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Proud to Be a Man?

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Profeminist men are frequently exhorted to be "male affirming" (Brod 1998, 198) and to be proud of being men. But this advice is confusing and confused. It is confusing because as profeminist men we are committed to denying the intrinsic differences between men and women that we seem to be affirming when we are proud to be men.[1] It is confused because pride is important for profeminist men but pride in being a man is not. The advice that we should be proud of being men contains important insights, but these are jumbled together with sentiments that sound suspiciously patriarchal. Untangling the different thoughts that give rise to this advice will teach us something about what it means to be a profeminist man.[2]

THE ADVICE IS CONFUSING

Of all the differences that matter to human beings, the difference between men and women seems to be among the most fundamental. It is enshrined in language that genders nouns. It provokes the first question we ask about a newborn: "boy or girl?" and the newborn's sex seems to be a central aspect of the identity of that person from then on. Most people think that these differences between human beings who are male and those who are female are somehow intrinsic to our humanity. Most people are confident that however human society may change and human beings with it, the difference between men and women is safe; it will always be with us.

It is most likely true that human bodies will always have sexual organs and that those are going to be different for different persons. In similar ways, I have no doubt, human beings will always differ in their skin color, their size, the color of their hair and its texture. But it is widely thought that in a future

Author's Note: *An earlier version of this article was read at Women's World 99, in Tromsoe, Norway, June 1999. It has since profited from careful reading by Lucy Candib, Tom Digby, and Joe Stenger.*

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IT IS IMPORTANT TO TAKE PRIDE . . .

It is tempting to try to avoid these confusions by simply rejecting all talk about being proud of being men, but to do so would be to overlook an important insight into what it means to be a profeminist man and the peculiar difficulties it involves for men. Pride is important:

> Without it, no matter how noble one's intentions, profeminist men will simply not be able to sustain their energies over the necessary long haul. (Brod 1998, 199)

The stance we take in society is not popular. In rejecting conventional conceptions of masculinity and of the relations between men and women and of the roles, entitlements, and deserts of women in society, we place ourselves at odds with the dominant opinions and with our own upbringing. We invite conflict with others, and we need to strengthen ourselves against the inner voices that tell us that we are not "real men," that we allow ourselves to be dominated by women, that we are weak and cowardly. Since the social norms regarding true manhood have been inculcated in all of us from early on, the criticisms of our profeminist stance do not come only from the outside. Each of us struggles against himself in holding to the profeminist course. Profeminist men need to be firm in their commitment to their profeminism to resist the external and internal criticism and ridicule. They need to be self-assured in their stance. They need to take pride in it.

"Pride" in this context obviously does not mean "arrogance" or "haughtiness." Nor does it refer to "vanity" or "boastfulness." It is, instead, shorthand for a number of different conditions: all persons are entitled to live a life in which they can feel content, in which they can be glad to be alive. They should be able to take pleasure in their life so that when they come to the end they can say wholeheartedly that it was worth living. Pride also refers to the sense that persons have of being competent and effective in their lives. They can do what needs to be done; they have the capacities to achieve the goals they set for themselves. When facing difficulties, they are able to respond and to invent solutions. They are able to make themselves felt in the groups to which they belong; they are attended to. Their opinions and desires are taken seriously, and they have an effect on their world. Pride finally refers to the sense that people have of themselves who are glad they are who they are, who are pleased with how they live their lives and with what they have accomplished. They can freely admit errors and (moral) failures in their past because they believe that they have succeeded in becoming better persons. They have an accurate estimate of how they and their work and life compare to that of others. To the extent that others do better, the proud person can admire the others' accomplishments without sinking into deep despair. They have come to accept their limitations and are grateful for the abilities they have and the opportunities they found or were given to develop those abilities.

Those who are proud of themselves are not overly defensive; they are able to acknowledge errors and failure and are able to struggle to overcome them. But they are not haunted by guilt. They are not bowed down by their past wrongs; they do not carry the cross of the misdeeds committed by their group. This is important for profeminist men because the standard characterization we often give of men is pervasively negative. Reading the writings of profeminist men can be very depressing if you are a man yourself. Men are more aggressive than women; they "show deficits in many (though not in all) aspects of emotional and interpersonal behavior" (Pleck 1981, 148). Men's aggressivity makes some into rapists (Stoltenberg 1989) and begins wars (Pleck 1981, 148). Men's socialization to be tough and "play through the pain" leads to "poor health, shorter lives, shallow relationships, and less time spent with loved ones" (Messner*, 6). Men's emotional aridity makes it very difficult for them to be friends with other men (Schmitt 1998). Men who take feminism seriously, and support it, accept with it the very sharp critique of dominant masculinities. We accept, following Larry May and Robert Strikwerda (1994), that all of us bear some responsibility for rapes and other violence against women. The picture painted of us is not attractive. If these descriptions of male lives are not to discourage us completely, we need the sort of strength and acceptance of oneself that is implicit in the notion of being proud of oneself.

