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# ONE MAN'S SEXUAL POLITICS

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by

**John Button**

One of the most encouraging things that happened to me recently was opening 'Self and Society' and finding John Rowan's review of my new book, 'Making Love Work'. One of his comments that stood out for me was that "... here is a book by a man which is very much OK on the question of sexual politics".

Ten years ago, long before I started leading self-help therapy groups, I wouldn't have known what he was talking about, but then ten years ago he wouldn't have written it. Five years ago, new to the therapy scene, increasingly aware of feminism, and trying desperately to solve the paradoxes of being a right-on man in my own muddled life, I might have cringed at the accolade. If, but only if, I had been feeling fairly secure, and if, but only if, prompted, I could have pointed out all the ways in which I thought my practice was at odds with my theory. Remembering the immediacy of the criticisms which 'the women in my life' were levelling at me, I would have muttered "Well, I'm doing my best, but it's hard work," and at least to myself I would have been worried about whether it was OK for a man to tell another man that he was OK on the question of sexual politics. If a woman had said it, on the other

hand, I would have felt flattered and then guilty in rapid succession.

Now I'm a little older and wiser, and while there is still a long way to go, I and many other people have moved considerably in the last few years. Far from having reached a post-growth-movement doldrum in which aging ex-hippies wholeheartedly embrace materialism and post-feminists have given up the struggle or are consorting with the enemy, I sense a new clarity seeping into that traditionally confused middle ground between the personal, political and psychological aspects of our everyday lives. A great deal of this change has come about as a result of working on what, for want of a better label, we refer to as 'sexual politics'.

One of the activities I have been involved in for the last six years or so is leading groups which have titles like 'Unconditional Lovers' and 'Crashing Through Your Blocks'. The title doesn't particularly matter - the workshops all have the same underpinnings, and these are the theories which, especially when translated into practice, are again directly connected with 'sexual politics'.

By far the most important of these underpinnings is a belief that fundamentally all human beings are equally important, and have an equal right to be heard, to be respected, and to fulfil their creative potential. Relating to people as people, and not as roles and stereotypes, is critical to any activity designed to empower human beings, but when we have been trained for years to do exactly the opposite, to limit people by virtue of who they appear to be, there's a great deal of unlearning to be done. What does it really mean to relate to a person unconditionally, especially when that most dangerous of cultural chasms, that of gender, runs deep and largely unexplored between us and half of the human population?

Clarity and honesty, by which I mean no more than trying to express as accurately as possible my own thoughts and feelings, are crucial to any deep understanding of sexual politics. Clarity is made difficult by constantly having to communicate in language that has already been moulded by limiting conventions, and honesty is constantly having to fight for autonomy against what is 'acceptable'. If it's not looking in one direction to see what our parents might disapprove of, it tends to be looking in the other, to make sure that none of our more-right-than-us friends are going to jump on us, telling us that if that's what we think is true then we've been kidding ourselves even more than they thought.

An example might help, the sort of situation which every group leader will have experienced. I'm sitting in a circle at the beginning of a new

group workshop, looking round at the participants, taking in their individual appearances and generally wondering if i'm going to enjoy myself with them. One of the many things I notice is that one of the women in the group has what I consider to be very beautiful breasts. The fact registers in my mind as for a split second my eyes alight on them. The thought is 'Mmmm', the feeling is shivery but nice. I find myself smiling.

And that, for the time being, is that. But at the next break I start analysing the transaction - hardly even a transaction. First there is in almost every interaction a cultural expectation to expand on what is wanted from it, a tendency that needs to be consciously acknowledged and rejected. What do I want when I notice a woman's attractive breasts? Do I really want to see them, to touch them? 'Come on', says a voice, 'don't pretend you don't. You're a man like the rest of us'. Well, if it was very hot and she took her shirt off, I wouldn't not look at them. If she asked for a massage, I wouldn't carefully not touch them, though I'd check first that that was okay with her. But at the moment, no, I don't want anything. The link between feeling and action (good old counselling theory) is not direct and pre-ordained.

But that's only part of 'the truth'. What if I started to remember all the times when I did want something from a physical encounter with a woman? In order to be an effective and non-intrusive leader in situations like this, I have to be certain that I have as far as possible dealt with my own patterns of

neediness, and if I find myself being taken over by uncomfortable feelings, then it's time for me to ask for attention from the group, or to put the feelings to one side until I can deal with them safely outside the group.

