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Toxic Masculinity and its Consequences

In recent years, particularly in the wake of Donald Trump's 2016 US Presidential victory, many have remarked about the salience of "toxic" masculinity among his supporters. Contemporaneously, interest in analyzing the nexus between gender construction, masculinity, and violence carried out by men, both against women, in the form of violent misogyny, and more generally, in the form of mass shootings, has increased; the findings have been striking. Indeed, empirical data indicate that toxic masculinity is a serious problem because of its strong correlation with unfavorable mental health outcomes and increased gun violence. Furthermore, it reinforces essentialized gender differences, contributing to occupational gender segregation and inequality. Because of this, masculinity is an indefensible construct. That notwithstanding, masculinity is not a construct that can be understood outside the context of capitalist class relations; consequently, capitalism per se must be defeated and socialism realized to end toxic masculinity and patriarchy.

Because masculinity is strongly correlated with negative mental health outcomes, it is a significant problem. A meta-analysis of recent psychological studies has confirmed the dangers of strict adherence to masculine norms, or what some have called "toxic masculinity." For instance, Wong et al. found a nexus between conformity to masculine norms and negative social functioning, such as increased loneliness (6–7, 10). Moreover, those who conformed to masculine norms generally experienced negative mental health outcomes—such as depression,

anxiety, and stress—and reduced positive mental health outcomes—such as life satisfaction, self-esteem, and psychological well-being (Weir 38). Regrettably, the men who conformed to masculinity most rigidly were also unlikely to seek professional help with the concomitant mental health symptoms (Wong et al. 9). The evidence is clear that conformity to masculine norms is psychologically harmful to those who hold such ideals.

And in a changing economy, such ideals are also holding men back from entering other occupational fields. Occupations traditionally held by men have disappeared in recent decades, and many gender roles have changed (Weir 37). At the same time, men's wages, after being adjusted for inflation, have declined more than they have for women (Coontz). Because men are not given the psychological and emotional tools necessary to discuss the distress and loss many of them feel, they have often turned to alcohol and recreational use of pain medication (Weir 36–37). Many men have simply failed to adjust to changing times. They have held onto what Stephanie Coontz has called the "masculine mystique": a desire to hold onto traditional gender roles and occupational and educational aspirations despite the changing occupational and domestic roles of women and men.

Some men respond to the perceived loss of their masculinity with suicide, and there is a gendered or masculine aspect to this as well. Oddly, women exhibit suicidal behavior more frequently than men; however, men suffer a greater mortality rate from suicidal behavior than women (Kalish and Kimmel 455–56). This is largely due to how men and women attempt suicide, such as men shooting themselves in the head instead of somewhere else in the body, and this tendency may be due to how such acts are perceived by others (456). Because a failed suicide may be seen as weakness of the man, he is more likely to carry out the suicide in a quick and efficient way; while women may poison or shoot themselves in their torso, allowing more

time for intervention and treatment (456–57); thus, they are more likely to survive. These examples illustrate how deeply entrenched these gendered ideals are and how serious the consequences can be when men are committed to rigid masculine ideals.

Conformity to masculine norms (and heteronormativity) may play a significant role in contributing to homicidal ideation. Most notably, mass shootings have been disproportionately carried out by men and young boys in recent decades (Hamblin). Ironically, while many of these students were indeed victimizers, they were also regularly victims of physical violence and verbal abuse on campus. Kalish and Kimmel analyzed media reports following several shootings and discovered that school administrators often turned a "blind eye" to the abuse the students were experiencing leaving the bullied students to fend for themselves (462). The lack of faculty intervention meant that bullied students had to tolerate continual verbal and physical abuse. This sort of behavior seems to be something young boys experience more than girls (Kalish and Kimmel 456). And many of those boys have felt that their masculinity was compromised if they did not retaliate, while girls have generally not responded in the same manner. For example, some studies have found that all school shootings were carried out by white men, often after being bullied, "gay-baited," and teased (25). They felt a sense of "aggrieved entitlement: a gendered sense that they were entitled, indeed, even expected, to exact their revenge on all who had hurt them" (463). Significantly, the authors believe that these shootings occurred after the students experienced "cultural marginalization" as a result of their inadequate "gender performance" and failure to follow "codes of masculinity" (455).

