

Integrating the "New Men's Studies" in the Women's Studies Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

Women's studies educators regard "new men's studies" with understandable ambivalence. Still, they can be valuable. A number of practitioners in this new field express feminist perspectives. Men's studies can contribute a clearer view of women's situation as well as men's. Feminist goals are sometimes advanced by examining and mobilizing both sexes.

RÉSUMÉ

Les éducatrice en études féminines considèrent les « nouvelles études masculines » avec une ambivalence bien compréhensible. Malgré cela ces études peuvent être précieuses. Un bon nombres de praticiens et de praticiennes dans ce nouveau domaine expriment les perspectives féministes. Les études masculines peuvent contribuer à une vue plus claire de la situation des femmes ainsi que celle des hommes. Les objectifs féministes sont parfois avancés en étudiant et en mobilisant les hommes et les femmes.

The women's history/women's studies classroom is a bit beleaguered these days. At the Ontario Women's Studies Coordinators' Conference in the final year of the twentieth century, along with success stories of new hiring at Lakehead and spectacular fundraising at York, there were ominous reports of Women's Studies students who hide their textbooks to avoid taunts from other students. There is a wariness, even by those enrolled in those courses, of the label "feminism." The roundtable of Women's Studies coordinators who made these revelations consisted of a number of women who had been on the battlelines since the 1970s. Their incipient strands of grey honour those veterans of the first daycare sit-ins, abortion rights marches, of manuscript rejections by editors who found feminist analysis "not up to our standards," and hand to hand combat with Doubting Thomases in departmental chairs and dean's offices. Though opinion is divided, some around the table expressed understandable reluctance to introduce the "New Men's Studies" into the Women's Studies curriculum they fought so hard to develop. Yet, other coordinators have taken that step. What follows is a brief examination of some of the benefits of integrating masculinity studies into the feminist curriculum, and a few experiences from my own university history classroom.

Before starting, lets us concede there are some good arguments for *not* introducing Men's

Studies.¹ It is not as though women have found their full place in the mainstream curriculum, as though the Dead White Males have shrunk to a place at all proportionate to their share of the world's population or philosophic insight. In my own field, pre-Confederation Canadian history, leading textbooks have tended to address the charge of gender exclusion by throwing in tokens, those little biographical inserts. Nice; but still rare are the ones that actually incorporate women into their structure, treating as worthy of the historical spotlight the domestic economy, childbearing and rearing, kinship, religious devotion and other aspects that loomed larger in the lives of women.

Apart from the issue of content, there is the issue of community. Who among Women's Studies instructors has not felt the palpable relief of students when they finally find curriculum that speaks to their own experience? Who has not seen them touched by the gift of theories, voices, and comrades in their search for personal growth and social change? These awakenings - that keep us all going - persist in these regressive years when it seems less likely than before that ideas from the classroom will reach the corridors of power. Glory be for the alternate worlds we can construct in the classroom! Courses focused explicitly on women tend to attract almost exclusively female students (about 85-100 percent on our campus). The sense of community experienced in the classroom is so

valuable that feminist teachers are loathe to leave it behind. In my own teaching I retain it by rotating my longstanding "History of Women in Canada" (based on *Canadian Women: A History and Rethinking Canada*) with a new offering, "Gender Issues in Canadian History."²

"Gender Issues in Canadian History" began to take shape in 1995. That year the practical and the theoretical converged for me. The practical need arose in a seminar that year on the Canadian West. Like other feminist instructors, I always look for the opportunity to include more than the conventional amount of material about women in the general courses I teach. Since the Natives, Northwest Mounted Police, Economic Development, Political Protest and several other sessions centred on male figures, I decided to use *A Harvest Yet to Reap*,³ which focuses on women, as the class reading for our session on Pioneer Experience. Composed largely of photographs and first-hand accounts, it seemed relatively safe from the charge of interpretive bias. It is a powerful book which leaves a searing impression of the loneliness, vulnerability to husbandly tyranny or desertion, and backbreaking work of prairie women in the settlement period, while ending on the upbeat note of women's organizing.

The Western Canada class was a wonderful one, bright students, no shortage of curious minds and warm hearts. They felt the suffering of those women who had come on false promises then wept at first sight of the sod shacks they were to inhabit; had hung clothes that froze on the lines; had shared doubtful contraceptive recipes, died in unassisted childbirth, and been sent to asylums when they broke under the strain of too much work and too many children. "What were the *men's* lives like?" the students wanted to know.

