feel the desperate desire for belonging that finds itself explosive when the desire cannot or is not met. Scheff's suggests that such desperation caused by isolation and alienation without the tools of emotional intelligence for understanding self as well as other, indeed has led—repeatedly—to, in his words, the *biosocial doomsday* machine. The machine erupts in spurts at Virginia Tech, on the killing fields of Darfur, the suicide bombing in Baghdad and in the prisons of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay.

What Culbertson describes as the effects of idealizing the "Man Alone" culture in New Zealand—a masculinity experienced as separate from women and independent of the state—is played out in patriarchal cultures throughout the world. After all, one cannot be independent and connected at the same time; cannot be emotionally vulnerable and defender/protector all at once. A man chooses, or does not, depending on whether the man can accept that there is a menu of desirable options.

The "bad ass" that Mullins and Cardwell-Mullins in their article, "Bad Ass or Punk Ass: The Contours of Street Masculinity," possesses qualities of alienation and repression of emotion at their core. The bad ass is *bad* because he can do harm, must do harm, to perform his masculinity in a similar way that the "Man Alone" in New Zealand must stand aside from community to affirm his manhood. Both are *bad*; they are outsiders seeking to be acknowledged as just that, and doing whatever is required to maintain their position.

While such images of violent masculinity are relatively easy to conjure up (we have all been exposed to and warned about the bad ass), Marc Ouellette's description of "mundane masculinities" reminds us that men are not inherently violent, do not seek to conform to the hegemonic masculine, but rather live lives adapting to whatever is around. The mundane man, Ouellette suggests, takes in more than he may show on the outside. He may perform a particular muscular masculinity as defense and protection, but is also capable of adaptation when threatened with losing his status, security or in the case of Detective Andy Sipowicz, the character from NYPD Blue that Ouellette draws on for his analysis—a job. Men adapt, masculinity is malleable; if that which is masculinity can be so readily violent without thought, and as a product of social forces, then to be not violent (or in the case of Detective Sipowicz, changing his level of homophobia and sexism) is also possible.

There are a number of other threads in these articles. Billman ("The Enfleshment of Masculinity(s): The Maintenance of Hegemonic Masculinity") describes the physicality of the masculine through performance. This leads us to wonder whether any man can be real—are we all "drag kings" as Billman suggests when he refers to Judith Butler's analysis of gender as performance, or are we "dudes" as portrayed by Byrd ("Hang With the Dude")—that require special padding and more than a little pretence (let alone willingness to take up space and be noticed!). What is the obsession with image of the male-self that is larger than our reality, a

body that performs beyond the necessary or (particularly in Byrd's portrayal) desirable? There is a connection here with Brod's discussion in "The Sorry Sons of the Godfather: Intersexuality, Orality, and Diminished Masculinity in *The Sopranos*," questions whether the son can ever meet the father's expectations, live up to the hero the son imagines the father to be but never was, and whose status is based on diminished and diminishing masculinities. If the father's masculinity is a product of the diminished other, than the son seems to pay the price of the father's persona. The father is as unrealistic (and undesirable) as Byrd's "dude" yet receives the attention accorded which presents as bigger than life.

It is against this backdrop—the enfleshment of the masculine, the struggle of the son to compete and claim the form of masculinity which matches the idealized version of the father that, perhaps, war is produced and violence, in all its forms, is reproduced. Nagel's slides on the subject of "Masculinities, Femininities and Fundamentalisms: Gender Confrontations and Collaborations in Global Conflict," tell the story of competing masculinities articulated through a common voice of absolutism and domination produced by the hegemonic masculine and delivered by three of its spokespeople: Jerry Falwell, Osama bin Laden, and Pat Robertson. War is an act of collaboration—confrontation among men that takes place in an arena that subjugates women and non-warring males, and claims to disdain violence at the very time it uses violence as the terms and conditions of men's relationships. In war, as Nagel's images suggest, a particular type of violent masculinity is the only winner, never men.

That masculinity itself is an arrangement is articulated in Lynn E. Nielsen's description of being "Female like me." He is a teacher of young children who holds advanced, terminal degrees. Nielsen understands the devaluation of the feminine in a unique way—and "gets it" in how that devaluation influences the decisions and lived experiences of men as they might desire to move into women's space, careers, identities. Diminished masculinities are those associated with the feminine; males in elementary schools are valued if in charge, hired to contain violence, held up as necessary to keep women and children in their place. Hegemonic masculinity has no room for powerlessness. Cory Aragon ("Am I a Man or a Feminist? Constructing Positive Male Feminist Thought") explains the confusion of *doing* the critical analysis of masculinities. As a male and as a feminist, he struggles to locate his place within the discourse of feminist theory. He admits that to listen to the voices of others, without preparing for argument, is a good start. And to reflect on the personal and on the political is a worthy addition to his early training as a male majoring in philosophy. As Susan Rochette describes in "*Imagine This: Disengendered Fiction Writers*," gender is something we can play with, something we can arrange; it is something that can be accessed by any sex—the male voice produced by the female writer, the female experience located in the male voice, think of the options. Yes, think of the options.

Baker and Brod's selections for this volume are notable for the way they portray a notion of masculinity that suggests men adapt, that gender is fluid, that violence is a product of historical-social contexts. This is not to suggest that reducing violence, creating new variations or new visions in men's lives is as simple as picking a man, any man, add "water" in the form of a new culture or effective ritual or counseling process and zap, a new man is born. But men are social creatures—pliable, and vulnerable to suggestion. Any coach or military officer knows how far a little intimidation will go in getting males to conform, to change. As political theorist Jesse Crane-Seeber (2007) recently noted, the military offers us an example of men's vulnerability, how in exchange for the status as a soldier, a man fully submits to another man or an organization of men; the soldier shaves his head, walks in step, submits to extreme punishments—all in the name of gaining acceptance from other men and an institution that is the symbol of hegemonic

masculinity. Change the institution, and the man is likely to change. Change the relationships men have and masculinity itself takes on new forms.

In their introductory essay to “Masculinities, Violence, Variations and Visions,” Professors Baker and Brod note that their intent was to “...present and discuss the intriguing complexity of concepts of masculinity/masculinities.” That the articles they selected incorporate themes of violence serve as a good place to start; after all, violence is a defining characteristic of masculinity. It is also through the examination of the variations, the acknowledgment that masculinities can be associated with a vision, that the discourse on change and creating difference, can take place. Feminist thought and action has provided the basis for revisioning gender. Without such a discourse in consideration of men, the variations in men’s lives will be limited to differences that only produce a reproduction of the status quo—not a new experience.

It is only when the image of the masculine changes through such critical examination presented in this volume, that new experiences of masculinity/masculinities, can emerge.

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REFERENCE

Crane-Seeber, J. 2007. *Radicalizing our critique: Masculinity, the State, and Modernity*. (Unpublished) Paper presented at the American Men’s Studies Association Annual Conference, April, 2007. Kansas City, Missouri.