

PEER REVIEWED PAPER

Indoor man: notes on masculinity and neoliberalism

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(Received 1 March 2015; accepted 7 July 2016)

This article reflects on contemporary notions of masculinity in relation to sexuality, the internet and the latest addendum to the neoliberal project, the ‘pharmaco-pornographic’ management of affect. Drawing on clinical work, on Nietzschean notions of *culture* and *civilization* and on contemporary critical theory, the author asks whether psychotherapy can help contemporary men out of the impasse between wildness and domestication. To this purpose, the article also sketches the basis for a feral philosophy that may be able to navigate a middle path for a masculine identity that is stuck between brutality and docility.

Keywords: masculinity; domestication; men’s therapy; feral philosophy

‘Go for it, brother!’

When my Argentinian client Mateo was about six years old, he had what he called ‘a powerful experience’ and his ‘first sense of achievement’. It took place in the pampas of the Santa Fe province, with cattle farming in huge open fields. Twice a year, some 20 men would ride to the end of the fields and bring all the cattle to the ranch for vaccination. Mateo loved horse-riding and was keen to join whenever he could. At times, when two groups of cattle were joined, each with one bull, intense bull-fighting would ensue. This would be managed by the older Gauchos; they’d come in with their horses and whips. On one occasion, while the cattle were being led by the men (including six-year-old Mateo) towards the ranch, one cow suddenly deserted the group. Mateo’s older cousin winked at him encouragingly and said, ‘Come on brother, go for it!’ Mateo turned his horse and rode it towards the cow, ‘my whole bodymind one with the galloping ... I became one with the horse, entirely focused on bringing back the cow’. He succeeded, and ‘one by one the older Gauchos greeted me with a special, double-handshake and congratulated me with a gaze of manly recognition’.

We had come to this story while exploring how he experiences his strength and power as a man in everyday life. Reflecting now on this vivid experience, he saw it ‘as a kind of ritual’, adding, ‘the sensation of power and achievement is still very present with me’. At times he found an immediate if somewhat obscure correlation between the ‘potent stir’ experienced as a six-year-old and his current sense of sexual power and strength. It was nonetheless ‘difficult to contextualize this experience

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This article was subject to double-blind peer review and in accordance with the journal’s editorial and reviewing policy. (See Aims & Scope, www.tandfonline.com/RSEL).

in my own life', he said, despite having no doubts about 'the very real impact it had on me'. He also felt that the experience was akin to a 'ritual scar', a sort of rite of passage. We explored how this may have influenced the construction of his masculinity. Mateo wondered whether he was coming a little closer to understanding a notion that had baffled him for years, Nietzsche's *will to power*. Could this mean 'power as a vital, positive force, not necessarily linked to the customary meaning of power *over*, of oppression and domination?'.

I felt deeply impacted by this particular session. Mateo found it 'very enlightening'. It represented a shift of sorts, and led to a deeper exploration of masculinity. He presented, I felt, a predicament that I found echoed time and time again in the narratives of some male clients, namely the difficulties in reconciling an exuberant sexuality with the social constraints that demanded the domestication of their vital energies. In Mateo's case, this did not create significant inner or outer conflicts. But for others, this struggle often becomes a harrowing internalized psychological friction that greatly impairs their well-being and their sense of self.

The link Mateo made to Nietzsche may have been fortuitous, but it proved to be stimulating. His point about understanding power as strength and vitality, rather than domination over another, reflected a breakthrough in his awareness. It also provided us, if not with an interpretative key, at least with a wider anthropological context.

The constant gardener

Nietzsche's notion may hold wider implications for a more comprehensive understanding of masculinity. Could it represent a way out of the current cultural impasse around what it means to be a man in our day and age? I personally understand this impasse as an ultimately futile, non-dialectical polarization between the intermittent re-emergence of the 'alpha-male' model, and its shadow and counterpart, the soft, witty nerd. This is, of course, an oversimplification, even a caricature, but one that may help illustrate our difficulty in understanding power in the Nietzschean sense, particularly in relation to men. This is because the exercise of a small-minded understanding of power may well be at the heart of male violence, abuse and more generally of hegemonic masculinity in our culture.

I have discussed elsewhere (Bazzano, 2006) Nietzsche's original formulation of 'will to power' as 'instinct of freedom'. As Freud a few decades later would speak of 'sex' instead of the more genteel 'eroticism', Nietzsche deliberately proffered a term that had maximum potential for controversy. All the same, as a lifelong disciple of Goethe, Nietzsche did not endorse an *individual* will to power *over* others, because this very desire is a sign of weakness, as Goethe says in Faust's *Walpurgis Night*, a clear indication that one is incapable of governing his own inborn self or, in Nietzschean terms, to attain a degree of self-overcoming. But self-overcoming is very different from pious repression of one's passions, and is more akin to gardening and to culture in the wider sense, to cultivating, for instance, 'the shoots of anger, pity, curiosity, vanity as productively and profitably as a beautiful tree on a trellis' (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 561).