Pride means, finally, that we not hate ourselves. Self-hatred is similar to but also different from guilt, and the differences are important. Kierkegaard (1941) characterized self-hatred a long time ago as "not wanting to be oneself." The expression is perhaps puzzling; the phenomenon only too familiar: political radicals reject what they perceive as their middle-class manners, speech, and way of life and impersonate working-class men and women as they imagine them to be, speaking English that is not quite grammatical, dressing in work clothes, drinking beer rather than wine. Offspring of working-class parents move away from the mores and customs of their families to take on what they perceive to be the manners and airs of the well-to-do. Whites often "dress black," listen to what is considered "black music," and never tire of excoriating the racism of other whites.

Self-hatred in the sense of not wanting to be oneself is very different from making important changes in one's life. One would not be justified in accusing every expatriate, transvestite, or refugee from academia or the business world of self-hatred. Many persons make important changes in their lives at one time or another and work steadily to grow into those changes and make the new life they have adopted their own. Not wanting to be themselves, persons affected by self-hatred do not engage in this long and arduous process of shaping a new identity but instead indulge in fantasies of being a different person as it were overnight by virtue of changing their mode of dress.

that we encounter in a range of contexts. Thus, Linda Alcoff (1998) writes that white antiracists must be proud of being white if they are to be effective in their work against racism. The central thought seems eminently plausible—that when one is proud, one is proud of who one is. If one is a man, one must be proud of that; if one is white, one must be proud of that also. Pride is understood as an emotion elicited and, presumably, justified in many cases by the characteristics of the person one is. There are certain facts about myself: I am white; I am a man. I am asked to be proud of those facts.

Pride has traditionally been thought of as an emotional state caused by the proud person's characteristics or properties (Taylor 1985; Hume, 1951). This conception of pride still prevails widely and not only among philosophers. Thus, persons say that they are "proud to be Americans" and that pride is, to be sure, an emotion. This pride consists of a range of sentiments that may but need not lead to action. Persons who are proud to be Americans in this emotional sense may organize to support legislation to protect the sanctity of the American flag. But they may do no more than mutter angrily about "hippies" or "commies" and then change the channel. They may very well not pay their income tax and their political participation as citizens is lackadaisical and ill informed.

The exhortation to be proud of who one is misunderstands both the nature of pride and the nature of identities. Pride, in that sense, in being men may protect them against the debilitating guilt some profeminist men feel, such as the self-flagellator discussed earlier, but it will not make them more effective allies for feminist women than men who are guilt ridden or motivated by self-hatred. This pride, this sentiment that they are men and that being a man is good, may save them grief but does not make them into active supporters of women's liberation because the *sentiment* of pride is not directly connected to actions of any sort. The pride profeminist men need is of a quite different nature. It is not primarily a set of sentimental reflexes but rather the assuredness and ease with which we live our lives as profeminist men. Pride comes to us from what we do, how we live our lives, how well we live them, how easily and competently we live. Pride, I said earlier, has to do with being content with one's life as well as being at ease in it. Proud persons are competent to live every day in ways that they find satisfying and rewarding. It is evinced in the assurance with which we live the life we have chosen, for example, that of a profeminist man.