Masculinity works in ways that naturalize fundamental gender differences, what some call gender essentialism, as masculinity and gender are unthinkable without embracing such essential differences. Perhaps the best analysis to work through this problem is one that makes a

distinction between horizontal difference and vertical difference. The horizontal plane would be the supposed fundamental difference between men and women (or other genders in another culture), while the vertical dimension would mean putative superiority (Brubaker 10–25). Horizontal aspects might include: "understandings of women as more skilled in service, nurturing, and interaction, and of men as more competent in the manipulation of things and more capable of strenuous physical labor" (24). The vertical dimension would suggest "male primacy," with men understood "as generally more status-worthy and as better suited for positions of authority and power" (24). While the hierarchical difference is unthinkable without a horizontal difference, the horizontal difference may, at least hypothetically, be possible without automatically, as it were, leading to vertical or hierarchical difference. That is, it would be impossible to have the hierarchical dimension without there being difference, but it might, at least in the abstract, be possible to have difference without it entailing hierarchical inequality. At least this is what the defenders of traditional masculine gender roles and identity hinge their claims on.

For instance, Maggie Gallagher, writing at the *National Review* avers, "We no longer valorize male work as manly because manliness itself has fallen out of favor," and that the real problem is "genderphobia,…the pervasive ideology that acknowledging the basic realities of gender and gender difference is somehow a crime against women (and more lately, against the LGBT community)." For Gallagher, gender is not an integral part of a hierarchical social order; rather, it is a natural category melded into sex type and feared by those who embrace "genderlessness." Her central claim is that it is possible to "achieve a masculine identity" that does not hurt one's child or wife.

The problem with Gallagher's claim is that the recognition of horizontal difference that

she calls for, while purporting to want to avoid hurting women, has that impact because of feedback loops that shape "employers' preferences, perceptions, and practices" on the "demand side" and "prospective employees' preferences" on the "supply side" by influencing where they will channel their educational investments (Brubaker 23–24). Because of these feedback loops, even those who do not internalize such beliefs, indeed, even those who explicitly reject gender essentialism, are nonetheless aware of the prevailing beliefs held by others, including employers, in wider society and the consequences of pursuing a gender-atypical career (24). Ironically, the liberal forms of gender egalitarianism, which emphasize equal opportunity and free choice, including gendered self-expression, reinforce and "legitimate the pursuit of gender-differentiated courses of study or lines of work" because those pursuits are consonant with the self-expression of gender identity. These practices reify horizontal gender differences (Brubaker 25).

The consequences of pursuing a gender-typical career includes the decreased likelihood of procuring employment (25), and this tends to be true for both men and women unless they already have experience from previous employment in that field (Hareli et al. 265–66). The genderization of occupations also impacts how well the job pays and performance evaluation outcomes, which often determine promotions (Thebaud and Doering). Those are the invidious consequences of the horizontal difference that Gallagher calls for. The "masculine goodness" she would like us to embrace is an ideal incompatible with the equality she wants to link it with. This should also make clear the inadequacy of simply rejecting masculinity or gender essentialism, as those constructs and their reproduction tend to be much more deeply entrenched in our culture than many of those against toxic masculinity seem to acknowledge.

From a historical materialist perspective, it might be best to see the processes of socialization into masculine gender roles as something enmeshed in the capitalist mode of

production and prevailing systems that reproduce occupational gender segregation. That is, young boys (and adult men) do not simply form masculine ideals out of a petulant sense of entitlement. Ideologies of toxic masculinity cannot be viewed apart from the broader context that foists such gendered norms on people in the first place. As Brubaker notes, awareness of the prevailing gendered expectations of both boys and girls is intertwined with and shaped by the gender-differentiated divisions of labor, both domestically and occupationally (24).

Furthermore, the feedback loop between employers' expectations (the "demand side") informing prospective employees' preferences (the "supply side") might be a useful focal point in discussions of what continues to shape such robust masculinities and essentialized gender differences. The production of these differences is implicated in the production and reproduction of what Kalish and Kimmel call "codes of masculinity" (455) or "the guy code" (458). That is, the economy might be a productive focal point moving forward because of the way gender segregation is built into it and economic forces are integral to the production and reification of those differences through the aforementioned feedback loops.