In *Gay Science* 3:115, Nietzsche (2001, p. 114) speaks of four fundamental errors on which humankind has mis-educated itself. The third one is having placed itself in 'a false rank order in relation to animals and nature'. Anticipating as well as overcoming Freud, Nietzsche placed a fundamental dichotomy between *culture* and *civilization*. The first stands for cultivation, for a discipline that can lead us to freedom from

moralizing; the second deals with taming and breeding, with subjugation to a repressive morality. In Nietzsche's vision, culture can help us commune with the animal in the human, making us more able to be in this world as an animal being. The seeming paradox here is that in order to restore this vital link to atavistic 'animality', in order to re-appropriate and redeem 'ancestral animality from the prehistoric wild' (Acampora, 2003, p. 3), we will need individuals capable of both instinctual courage and advanced artistry. This task is twofold. It is first of all *diagnostic*, in the sense of uncovering animality under the layers of theology and morality, and in this sense this is akin to Darwinism (though, crucially, without the latter's eventual elevation of the human). It is also *therapeutic*, an ambitious attempt to heal our civilization of (human) animals who have become 'spiritually sickened by [having being made] all-too-humanly tame' (Acampora, 2003, p. 2). Nietzsche's vision calls for nothing less than a *feral philosophy*, for the revitalization of wild animal energy, which has waned while suffering centuries of over-civilizing ideologies and institutions (Acampora, 2003, p. 2).

At the heart of this cultural and therapeutic project is the renewal of the agonistic spirit, that combative spirit in the human animal that does not shy away from but actively seeks out *inner* as well as *outer* conflict, respectively by wrestling with those magnificent monsters, passions and upheavals of thought and by valuing engagement in honest combat with worthy opponents, an activity that may in turn lead to greater achievements in culture and society. Can psychotherapy ever be instrumental to this arduous twofold task? My own view is rather pessimistic, for two reasons:

- a) For too long we have been dominated by 'the priestly type' whose successful and perverse endeavour to extirpate the passions in the name of morality has granted a 'false overcoming' (Lemm, 2009, p. 20), i.e. the very opposite of cultural achievement.
- b) On the whole, our profession continues to exhibit a propensity to comply with dominant ideologies – in our day and age, neoliberalism. Among the many nefarious influences neoliberalism is having on the world of counselling and psychotherapy, there are two, intrinsically linked, which are pertinent here: the *commodification* of human experience and the *control* and regulation of the domain of affect. For neoliberalism, humans are first and foremost consumers, hence the 'unruly' passions; those unpredictable and troubling feelings and emotions are to be controlled and/or manipulated so that we can carry on shopping. Despite strong counter-cultural elements still present in psychotherapy culture (see, among others, Bazzano & Webb, 2016; Lees, 2016), neoliberalism has on the whole succeeded in engulfing and co-opting the emancipatory language of progressive, humanistic psychotherapy, and selling it back to therapy consumers in a shiny new package where empathy can apparently be measured and unconditional positive regard made pliable to corporate appetites.

Aching to be spied on

Neoliberalism's influence on contemporary culture has arguably increased. One of the ways in which it accelerated its control is via modern technology and the internet. This is wholly consistent with the sort of 'managerial steering' (Spencer, 2016, p. 60) that

was already on the agenda of neoliberal theorists such as Hayek (2001), who had intuited the augmented potential cybernetics provided for the neoliberal project. With our data, predilections, opinions and preferences on full display, Foucault's disciplinary society and Deleuze's societies of control have now paved the way to the *expository society* (Harcourt, 2015), its members hunting for ever-elusive approval, aching to be spied on. In the expository society we exist solely in order to be observed. The internet undoubtedly transformed collective imagination in terms of how we experience and understand eroticism and sexual experience as men – namely, by promulgating imbecilic views of sex, concocting novel ways of exploiting women's bodies and effecting new levels of de-sublimated manipulation of men's psyches. Of course the exploitation of women's bodies and the manipulation of men's psyche have gone on for decades, but neo-global capitalism has created new forms of oppression which, in turn, may require new forms of resistance.

According to Preciado, we now live under a *pharmaco-pornographic regime* (Preciado, 2008, 2014a), characterized 'by the introduction of new chemical, pharmacological prosthetic, media, and electronic surveillance techniques for controlling gender and sexual reproduction' (cited in Spencer, 2016, p. 59). Under this management, the most important reproduction is not the reproduction of life, but the reproduction of *capital*. Neoliberalism has updated its arsenal, employing Big Pharma and Cyber Porn in order to devise a concerted attack on the remnants of un-colonized life.

