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POLS 230: Social Movements From the 1960s to Present

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Toxic Masculinity: A Threat to Social Movements in the United States

Part I: Introduction & Thesis

      Throughout history, patriarchal-based ideologies have often been marred by flaws, wielding influence over societal norms, values, and power structures. Men have traditionally occupied positions at the forefront of society, driving discourse, shaping cultural narratives, and often setting the tone for interactions and relationships. However, within this historical context, a phenomenon has emerged that significantly impedes progress and social advancement toward gender equality: Toxic Masculinity.

      Academically speaking, toxic masculinity is the way men are culturally trained and socially pressured to behave. Three of its core tenants, toughness, anti-femininity, and power, range in expression from person to person, but all combine to create the sense of "manliness" (ADAA). This toxic manifestation of masculinity not only harms men themselves but also creates barriers for underrepresented groups, hindering their ability to have a societal impact.

      Toxic masculinity stands as one of the greatest inhibitors of progress and change for underrepresented groups, explicitly manifesting through power dominance and unjust morals during times of conflict. This paper aims to explore the detrimental impact of toxic masculinity and its role in perpetuating inequality, stifling diversity, and obstructing efforts towards meaningful social transformation. Through an examination of historical and contemporary

examples, this paper will demonstrate how toxic masculinity undermines the principles of equity, justice, and inclusivity, ultimately impeding the realization of a more just and equitable world.

Part II: Review of Previous Work - POLS 230

"The [Occupy] camp was defined by misogynist behavior, as [writer and social scientist Michael] Wartofsky reflects on the aggressive white, radical young men, pejoratively labeled "manarchists or mactivists" who 'vied with one another for personal prestige, political influence, and sexual partners among their peers" (DiMaggio 85). One would assume this was being written about a radical conservative group, but alas this was a description of the New York City Occupy Wall Street movement, highlighting the deep roots of this issue in all social and economic groups. This is also true regarding the distinction between racial groups as well, as some members of the Black Power Movement and Black Panther Party were noted to be interested in the "redemption of black manhood" while placing a heavy emphasis on Black masculinity, leaving women "mostly invisible in the history of the movement" (Williams 67-70). The neglect of women's rights in these movements can be largely attributed to this "hyper-masculinism" that was embedded within the structures and ideals of these groups.

This emphasis on patriarchy can also be attributed to a growing nostalgia for "outdoor masculinity" amongst the rising city population in the 1920s industrial revolution (Hall 45). With this mass movement to the cities also came a "cult of domesticity" that relegated middle-class women to the home and out of environmental conservation affairs (Spears 35). These issues can be attributed to a culture dominated by masculine ideologies, one that tends to neglect nurturing in favor of toughness and power; thus harming our planet and halting true progress on long-term solutions on global preservation. Further explored in an article by Ben Carpenter in a

conversation with gender studies researcher Michael Kimmel, this can also be attributed to a growing sense of "aggrieved" entitlement in the 1900s due to an "adherence to traditional ideals of masculinity leave[ing] so many white men feeling entitled to a dream" of taming and exploring land that never needed to be tamed or explored in the first place (Carpenter). This line of masculinity was perpetuated by so-called "pioneers" of the era like President Theodore Roosevelt and mountaineer John Muir, representing ideologies of fatherhood and a repudiation of feminist ideologies in their children.

This thinking can also be evaluated in the New York Ladies' Health Protective Association's newsletter advocating for "municipal housekeeping" in 1894 as a "gender-coded frame that created space for women in the public sphere" (Spears 35). The message here was that women belong in "feminine" or "house-making" roles that emphasized cleaning and organization as core tenants of their profession. The argument presented by "new women" of the time was that the care of neighborhoods and cities was a logical extension of their work in the private sphere, which was an easier platform to stand on at a time when opportunities for women were limited outside of the home setting in the late 1800s.

All of this is to recognize a key problem within the toxic masculinity ideology: women were consequently categorized as second class citizens in all aspects of life - social, political, and economic. This was true in the smallest aspects of life, as activist Jane Fonda asserted she had "only known for 10 years that no is a complete sentence" (Feminists: What Were They Thinking?). This extended to the mistreatment of women by American soldiers during the Vietnam war, considering their bodies as property amongst the military campaigns in Vietnamese cities (Hearts and Minds). These findings can be supported with data as well, and as pertaining to contemporary American society, with a survey of New York Occupy finding that the leaders of

the chapter shared "little interest in understanding intersecting forms of discrimination across class, color, and genderlines" and no mention of sexism as a list of concerns motivating activists of the movement (DiMaggio 85). This toxic masculinity has even been used to gaslight women political opponents, with Donald Trump going as far as to claim that "women have an advantage in presidential races over men" despite the fact that there has never been a woman president. This sense of "reverse sexism," developed by reactionary men who felt threatened by the MeToo movement, emphasizes that this problem is still an issue today. This sense of men as victims goes as far as to imagine that men are systematically repressed by feminists and a power structure committed to "assaulting masculinity" (DiMaggio 200). This further highlights the "anti-femininity" that toxic masculinity feeds on in young men, and which works to restrict their views on self-expression and their ability to sympathize with others.