Because masculinity is not a construct that can be understood outside the context of capitalist class relations, looking at gender and masculinity from a Marxian perspective may offer the best interpretation and ideals to strive for. From this perspective, notions of toxic masculinity do not have the interpretative power to explain why undesirable events occur or how to combat them best. Gender and cognate notions such as masculinity are ideological, and approaching the problems of gendered-violence, misogyny, or mass shootings as an ideological dilemma does not help us understand the genesis of the problems. This is not to say that ideology does not have real effects in the world. Indeed, masculinity, toxic or however modified, has a very real impact on both those who identify with it and those who are on the receiving end of

misogynist violence. It is real in the way six o'clock is real as a social fact, but it is not real in the same way that six o'clock has no real existence in nature (Fields and Fields 25); that is to say, its only basis is ideological. An analogy may help elucidate this point further: To say that masculinity is the cause of gendered violence is equivalent to saying 11:10 am is the cause of English class starting. Much like Marx said:

> Do not let us go back to a fictitious primordial condition as the political economist does, when he tries to explain [political economy]. Such a primordial condition explains nothing. He merely pushes the question away into a gray nebulous distance. He assumes in the form of fact, of an event, what he is supposed to deduce—namely, the necessary relationship between two things— between, for example, division of labor and exchange. Theology in the same way explains the origin of evil by the fall of man; that is, it assumes as a fact, in historical form, what has to be explained. (Marx and Engels 70–71)

Ten minutes after eleven A.M. as a social fact cannot explain why English class commences any more than masculinity can explain why violence occurs. Social constructions do not offer intrinsic explanatory power; instead, we must look at the material conditions which give rise to their existence.

From this perspective, the neoliberal capitalism of the past four decades has been an incubator of masculine violence. Since the 1970s, real wages of men have continually decreased (Wolff and Fraad; Coontz); meaning that instead of each generation of men improving their socioeconomic status, they have lost ground. With the welfare state practically destroyed and little social protection to rely on, many men have felt that they have not lived up to the masculine norms and expectations. Because of the masculine belief that men should be able to make it on their own and provide for a family, many men have experienced self-blame and psychological

distress (Oliffe et al. 480; Wolff and Fraad). Significantly, research has demonstrated that interest in carrying out a murder-suicide increases as financial hardship factors increase (Oliffe et al. 476–80).

Many of these men feel disempowered, and within a hyper-masculine culture, they are encouraged to reclaim their "manhood." For example, Bushmaster, a manufacturer of automatic weapons, understood this and targeted their advertising specifically toward men whose girlfriends and wives earned more money than them, suggesting that purchasing their weapons could help men "reinstate" their "man card" (Wolff and Fraad). The advertisement was later pulled after Adam Lanza carried out the Sandy Hook mass shooting using a Bushmaster weapon, killing twenty elementary school children and six school faculty in 2012 (Wolff and Fraad).

In the wake of Donald Trump's victory and the endless posturing and fighting over the significance of his "white working-class" support, some have begun to remark about the significance of racism, sexism, and the toxic masculinity among his supporters. While it is certainly true that Donald Trump is unlikely to do anything to help his working-class supporters (there is also evidence that much of his support is not from working-class people [Silver]) and that many of his supporters are racist, sexist, and embrace the sort of hyper-masculinity that his opponents decry, it is equally true that this narrative has become a mechanism for bourgeois liberals to abstract away from the material conditions of neoliberal capitalism that have created the situation in the first place.

Significantly, conservatives and liberals rely heavily on scapegoating. While conservatives insist that immigrants, women, and minorities have been privileged at the expense of white men, liberals scapegoat the "white working-class" as "angry, disempowered,… politically incorrect,…boorish" (Wolff and Fraad), and toxically masculine. Instead, of taking

this as an opportunity to critique the capitalist system responsible for denying these downwardly mobile white men their "American dream," the trope of the hyper-masculinized "white working-class," a species with racism and sexism embedded in its very nature (Dudzic), has become an excuse for liberals to avoid admitting any blame for reluctance to address systemic inequality by suggesting that the cause of all our ills are ideational and attitudinal. Therefore, in its purview, the discourse of toxic masculinity leaves capitalism untouched and "rendered innocent" (Wolff and Fraad).