Preciado sees this as the culmination of a long process that goes back to Foucault's notion of *biopower* (Foucault, 1998), in relation to which masculinity has played a pivotal role. Briefly put, power in the eighteenth century shifted from sovereign to biopower. Until that point, power was a necro-political technique, a technique of giving death, power as the power to give death, a power exercised by the male monarch, the king, and by association, the father. This has historically tarnished masculinity itself (Preciado, 2014b). If Foucault is right, then masculinity itself, as it is embodied right now in living men, carries within it this lethal hereditary predisposition.

As I wrote these words just now, what came to my mind was a vivid memory of my first ever participation in a men's retreat and the irrational fear that I felt at our first gathering during that weekend – a feeling echoed by several participants.

This felt sense (and felt knowledge) of masculinity as death-giving power brings about a burden of responsibility in me as a man. It spurs me in multiple directions; it incites me to question masculinity (to bend, sublimate, transform it), to exert it in life-giving directions – without ignoring, however, its raw beauty, without neutering its natural strengths.

This important historical shift in the understanding of power in relation to masculinity is from a *theological* frame, one that utilizes the metaphors and imagery of religious discourse, to the adoption of the language and the modalities of *science* and, later, *technology*. This change has brought about a different emphasis, from necro-politics to biopower, i.e. to the reproduction and management of life. And for Foucault, sexuality belongs here, to the science and modalities of reproduction, in relation to which non-reproductive practices, including homosexuality, are seen as pathological.

Indoor man

Hugh Hefner's magazine *Playboy* has been instrumental in initiating the bio-political mutations of space and subjectivity which internet porn helped propagate and which

have altered modern notions of masculinity. The birth of the neoliberal male prototype took place in its pages promoting, alongside the delights of sexual jamborees with no hangers-on, a functional and innovative architecture conducive to this newfound male domesticity. Until Hefner had come along, ‘indoor man’ had been considered a distinctly effeminate trait, and ambiguous in the extreme. Now the playboy apartment provided a new sort of installation for the neoliberal male’s exploits, its walls stripped down ‘producing a totally naked (but over-coded) domesticity: the interior space as sexualized topos’ (Preciado, 2014a, p. 61). Here the stereotype is turned upside down: ‘Hefner is dressed, always, for a life lived and enjoyed in the confines of his apartment – pyjamas, dressing gown, slippers. His bed is his office ... Hefner’s bedroom – equipped with radio and television, film projector and telephone, rotating bed – is an electronic boudoir’ (Spencer, 2016, p. 59). The presence of heterosexual pornography in the magazine appears to be there to reassure this type of ‘new man’ that the turn towards domesticity does not make him queer or feminized: ‘The real reason *Playboy* featured female nudity in its pages, it seems, was so as to inoculate itself from homosexual connotations’ (Spencer, 2016, p. 59) and, conversely, to take control of the home domain back from women. But this new domesticated male surrounded by ‘bunnies’ or, nowadays, mesmerized by cyber nymphs with impossible virtual bodies is neither free nor particularly happy. His vital energies *desublimated* (Marcuse, 1964), i.e. subjected to a momentary, repressive satisfaction that diverts them from genuine erotic, social and political engagement (in short, from what the French call *jouissance*), he is no longer a citizen but a fashionable new conservative-about-town.

Can contemporary men ever climb back from the honey trap of cyber fake contentment?

In one of our recent weekly sessions, Jim spoke of a general sense of renewed vitality that he had experienced lately. He had been a little more proactive in being social, contacting friends and even arranging a date through a social network. Even at work things seemed to be looking up. Then, hesitantly, he added that he had watched some porn online, and had noticed that this time around, instead of bringing about the usual sense of frustration and low moods, it had energized him, making him feel more excited and motivated to go out and seek a sexual partner. He added that when he decided to share this with a friend, his disclosure had been met with rather strong objections. His friend had chastised him, even diagnosed him – he was clearly a ‘sex addict’. Jim was perplexed. However strange this may sound to you, he said, his understanding was that his feeling more energized had stemmed from discovering his ability to feel sexual desire in the first place. That the latter had been ignited from watching porn online surely was irrelevant, was it not? He went on to ask me, how useful is the ‘addiction’ label? Sure, it works for some men on the path to achieving greater freedom. But what if it becomes a blanket label that explains away difficulties and contradictions experienced in a particular phase of a person’s life?

In Jim’s case, with his history of low moods and stints of depression, mild stimulation made him feel more alive. He hadn’t spent hours masturbating; he didn’t feel lonely and frustrated afterwards. He felt he was more in control and that he could easily stop. He did stop at some point, in fact, because he began to find the material predictable and the script banal.

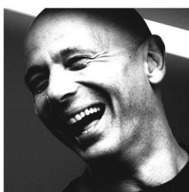
The paradox implicit in the above example is that in order to go back to *culture* in the Nietzschean sense, some of us may need to climb the greasy pole of *civilization*

before we discard it. But we can't do this alone: the solidarity of other men is needed, of men who have intelligently absorbed feminist critique and are able to create the basis for new models of masculinity that are tender and strong, vulnerable and resilient.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor



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