It's also very important to remember that the fortunate possessor of the beautiful breasts is a human being too, with her own thoughts and feelings, relating both to her body and to the present situation. If she noticed that I was admiring her breasts, what was she thinking and feeling? This is where two-way communication becomes very important, especially in an area of relating so fraught with embarrassment, fear and pain. There is, of course, every possibility that while all this analysis is going on in my head, neither she nor anybody else in the group is at all aware of the issue, which suggests that I may be making a meal out of something which is of very little interest to any of them. That doesn't stop the train of thought.

In one of the exercises after the break we sit in pairs to appreciate each other and, having drawn the same numbered card, I am sitting with the woman in question, who now has a name. I appreciate various things about her, and then, feeling embarrassed that I haven't mentioned one of the things uppermost in my thoughts, I say 'Sally, I really like your breasts'. Of course, I can't actually see them, which makes the appreciation partly a matter of trust, and should I look at them as I appreciate them? Surely it's just as dishonest to

pretend they're not there as it is oppressive to stare at them. 'Thank you', she says, smiling.

But that still hasn't really dealt with the issue. Men are always ogling women's breasts - maybe she thinks I'm just like all the rest. Maybe I am, but no, that's limiting the choice I have about what I do with my feelings. It certainly wouldn't have been honest to pretend that I hadn't noticed them, but I have also appreciated a lot of other things about her. Her breasts are just as much part of her innate beauty and power as anything else.

My thoughts wander. What if she had said 'Yes, I like them too'? Well, that's okay; of course people should be encouraged to love their bodies. Or 'Would you like to see them properly?' A slight twinge in my stomach, but I could handle that perfectly well in a group setting - 'Yes', I could say with honesty, 'I'd like that. Would you like to show everybody else too?' Or 'Would you like a feel of them afterwards?' - an honest answer to that escapes me at present. I think I would wonder if she was taking advantage of the workshop setting. I certainly think I would be if I accepted the offer, but on second thoughts would I? Or 'Thank you, and I love the bulge in your trousers'. Assuming I can tell whether this is a straight appreciation or not, what is the appropriate reaction? Is she not as entitled to her observation as I am to mine?

This is all very well when there is something we are used to appreciating, whether we communi-

cate the appreciation or not. But what if we had noticed that the woman had had a breast removed and had chosen not to disguise the fact? Is 'I appreciate your courage' enough?

In the event, when it came to the self-appreciation exercise near the end of the workshop, Sally stood up, held her arms out, and said that she loved her breasts. At the end I told her how courageous I thought she'd been, then wondered if that was condescending, but she gave me a big hug and said she would never have dared do it if I hadn't appreciated them first. There were probably many other ways in which the issue might have resolved itself, but the experience did illustrate for me many of the questions of sexual politics raised by humanistic psychology, especially in mixed groups, and particularly where men lead such groups.

In a 1979 booklet called 'Feminist Practice', Amanda Sebastyen sets out a chart entitled 'Tendencies in the Women's Liberation Movement'. Among other things it looks at feminists' relation to men, and here the chart appears to give feminist women three main options. In traditional political analyses women are seen as fighting alongside men, but women's action is seen as nibbling with little plan or vision at the edges of a monolithic patriarchal social structure. For radical feminists there appears to be no place for men as political allies, and men, rather than social and economic circumstances, are seen as the source of the problem. This leaves, and I suppose it's inevitable that this is the only option I can

imagine bearing fruit in the long term, the category of 'humanist feminism', in which both women and men are seen as being alienated from their real personalities, and from which nobody benefits in the end.

Even two or three years ago, I wouldn't have dared to go public with any critique of feminist analysis, but I'm now fairly clear that this was because of my own guilt and need to be approved of, even (especially) by my feminist women friends. I'm convinced that oppressive behaviour cannot change fundamentally until the person who is being oppressive in a particular situation sees very clearly that it's not going to benefit them, and as a result of this, it's important for every one of us to come to our own understanding of the ideas and insights that feminism has to offer.

Apart from anything else, equality includes the equal capacity to understand intelligent social and political analysis, and the equal ability to listen to and understand what people are saying about their own experience. This means that although women and men may have very different experiences of living in a world divided along lines of gender, each of us is capable of listening to and thereby understanding the experiences of anybody else. This is not to deny our individuality - understanding another person can never be the same as being that person - but to suggest that there are unbridgeable gaps of understanding between people is an invitation to frustration and confrontation, and we can do without an escalation of either of these.

Re-evaluation co-counselling theory makes it very clear that in dealing with sexist oppression men are not the enemy, and conversely, many men need to discover for themselves that women are not the enemy either. The whole idea of an external 'enemy', aside from unbidden physical threat, is anathema to humanistic psychology, and the exploration of our 'shadow side' is an important step on the way to finding our own power. I sometimes find myself getting very frustrated when a person refuses to deal with feelings of anger arising from their own hurt, preferring to blame anything and anybody rather than own their feelings. This is particularly difficult when the blame is couched in apparently right-on political terms, designed to 'prove' the rightness of the blamer and the inevitable guilt of the blamed. In my experience the source of a great deal of such unaware rhetoric has been women, and a few men, who not only think of themselves as feminist or allies of feminism, but also feel they have the right to judge the right-on-ness

of everyone else, particularly those they view as 'the enemy'.