Moreover, our identity, who we are, what we are proud of, does not consist of some facts about us. Identity in the sense relevant here is not a possession, a set of characteristics I own. My identity lies in the life I lead; the world I construct, tend, alter, and expand or contract day by day; the relationships that allow me to share that world, or at least parts of it, with other persons. Identities are always in progress. My identity is not what I am but what I do. Charles Taylor (1989) puts this succinctly: "To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand" (p. 27). One's identity consists of one's commitments and values, of one's goals and the stories one tells about one's life. It is not just a collection of facts about oneself. Moreover, as Taylor points out, human beings are always becoming. They have a past from whence they came and a future they are moving toward. Thus, who persons are, their "self" or "identity," is the process of growing and moving, or decaying and being stuck, but always a story of going from one place to another or of doing something (Taylor 1989). In the same vein, Sartre (1956) insists forcefully that human beings, being free, never just are something without participating in what they are. We make ourselves be who we are. Our identity thus is not only a process but a "project," something we do and something we therefore have responsibility for. Humans, Sartre adds, tend to evade this responsibility by presenting themselves as just who they are, as a matter of fact. Identity as what I am is then an evasion of human freedom.[6] Thus, being a man does not consist of certain physiological facts about oneself but is the ongoing project of being a particular kind of man. Most or all profeminist men were not born such but were fortunate at some point to understand that they needed to distance themselves from the manhood they were raised to develop. Instead, they became male persons who loved justice more than power, equality more than privilege. Being that sort of man is a continuing effort.

But the matter is even more complex. One's life is not just a project. It is many projects. Human life is replete with conflicts, with opposing interests and desires, with different accounts of one's past and different expectations for the future. What one stands for is rarely consistent. One is constantly finding out that one's most firmly held beliefs do not hang together. As a being whose being is becoming, one is always becoming more than one person. The becoming that is one's identity thus has as one of its tasks to bring some sort of order into the different concurrent trajectories of one's life. Different persons obviously achieve an inner peace in very different ways ranging from choosing one person to be and ruthlessly suppressing the other to being a person of many different views and lives (Mullin 1995; Lugones 1987).[7]

The concept of self-identity as "what I am," for example, a man or white, must perforce remain empty because it is not at all clear what I am. Discussions of being oneself or of identity are beset by pictures of human beings who are fairly clear about what they want, what their motivations are, what their values are (what they stand for), and what they believe. But that is, of course, flattering ourselves outrageously. Even the person who is most transparent to herself often does not know what she is doing; she has hidden agendas, she follows hidden scripts, which she understands, if at all, only many years later. She has opinions quite the opposite of those she believes herself to have, and her values often depart seriously from those she professes. Forming an identity is, in part, a process of discovery of who I am. That process continues until one's death and even afterward one's biographer may tell plausible stories about one that one could have never told oneself. Who one is is hidden, on one hand, and open to different readings, on the other. There is not one

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Male Pride and Antisexism[1]

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When I compare Richard Schmitt's "Proud to Be a Man?" with my essay of which he is critical, "To Be a Man, or Not to Be a Man—That Is the Feminist Question," I am struck most of all by the difference in the individualist versus collectivist frames of reference we use. He writes of how we are to think of *ourselves*; I write of how we are to think of *each other*. Therein, I believe, lies all the difference.

To me, writing about being male affirmative, about men having a positive sense of themselves and pride in themselves as men, is first and foremost part of a political project, part of an effort to encourage and empower men to take collective action against sexism. In contrast, the terrain Schmitt inhabits is primarily not political but psychological. He seems most concerned with how my identity and self-definition will affect me personally. Now, both of us have learned well enough from the feminist movement its lesson that "the personal is political" and vice versa that we know that one cannot neatly separate the one from the other, and both our essays have both political and personal dimensions to our arguments and their implications. Yet, the difference between foreground and background in discussing the personal and the political remains important, and I believe that difference is crucial in understanding the difference between Schmitt and me.

As I reread my essay in preparing to respond to Schmitt, I was struck by how emphatically I situate my argument as part of a discussion of political strategies for a profeminist men's movement. I argue that without a male-affirmative foundation, men are left insufficiently grounded in their efforts to connect with one another for positive political movement. For me, talking about being male affirmative is a way of talking about profeminist gender solidarity among men, really a way of talking about brotherhood. And in being moved to reconsider what I had written by Schmitt's scrutiny of it, I wondered why I had not used the language of brotherhood. I went back to an earlier essay of mine, published in 1986 in *Changing Men*, the primary magazine of the profeminist men's movement, to find that I did use that language there. Indeed, my closing words in "Fraternity, Equality, Liberty," in which I use the ideal of "fraternity" from the French Revolution to talk about the kind

Author's Note: *I am indebted to Michael Kimmel, Tom Mosmiller, and Martha Reineke for helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.*