Moreover, when women would participate in positions outside of the home, they were met with increased pressure and scrutiny for their work and way of life. This fear of women taking on more power and independence was documented in the Civil Rights movement, as political activist Angela Davis recalls that when women were involved in something important, men within SNCC [the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] began to talk about "women taking over the organization" — calling it a matriarchal coup d'état (Williams 73). Nevertheless, this struggle did not stop black women activists from speaking up on behalf of other women whose voices were drowned out in these movements. Women voices gave force and design to the movement as women artists and activists articulated their own profound vision of Black oppression and liberation differently from men within progressive movements (Williams 93).

In order to keep this ideology alive, men for decades used various scare and oppression tactics to establish dominance in all aspects of life. These strategies affected black women disproportionally, with the Combahee River Collective highlighting issues and projects that collective members worked on, including sterilization abuse, abortion rights, battered women, rape and health care in their 1974 statement (The Combahee River Collective Statement). Similarly, toxic ideologies against femininity infected California in the 1970s as Harvey Milk, as a representative of the emerging gay rights movement, was running for local government. There was a fear that including homosexuals in society would decrease the heterosexual population and convert previously straight children against their parents' wishes, a sentiment that is still shared today by right-leaning voters and politicians alike. "I don't think your application will be approved, Mr. Milk," stated a local store owner when Harvey asked to join an organization in San Francisco, citing that he needed to leave because there's "man's law and there's God's law in this neighborhood… the San Francisco Police force is happy to enforce either" (Milk). This negative sentiment included frequent beatings of homosexuals across the U.S., organized by individuals who were interested in protecting "traditional" beliefs.

On the opposite side, there are groups that have developed with the intention of inhibiting the rise of women's and gay rights, such as the Religious Right, which relies heavily on masculine, patriarchal affirming values, and whose members interpret their way of life as the only acceptable one for America. This dynamic conflicts with pro-choice activists on the abortion issue as well as in conversations around keeping church and state separate as dictated by our founding fathers. These restrictive ideologies from the religious right also helped develop the "Great Replacement Theory," which is a white supremacist, xenophobic, and anti-immigrant concept positing that white people are being intentionally replaced, in a conspiracy led by

Democratic Party, by immigrants, Muslims, and other people of color who are being encouraged to relocate to the U.S. and away from their so-called "home" countries (GPAHE).

The conservative ideologies developed around anti-abortion values and politics are still being contested today, with men who hold political office feeling that it is their responsibility to protect morality while neglecting the harm that their policies cause to everyday people. The right of women to control their bodies is unfortunately still a struggle today with the recent Supreme Court overturning Roe v. Wade in 2022, a damning decision that is rooted in toxic masculine ideologies of the American religious right. There is a predominant ideology that we must "hear out the other side" on an issue when the other side - particularly men and men holding political office, play only a small part in the child bearing process. The idea that a man can choose what a woman is able to do is an incredibly toxic ideology that has impacted women for generations, and that is increasingly influential in contemporary politics.

Part III: Original Evidence & Thesis Engagement

In addition to course readings and activities that discuss toxic masculinity, I've also had the opportunity to do some observational analysis. Original evidence surrounding my thesis comes from various sources, including databases, scholarly articles, events happening on Lehigh's campus, and more. This case study-based analysis will hopefully clarify areas surrounding this topic that were not covered in class readings and discussions. I will explore arguments given by toxically masculine driven individuals and how they are invalid when considering the data we have on mental health and mass shootings. I also highlight the dominance of white, cis-men over other genders/groups and how that varies by nation.

Toxic masculinity is rooted in the idea that men are supposed to be "strong" and bottle up their emotions in the pursuit of adhering to these misguided ideals. This negative philosophy contributes to men reporting lower levels of life satisfaction than women, according to the UK government's 2018-2019 national well-being survey (Mental Health Foundation). The report also concludes that men are less likely to seek mental health support, more likely to go missing, and are nearly three times as likely as women to become dependent on alcohol and drug use to cope with their stress and anxiety.

As discussed by the LA Times in 2013, toxic masculinity feeds into the idea that men are stuck in gender roles, affecting how they see themselves and their worth in the face of pressure and expectations. "I don't want other men to look at me like less of a man," said Brent Kroeger, a Rowland Heights stay-at-home father who explained his fear of being ostracized both online and in person for his unique life-path compared to his peers. While women are praised for breaking into fields dominated by men, ridicule can follow men who take on predominantly "feminine" jobs, such as nursing, teaching preschool, or administrative assistant roles.