A fair question. Two students began reading male pioneer accounts, and wrote essays comparing the two sexes. They both came to the same conclusion: life was backbreakingly hard for both sexes in the settlement period. Men, frequently facing failure, keenly felt the financial responsibility, and were particularly exposed to the elements; women, who seldom left the farm, bore the brunt of loneliness and isolation, and were often pawns of husbands who had made the decision to homestead. What tipped the scales against women - and tipped the students' decision that they indeed

suffered more - was that the women were so bereft of legal and property rights, not entitled even to the custody of their children. The Prairie inequalities were even greater than in the east, since dower rights had been curtailed to assure that Métis wives did not gain control of white men's property. Prairie women, as one writer put it, had the responsibilities of an adult and the legal status of a child. The experience of comparing the two sexes stilled doubts that men's lot was just as bad but we were ignoring it. In the end the feminist message was more powerful, and more convincing, because we had drawn comparisons; and perhaps because both sexes looked at the question, and came to a common answer.

When I developed a Gender course the following year, sources on women were plentiful but material on pre-Confederation masculinity was scarce. So we read, obliquely, articles written long before the field developed, such as W.J. Eccles on the military in New France, "The Social, Economic and Political Significance of the Military Establishment in New France," *Canadian Historical Review*, 52.1 (March, 1971), and Chris Curtis on loggers, "Shanty Life in The Kawarthas," *Material History Bulletin* 13 (1981), supplementing them with newer American and British articles on masculinity for models of how we might reconceive our own past. Collections on gender in Canadian history such as Joy Parr and Mark Rosenfeld's *Gender and History in Canada* (Toronto, 1996) and K. McPherson, C. Morgan and N. Forestell's *Gendered Pasts* (Toronto, 1999) now make the task easier. The Parr and Rosenfeld collection includes a useful bibliography. My own collection, *Race and Gender in the Northern Colonies* (Toronto, 2000) has been published by Canadian Scholars' Press. In these three collections one can find work by both young and established scholars, with studies on masculinity ranging from Carolyn Podruchny's analysis of early nineteenth century fur traders (Noel collection) to Robert Rutherford's examination of male parenting in postwar British Columbia (Parr and Rosenfeld collection).

Apart from the felt need to look at both sexes in order to understand women's oppression, another foundation of that new Gender course emerged when a teaching assistant working on a thesis about the Great War drew my attention to the growing literature that theorized masculinity. "It's

mainly *feminist* literature, you know," he said, "you should look into it." Intrigued, I went to the bastion of books, University of Toronto's towering Robarts Library, to see for myself. There was Robert Bly's notorious *Iron John* (not so bad really, but superficial). A bevy of other titles surrounded it, many of British and Australian provenance: *Masculinities, Meanings for Manhood, Male Myths and Icons, Cracking the Armour, The Making of Anti-Sexist Men*. These "New Men's Studies" are found in a growing number of disciplines, and acknowledge debts to feminist theorists such as Nancy Chodorow, Carol Gilligan, and Kate Millett. They embrace history and art history, sociology, psychology and psychoanalysis, anthropology, cultural studies, literature, as well as media, health and sport. Their authors include activists, educators, therapists, and counsellors addressing male violence, misogyny, and homophobia.

These books share the feminist premise that gender is contingent, changing over time in relation to other aspects of the culture in which it is situated. Harry Brod, one of the movement's leading theorists, observes what the two movements have in common:

Like women's studies, men's studies aims at the emasculation of patriarchal ideology's masquerade as knowledge ... While *seemingly* about men, traditional scholarship's treatment of generic man as the human norm in fact systematically excludes from consideration what is unique to men qua men....[Men's] studies situate masculinities as objects of study on a par with femininities, instead of elevating them to universal norms.⁴

Of course not all this literature is feminist; for example the "warrior within" genre often seeks to liberate men from what is presented as the domination of women. But many of the new academic writings, as Michael Kaufman and Harry Brod observed in a 1994 publication, are:

differentiated from earlier and nonfeminist ones, and from much of the more popular contemporary genre of books about men, because they incorporate the fundamental feminist insight that gender is a system of

power and not just a set of stereotypes or observable differences between men and women.⁵

Why do men want to study masculinity from a feminist perspective? The short answer, Scott Coltrane notes, "is that gender is too important to ignore and feminist theories explain more about gender than other theories."⁶ Much of the new literature operates on the feminist assumption that male and female experiences are not parallel. Masculinities are seen as diverse and often painful to men themselves, but it is accepted that assuaging male pain (such as humiliations at work, and broken relations with children) includes acknowledging and giving up what is clearly a privileged position relative to women. A collection centred on work by Australian psychologists puts it this way:

Men's Ways of Being calls for an examination of how men maintain patriarchy by fiercely disciplining each other to be "real men" and to uphold the standard of dominant masculinity....It acknowledges men's confusion and pain without denying men's privilege and dominance.⁷

Men's Ways of Being issues a ringing call for change. "Dominant masculinity has maintained its power and the illusion of universality by being unexamined,"⁸ its authors assert. For too long male privilege has rested secure in the widespread view of the essential naturalness of gender differences. Opening up the field will remove a roadblock to change. One contributor to the volume points out that what is problematic about male social development is not simply the difficulty in expressing feelings about their own experiences, but their undeveloped capacity to connect with the experiences of others. Also discussed is the importance of encouraging a sense of masculinity that is in partnership with women rather than in opposition to them. Men's Studies offer insight - and reinforcement - for those promoting the causes of equality and community.