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agree that there are no such essences, and I fail to see why Schmitt thinks that being male affirmative requires any such belief. He writes: "When profeminist men urge other men to be 'male-affirming' and to be proud of being men, they obviously presuppose this thesis that there is something about men that is characteristic of men and exclusive to them." This is just false and unfounded. When I assert my Jewish pride, I am not asserting that there is anything characteristic of and exclusive to Jews. I am claiming a socially, historically constructed identity and asserting that there are parts, not necessarily the whole, of that historically created collectivity with which I find it valuable to identify myself, not necessarily uncritically. I need not believe that there is any trait characteristic of Jews per se, nor any trait that is exclusive to Jews. Indeed, I would probably reject any such belief as anti-Semitic. The same sort of claiming of one's historical heritage is available to those from dominant groups as well. I have no problems with someone claiming a proud Christian heritage as a foundation for their social activism in pursuit of justice, as many have done. Such persons do not deny the many crimes committed in the name of Christianity. On the contrary, they are often more acutely aware of the problematic nature of the heritage they are claiming than those Christians to whom their Christian identity is not so salient.

The same holds true for male pride. In claiming to be proud as a man, I align myself in solidarity with other men who stand for justice, as we avail ourselves of the specific collective resources that our histories provide us in our struggles. These resources include our abilities to contribute to gender justice by forging feminist knowledge from the specific vantage points at which we are situated, vantage points structurally unavailable to women, and our roles as allies, as well as more material resources to which we have access.[4] Making full use of these resources requires affirming, not denying, our male identities, for these resources are best mobilized collectively, in part because they are collectively generated. For example, while I can ruminate on the male condition by myself, in isolation, we have learned from feminist studies of the production of knowledge that insight is most effectively gained in interactive discussion. And for these discussions to be most fruitful, men must be motivated to seek out other men with whom to engage in these discussions and to relate positively to the other men with whom they are engaged—hence a need for being male affirmative.

Perhaps it is the same individualism I criticized earlier that again leads Schmitt astray here. If one views gender as only a characteristic of individuals, then one might perhaps be driven to identify male pride with pride in certain "reproductive organs," as Schmitt puts it. But if Schmitt is really the social constructionist he claims to be, why does he revert to biological essentialism here and ignore the historical construction of male identities as social and political constructs rather than as biological entities? I do not understand why collective history and politics are so absent from his essay, [illegible] on the individualistically constricted terrain of biology

and psychology. The question of male pride is not only a question of who *I* am. It is also a question of who *we* are. As I write these words, I recall that on my bookshelves is a volume of readings in black philosophy whose title is *I Am Because We Are*.[5] That is precisely the point.

At the conclusion of his essay, Schmitt comes to the view that it is pride in what one has become and is becoming that is the issue, not pride in how one was originally constituted, biologically or psychologically. But he writes as if advice to be proud to be a man is advice to "be proud of being oppressors" or "take pride in the official identities imposed by the society with which we are at war." But this is to admit defeat in this war from the outset, for it is to concede the all-important power of definition to that society. The important struggle in which we are engaged is precisely to redefine what it means to be men, to create and assert masculinities as counteroppressive identities. This political necessity is dictated to us by the present realities of gender identities. Even if one believes we should adopt the vision of a world beyond gender as our goal, a present call for men to abandon gendered identities will hinder rather than help reaching that goal, for it will not effectively mobilize anything beyond a small handful of men in the present. Effective political mobilization of men for profeminist activism in the present requires a positive vision of men as men with which men can identify in their profeminist struggles. We men need to take pride as the gendered beings that we presently are in what we have contributed and what we will continue to contribute to struggles for gender justice.

Since I believe in the connection between theory and practice, I would like to close by noting that the theory I have outlined here seems to me to be more closely connected to current antisexist men's practice than does Schmitt's alternative. I spend most of my working time on college campuses, and I have seen there a phenomenon on which others have also commented, the growth of men's antisexist groups, in the form of men's consciousness-raising groups and especially men's groups acting against sexual violence (Gold and Villari 2000). It seems to me that the (primarily young) men who populate these groups are for the most part not in the least interested in claiming an ungendered identity of the sort Schmitt advocates. Rather, they are committed to seizing and reinterpreting what it means to be men and in working and bonding specifically with other men in doing so. I therefore remain convinced that they and others are best served by a theory that encourages men to be male affirmative.

NOTES

1. An influential pamphlet with the same title as this essay ("Male Pride and Anti-Sexism"), published and circulated by the California Anti-Sexist Men's Political (CAMP) Caucus, was collectively written for the third California Men's Gathering (CMG), 1980, by Tim Wernette, Alan Acacia, and Craig Scherfenberg and revised for the fourth CMG, 1981, by Tom Mosmiller,