Masculine roles have been defined since the birth of our nation; one where "all men are created equal," disregarding women and other genders in the process. The Women's Rights Convention of 1848 saw coverage that was filled with "misconception, misrepresentation and ridicule," with one newspaper discussing the matter as an attempt to "announce their intention of dispensing with corsets and big bustles" (Library of Congress). The sheer neglect of what these women were fighting for, instead focusing on their physical qualities, is yet another sign of our toxically masculine culture that has been developing for centuries.

Toxic masculinity and gender inequalities have been perpetuated by who are able to tell stories of the past. An analysis of America's most popular recent history books [as of 2018]

found that " 75.8 percent were written by men and most of those men wrote about other men while only 6 percent of male biographers chose to document a woman's life" (Angyal). When women are able to write about history, it comes with the increased challenge of simply finding these sources, as in many cases, "these materials end up in collections cataloged under the names of men, often the woman's husband, son, or male correspondents" (Moniz).

As described by Professor Robert A. Pape from the University of Chicago's Department of Political Science: we are in an era where the general public fears that their interests are not being met. We are witnessing events like January 6th, which are rationalized by much of the Republican Party's base, and that are tied to hyper-masculine politics like those of the Proud Boys. The right-wing theory of "Great Replacement" is a key driver for those who are afraid of the country shifting away from their interests, but this also highlights an element of toxic masculinity as well. Eighty-Six percent of the insurrectionists on Jan 6th were men, and not only that but 12 percent of the participants were members of militia groups (Violent Populism Event).

America is heading towards a major crisis of legitimacy no matter who wins this year's election, and that is driven by both parties and a renewed sense of belief in violence and aggression as the solution if one's preferred candidate doesn't win an election. According to the data, even nine months after Jan 6th, there was still an alarming rate of people who supported a potential insurrection for Donald Trump's reinstatement as President. This movement is becoming mainstream and broad in scope, alarming any rational political theorist who recognizes a growing tolerance for violence forming in this country.

If a country's culture and norms allow for violence to be mainstreamed as part of the social and political culture, and that same country allows for guns to not only be legal, but met with minimal regulations and background checks, what does that mean for the population? If

you've watched the news in the past few decades you will recognize that problem as mass shootings, horrible crimes that have been perpetuated by problematic ideologies, and speaking to how our mental health support system fails men. Of the classified mass shootings in the United States between 1982 and December 2023, one hundred forty three of them were committed by men, and four were committed by women (Statista). What this shows is a clear lack of support for struggling men, resulting in the rise of violent "solutions" to these mens' problems on a tragic scale. Speaking to the ties between masculinity and violence, the Pew Research Center concludes that eight out of ten men feel pressure to be strong and six out of ten feel pressure to throw a punch if presented with physical confrontation.

The rise of toxic masculinity and its ties to violence leads to a situation that hasn't been discussed nearly enough in academic studies due to its recent occurrence. October 7th, 2023 in the state of Israel, armed Hamas terrorists entered with the intention of killing and raping innocent civilians to highlight their belief that Jewish people should not exist at all. Charlotte Korchak of StandWithUs came to Lehigh University's campus on April 1st to discuss the recent events between Israel and Gaza, highlighting a key issue in this conflict: the denial of sexual violence against Israeli women during Hamas' siege. While there are horrible atrocities that have been committed on both sides, nothing excuses the mass rape, kidnap, and torture of innocent civilians. After over half a year of war, many of those captured have yet to be released, a barbaric punishment that reeks of masculine policies dictated by Hamas, an internationally recognized terrorist group. Casualties are significant in Gaza, but as Charlotte pointed out, nearly half of the 33,000 confirmed deaths as of April 1st were of terrorists in a calculated effort to not hurt civilians by the IDF. The greatest tragedy is the harm to civilians of both Israel and Gaza; those

who were raped and sexually assaulted on October 7th as well as the Gazans who are not receiving the full supplies and aid they need to survive in harsh wartime conditions.

Hamas leadership has stated they would like to repeat October 7th until the Jewish people are exterminated, demonstrating aggression and harmful ideologies that will hurt the growth of the Middle East region going forward. This is also amplified by groups that would like to argue that sexual assault either didn't happen during Hamas' attacks or justify it as "reasonable" the pursuit of resistance. There is a saying in Jewish culture that goes "if someone says they want you to die, listen to them," and this is built off generations of attempted persecution; showing the resilience of a people united by faith and belief instead of anger and grief. While there is still much to be decided on in the Middle East, there has to be hope that we can find a peaceful solution that is unaffected by toxically masculine ideologies that pit us against each other and cause pain for the global population.

Toxic masculinity represents one of the greatest threats to progress that past and current social movements worked for, inhibiting their ability to enact change in the greater population. The unfair policies that are developed from this ideology have led to irreparable damage and a gap in equality for minority groups compared to those that are deemed "acceptable." It's our job as Americans to not only be aware of our history, but also work proactively to prevent future mistakes from these false belief systems from taking root in our societal structures.

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