Campaigns such as #MeToo, despite exponents' assertions, cannot help us realize gender-egalitarian ideals. While it has shed light on otherwise unrecognized ways that men use and abuse women, such movements likely do not have the capacity or ability to bring about broader systemic change because of its monomaniacal fixation on the patriarch, rather than patriarchy (Faludi). In 2017, after Harvey Weinstein and others were investigated or even indicted for rape or other sexual misconduct, several prominent articles noted that patriarchy had either ended or was on its way out (Faludi). Of course these sort of hyperbolic claims overlooked the fact that during that same period the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act jettisoned benefits that support women in need because it ended personal and dependent exemptions, and during the same period legal abortion was under attack in Congress with an attempt to create a college savings account for unborn children (Faludi). In other words, while odious men were individually outed in public, systemic forces were attacking social protections for women; or as Susan Faludi put it, attacking the patriarch was "more popular" than attacking the patriarchy.

To be sure, fighting sexual harassment and abuse and the larger systemic forces are not mutually exclusive, as fighting sexual harassment in the workplace, for example, has often been an element of broader feminism (Faludi). However, today's focus tends to avoid the more

convoluted and systemic forces that are producing toxic masculinity and perpetuating patriarchy.

This sort of hollowed-out movement building has recently attracted corporate interests. The recent Gillette ad is a case in point. Proctor and Gamble, a multi-national consumer goods corporation, owns Gillette. In January of 2019, they released a #MeToo inspired ad campaign, changing their slogan from "The Best a Man Can Get" to "We Believe: The Best Men Can Be" and provoking a considerable backlash from conservatives and praise from liberals (Salam). Because of its ability to paper over class contradictions ostensibly in the name of women's liberation, this sort of hollowed out feminism has become part and parcel of advancing capitalist class interests. Wall Street banks and multi-national corporations, eager to portray themselves as progressive, incorporate any sort of nominal racial justice (One United's #BankBlack "movement" is a similar phenomenon) or feminist movement into their company's profile while obscuring the fact that the class interests of the company are opposed to those of most African-Americans' and women's (Blackout Coalition).

Restoring men to their pre-1970s status as breadwinners with stay-at-home girlfriends or wives is a reactionary anti-feminist goal, and my intent is not to scapegoat women in any way or to suggest that feminists are responsible for men's current problems. That would render capital innocent in the same way liberals and conservatives have. Men's and women's roles have changed over the past several decades, and much of that has been for the better. The political moment we're in requires a much deeper and broader strategy.

A socialist-feminist transformation is needed to realize any possibility of gender equality and an end to toxic masculinity. The class struggle should include broadening movements to fight for comparative worth and other significant workplace protections. Involving men in not just a "conversation" about gender and masculinity, but a bigger movement that emphasizes their

stake in fighting inequality and how masculinity and gender differences make that task impossible. This should include a focus on how notions of "men's work" and "women's work" undergird the masculine ideology that shapes many men's image of themselves and leads to misogyny, violence, and psychological trouble when men adhere to those norms, and occupational gender segregation and inequality for women.

The takeaway should be that while masculinity and essentialized gender differences are not defensible, they cannot be attacked alone or outside of the broader context of the capitalist mode of production. Because of bourgeois class power's ability to shape these essentialized differences and masculinities, they remain robust because they continue to be reproduced through a feedback mechanism between employers' preferences and parents' and children's perceptions and corresponding educational investments into a masculine or feminine career path (Brubaker 24). Trump's style of toxic masculinity is repulsive, to be sure, and sexual harassment is something that needed to be faced head-on. But using him as a focal point of the discussion often leads to caricatures of the "white working-class" as helplessly masculine and racist, moving toward empty calls for atonement and expiation, instead of toward the sort of social movement that would be necessary to challenge gender inequality and the prevalence of mass shootings and masculinized violence in this retrograde moment. This coincides with recent corporate attempts to capitalize on #MeToo and anti-masculinity; it should give us pause, as those avenues are unlikely to yield any substantial change, much less fundamentally alter, patterned gender hierarchies.

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