To understand and improve women's situation it is at times essential to look squarely at men's situation. Nowhere is this generalization better exemplified than in the gender gap in voting

behaviour. In Canada and the United States various electoral campaigns over the past two decades revealed significantly lower support among women for neoconservative parties such as United States Republicans and Ontario Harris Conservatives. Women have stood by the parties that did most to build and maintain the liberal welfare state. One can only understand the gender gap by analysing *men's* behaviour. They are the group that has led the charge to the right, while women have remained more stable. Neo-conservatism has a gender component. Its troubling implications for women have been discussed in the pages of *Atlantis* over the past decade. A friend in a polling firm that worked for successive Ontario governments, though himself conservative, observed recently that there is a very "macho" tone to the current governing group at Queen's Park. Their particularly antagonistic stance towards teachers and welfare mothers seems to bear this out. It is necessary to understand why men have changed, and what gendered concerns we must address, if we wish to restore belief in the legitimacy of taxation and support for dynamic public institutions.

Another example of how studying men may advance women's interests is the issue of childcare. Harry Brod asks:

Why are women parents in the paid labor force seen as working mothers, while statistics on levels of fatherhood in the workforce are unavailable, not even collected by the Census Bureau? ... With parenting concentrated on the female model, where the private is seen as antecedent to and constitutive of the public, we have not sufficiently investigated how men's supposedly essential public roles have an impact on their private fathering functions. For example, do men see parenting as more of a "job," with discrete tasks....⁹

There can be progressive results from studying "working fathers," to determine obstacles and aids to fuller paternal roles. Whether we are looking at pioneering, voting, or parenting, broadening the field to include both sexes is at times revealing and empowering.

There can be real value in reaching out, with at least some of our material, to the sizable number of male feminist students. Feminist mothers, and the movement itself, *did* have quite an impact on the way newer generations think and behave. I remember the pleasant shock of having my own adolescent son bring me up short (when I was suggesting some male writer I thought he might appreciate more than the female one we were discussing) "Mom, I don't value things less because they're written by a woman, you know." (He later introduced me to the delights of Willa Cather and Edith Wharton.) We do make assumptions that reflect the ingrained wariness that comes from living on a patriarchal planet. We forget to note sometimes that the world has changed a good deal since the days when the greying Women's Studies Coordinators first bounded up to the barricades. Certainly things have not changed as much as we would like. Still, some new and decidedly different male faces have appeared in our corridors. Some are more willing to call themselves feminists than the women beside them are. "Proud papa" students are pushing strollers while their partner works or studies. Their concerns, and their advance, are too good a part of our feminist story to miss. If we are reaching a hiatus now, we want these fellow travellers with us when we circle our wagons. We want them on the trek ahead, too.

ENDNOTES

1. For discussion of this issue by some of the leading Canadian practitioners of gender history and women's history see Joan Sangster, "Beyond Dichotomies: Re-Assessing Gender History and Women's History in Canada," *left history* 3.1 (Spring/Summer 1995), 109-21;

and responses by Dubinsky, Marks, Kealey and Iacovetta, and Sangster in the following issue.

2. Alison Prentice, et al., *Canadian Women: A History*. 2nd edition. Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1996; and Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Claire Fellman, ed. *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*, 3rd edition (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1997).
3. L. Rasmussen, et al., *A Harvest Yet to Reap*. (Toronto: Women's Press, 1976).
4. Harry Brod, "The Case for Men's Studies" in Brod, ed. *The Making of Masculinities* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987): 40.
5. Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman, "Introduction," in Brod and Kaufman, eds. *Theorizing Masculinities* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994): 4.
6. Scott Coltrane, "Theorizing Masculinities in Contemporary Social Science," in Brod and Kaufman, *Theorizing Masculinities*, 43.
7. Rachel T. Hare-Mustin, "Foreward" in Christopher McLean, Maggie Carey, and Cheryl White, *Men's Ways of Being* (Boulder, Westview Press, 1996): ix-xi.
8. Hare-Mustin, x.
9. Brod, "Case for Men's Studies", 41.