Any model of human beings which sees men and women having very different capacities to live fulfilling, creative and self-directed lives cannot fill me with any hope. I have to start from the belief that although our masculinity and femininity have invariably forced us into limited and limiting roles, each of us is above all human, with human experiences, feelings and ideas, which can be shared with and understood by any other human being.

We hardly need reminding of the way that men dominate leadership in every area of public life, but it's worth taking note of the fact that we humanistic psychologists are no exception. There were 73 of us at last year's gathering at Wentworth Woodhouse, and nineteen of those people led workshops. When we look at the proportions of women and men attending and leading, it looks like this:

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	attending		leading workshops	
	number	%	number	%
women	39	53	9	35
men	34	47	17	65

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While men tend to lead groups, women tend to go to them. Only three times in over forty mixed workshops I have led have there been more men than women. When I go to other leaders' mixed groups, however, I admit to preferring groups where the leader is a woman. I have seen excellent group leadership from men, but in general I find that men have real problems in

balancing excessive dominance with what, for want of a better description, I will call creative focalisation.

I hardly need to dwell on the excessive domination of mixed groups by men, leaders or otherwise - the phenomenon is well documented in sources like Dale Spender's 'Man Made Language'.

Any man who leads groups and who professes to understand group dynamics would be a fool to ignore either excessive domination of the proceedings by any member of the group, or the assertive responses which can interrupt it. I try hard to watch my own domination patterns, and have been known to clap a hand across a male mouth that wouldn't stop talking - interrupting the pattern like this can often achieve instant and most satisfying emotional discharge.

On the other hand, I have also seen wimpish leadership from men that would make a Mills and Boon heroine join an evening class in assertiveness training. In a mixed bodywork weekend I once went to, the trainer let one participant get so far into her distress because he 'didn't want to force her', that she never managed to drag herself up again; he got deeply into his soothing parent subpersonality, and along with one or two of the other participants, I fell asleep.

Creative focalisation, whatever your gender, means accepting the leadership role, trusting your experience and your intuition, and using - with care - any technique that you think is going to help move a person forward. Being a male leader of a mixed group, the danger is in taking advantage of this carte blanche to overstep the boundary where the anything you think might help becomes a particular thing which the person in question does not want.

When I was at Findhorn, I helped to lead a workshop called 'The Game of Life'; each week the 'game guides'

met to talk about different aspects of leadership, and I remember being fairly shocked to hear that one of the long-term guides, a man who had taken the Game to Europe and the USA, reckoned that if he didn't find someone to sleep with from each group he led, he felt cheated. In retrospect I don't believe him on either count, but this is where the beast comes in, the leader who devours vulnerable group-goers just when they are at their most open and needy.

Many group leaders I know have their own guidelines for situations like this. It has to be said that we are likely to meet wonderful and attractive people at group workshops, but such events are no place for leaders, male or female, to confuse the issue by displaying blatant - or even worse, underhand - favouritism. My own guideline is that while I enjoy any amount of hugs and cuddles, I do not 'sleep' with anyone during or immediately after leading a group. Apart from anything else, I need the sleep.

In our society, women and men have more often met in single-sex groups than in mixed ones. Men have met at the pub, the club, the match and the races; women at the institute, the corner shop, or when taking the children to school. It is only recently that women and men have started to meet specifically to look in depth at the interactions that go on between them. This development - a result of the parallel growth of the human potential movement and women's consciousness-raising groups, has allowed many aspects of people's interpersonal behaviour, especially what goes on between

men and women, to be explored in wonderful and gruesome detail.

I would not for a moment deny the importance of the single-sex group, whether it be a consciousness raising group or for anything from needlepoint to model railways, but I am convinced that there are very important benefits and insights to be gained from men and women meeting together on a regular basis in mixed groups, especially if one of our aims is to deal effectively with many of the practical issues of sexual politics.

Whether we feel comfortable in it or not, we all live in a world inhabited by both men and women. Whatever we choose as our priorities, we still have to work out how we are going to relate to the half of the population who are the other sex from us. Until we have done this to our own satisfaction, we cannot possibly feel secure and confident in the world. This certainly doesn't mean the enforced heterosexual patterns of most conventional social interaction, but imagining that we don't have to deal confidently and intelligently with people of both sexes will not help us live our everyday lives.

It is important to remember that the purpose of meeting in groups is to add to the sum of human fulfilment. Groups, like relationships, can sometimes feel like a particularly horrendous form of self-inflicted torture, and we can easily come to imagine that the reason why things are not as they should be is due to the presence of a person or people of the other sex. Sometimes this is true, but that does not make them

the enemy. We can choose to withdraw to the comparative safety of people who, being the same sex as us, feel easier to be with, but ultimately this won't make the problems go away, and though it might ease things in the short term, it won't make any radical difference to the society we live in.

So meeting in mixed groups is not just to 'deal with the issues' in what often seems an increasingly fraught and heavy fashion; indeed, this way of working with difficulties is almost always doomed to confrontation, mutual defensiveness, a total unwillingness to climb down, and complete failure. If this is your experience of mixed groups, then perhaps you should try something creative in a mixed group, like dancing or singing.

Eventually, though, the problems, the blocks, the difficulties, do need to be faced and broken through, and since many of the difficulties we all experience are to do with relating to one or more people of the other sex, the importance of the mixed group in providing the immediate stimulus for helping to deal with these difficulties is crucial.

All group therapies can of course be done in single-sex groups, and even in therapies like psychodrama and encounter where role-playing is important, an experienced participant can successfully 'be' anybody from a policeman to an aging mother. Actually having somebody there, though, who by virtue of their gender represents the critical stimulus for a person's feelings to start flowing, can often help that person to move much faster than would otherwise be the case.

Women's anger towards man is a case in point. It is virtually inevitable that women in our society will be quite justifiably angry about their treatment at the hands of men. When a woman has some solidarity between women, she can often find it difficult in therapy sessions to completely disassociate a female therapist from the women she 'should' be supporting, and therefore 'should not' be shouting at. To have an actual man there to shout at can be far more satisfying, and at the same time it can help the man to be able to listen to and hear the woman's anger without running away from it.

There are to my mind definite advantages of having this sort of interaction take place in a mixed group rather than between a therapist of one sex and a client of the other. Apart from the question of safety - an aware group is an excellent check on the practice of the leader (if he or she can hear the feedback), and there is much less opportunity for the leader to take advantage of the vulnerability of any member of the group - both the leader and the person who is 'working' at any particular time have the psychological support of obvious allies in the group. If a man is getting deeply into his feelings about his mother, he only has to open his eyes to see, at the same time, embodiments of people the same sex as his mother, and other men for whom what he is going through will strike inevitable chords.

Apart from anything else, we all learn about the variety of human experience from hearing other people relating aspects of their own

unique histories. One of the greatest barriers between women and men (though usually a more common problem for men) is not having very much idea about the world inhabited by people of the other sex, and it is here that people working together in a mixed group can open each other's eyes to varieties of experience which might otherwise be difficult to gain access to. At the same time it is important to remember that some people - for which read women - feel they have heard quite enough about what it's like to be somebody of the other sex, so to my mind a fair degree of positive discrimination (letting women speak first and for longer, for example) never comes amiss - as long as it doesn't become patronising, and there's a fine distinction for you

Being OK on questions of sexual politics sometimes seems quite a heavy burden, but when I can remember that it's ultimately for each of us to come to the conclusion that oppression doesn't benefit anyone, including me, it's an easier one to carry. I have to avoid falling into the trap of labelling myself, and of allowing other people to label me, with tags that are meaningless beyond the confines of personal conviction. How many times have I had to reply to questions that begin "If you're such a non-sexist man, then why . . . ?" - the label is not mine, sister (occasionally brother even). We all have to come to our own conclusions, and while there are universals like gender and oppression, judging another person's performance, rather than appreciating what they're doing well and pointing out ways they might do



even better, doesn't help. It's good to be appreciated, so thank you, John, for appreciating my efforts in the arena of sexual politics (but does it really count if he's a man?).

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### **Desperate Sofas**

They are only of momentary importance.  
When that goes, when all vital minutes  
Have passed on,  
They resume the old upholstered order,  
Plump blends of colors  
In someone else's living room.

Quick minutes are profound  
In a time all their own.  
A pair of voices, clasped hands  
Or apart in bad weather, coaxing fire  
Or sealing some fate,  
Stealing from one another,  
Sitting on cushions.

Desperate sofas become small intimate stages  
Where themes are played out, improvised,  
Constant with change, turning  
Bent on ending.  
There is no other way.

Not even if our talk should stop  
Long enough to go to the kitchen for tea.  
The sofas await our return  
Until everything we have ever thought  
Has been verbalized,  
Has already begun the long weary haul  
Across the room, the dark side of memory.

**Christopher Woods**

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