

Masculinity, Nature, Ecofeminism

“Your masculinity is only as secure as your last competitive achievement. This fear of what nature might reveal is an endemic aspect of dominant forms of masculinity. It is built upon a denial of what cannot be denied, since it remains part of us”

-Victor Seidler (1994, p.18)

Bob Connell’s attractive notion of ‘exit politics’ is only working for a very small minority with male profeminism typically a result of middle class / educational privilege (my case for example) and since the 1970s largely privatised to predominate in the sphere of personal relations. It is worth asking why there are no direct action groups of men, skilled in media exploitation akin to environmental groups, voicing public political protest against male dominance. Exiting from privilege may have caught on in terms of ‘race’ (or even specie) but the man who makes a concerted attempt to exit from traditional masculinity remains a rare and collectively unpoliticised figure.

Here I want to make a small contribution to the critique of what Bob Connell refers to as ‘hegemonic’ masculinity (1995). He defines this as *“The configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees, or is taken to guarantee, the dominant position of men and the subordination of women”* (1995, p. 77). Connell’s use of the word ‘hegemonic’ is intended to do two things, firstly to emphasis diversity in masculinities and secondly to imply that what ever hegemonic masculinity may be at a particular point in time, it is never *total*, but rather, open to challenge and change. Moreover, for Connell, it is not enough to talk of diverse masculinities, but rather we must recognise the *relations* between these different masculinities that are *“constructed through practices that exclude and include, that intimidate, exploit and so on. There is a gender politics within masculinity”* (ibid. p.37). I aim to contribute to this critique of hegemonic masculinity by discussing nature and briefly bringing in the philosophy of ecofeminism as another worthwhile political critique for profeminist men to recognise.

This article is also based on the belief that we can do much better than Robert Bly’s essentialised narrative of the ‘Wild Man’ as a way of representing nature and masculinity. I feel that there is an absence of writing on the relationship between masculinity and nature even though it has been recognised for a long time that hegemonic masculinity is partly configured by a dominating and alienated relation to nature. Moreover, in discussions of men and emotions, or men and violence, or men and embodiment the category of ‘nature’ is always lurking there in the background yet is not given sufficient direct attention.

We can begin with one of the basic feminist premises that our dominant cultural institutions have been built upon and evolved along lines that embody and express hegemonic masculinity. Seidler expresses this similarly- *“With the identification of masculinity with reason, men become the protectors of and gatekeepers for this dominant vision of modernity. We set the terms on which others can be permitted to enter”* (ibid. p.19). The colonisation of the public sphere in this way puts forward a

particular naturalised view of culture and humanity. **Thus, if hegemonic constructions of masculinity have colonised what we have come to assume constitutes 'human nature' then a pro-feminist critique of hegemonic masculinity clearly also involves a simultaneous exposure of the arbitrary definitions of our dominant understanding of 'humanity'**. This opens up the idea that there is a similar degree of mythology and performativity to our 'human' identity, just as there is as we live through different genders.

Accepting that hegemonic masculinity is built upon the imperative to control all that is placed under the term 'nature'; new ecological practices can but only also simultaneously challenge patriarchy. Here we should understand 'nature' in an internal and external sense referring firstly to a man's own emotional and embodied life and then secondly, *externally* to the mastery of those *human* groups seen as 'closer to nature' - women, racialised groups, but *also* what we traditionally think of as nature- wilderness, animals and so on.

All this suggests that nature has been a decisive referent in constructing masculine identity. What strategies can be formulated to create alternative identities for men? If, as much eco/feminist theory suggests, we are talking about an interdependent 'web of oppression' involving class, gender, 'race' and nature it is possible to politically appropriate this interdependency. Each of these four dimensions has links to the other so it may be politically astute to pinpoint those areas of overlap. To give an example, a male involved in the environmental movement cares for things so that they no longer are 'things'. In other words he begins to reverse the conceptual death of nature which constructs trees and/or nonhuman animals as objectified resources. He is impelled to care, to think emotionally about his relationship to nature. In doing so he can be said to be also at least partly practising something counter to hegemonic masculinity. He begins to break the link of interdependency that exists between hegemonic masculinity and those discourses which resource, objectify and expel nature. Single-issue movements are in reality only rarely 'single issue' so that those taking part have a good chance of being exposed to other emancipatory discourses. This was the case in Bob Connell's biographical study of Australian men involved in environmental protest who found themselves exposed to feminism through women on the protest (1995, p. 120-139).

It is obvious, I think, that men being politicised for the first time are more likely to join other movements than profeminism and this is for a number of reasons. Importantly, the cultural stereotype of feminism is such to dissuade many young women from identifying themselves as 'feminist' so it is not likely to encourage many men. The public debate on gender remains rooted in essentialist assumptions, whereas that level of debate is largely antiquated within academic feminism. Secondly, social movements associated around issues of class or nature retain an outward appeal that can be seen to bolster a particular form of romantic masculinity. In the case of class it is the heroic masculine romanticism of taking on the system and enforcing social *justice*. Whilst this form of masculinity can hardly be seen as wholly complicit with hegemonic masculinity neither is it typically open to sexual politics. In the case of environmental politics we perhaps find something different. Firstly, owing to the differing histories of environmentalism and so different influences, the male environmentalist is arguably more open to profeminism than the male who is first and foremost a socialist. Environmentalism in certain contexts threatens

hegemonic masculinity more than socialism. This is illustrated in the mainstream response to male environmentalists who are sometimes seen as less manly, slightly emasculated. This is acutely captured in the case of male vegetarianism. Meat being one of *the* symbols of masculinity the male vegetarianism mounts a significant challenge to (Western) hegemonic masculinity, more so if the decision is taken for ethical reasons that then signify an empathy with nonhuman animals. The suspicion held against the male vegetarian can then translate into doubts about his heterosexuality.

One example from popular culture was a recent episode from *The Simpsons* (entitled 'Homer's phobia') in which Homer fears that his son Bart is gay. After mistakenly taking his son to a gay steel mill Homer takes Bart hunting in the wilderness to re-establish his son's manliness. In the style of *The Simpsons* this was all scripted with much irony but it remains significant that that scene could be chosen as one that would communicate to so many people. These are just a couple of examples that suggest that distance from, and domination of nature are an integral part of hegemonic masculinity. Whilst there are very many close links between class and gender, in terms of a strategy to encourage more profeminist men I would suggest that environmentalism at this point in time is a more fertile ground than purely class politics.

However, the long term liberatory intention has to be to make clear the interconnections between class, 'race', gender and nature (and other oppressions) and so to make less likely the existence of heterosexist socialists, patriarchal eco-warriors and humanist feminists and so on. To make clear that prioritising class, for example, over all other categories of oppression is unrealistic and only serves to re-impose a hierarchy of oppressions. This search for a better framework is where ecofeminism comes in.

Ecofeminism, which has coalesced in the last thirty years, is a strategic response to the persistent Western association of women with nature. Now, feminist theorists have known for a long time that women have historically been associated with nature and that nature has often been feminised as in myths such as 'Mother Nature'. Gut reaction humanism meant that often this link was taken as degrading – indeed that is how the association is *supposed* to be taken. It is assumed that the oppressed along with the oppressor similarly regards the status of nature as inferior to all that is human so that a hierarchical system is imposed in which some people are thought of as more 'human' than others. Now the criteria over whether who can be regarded as human are liable to change over time to some degree.

During colonialism the Christian/Heathen distinction was of paramount importance. Since then the Rational/Irrational distinction has taken precedence. This new seemingly secular criterion is not wholly discontinuous from Christian definitions of the human. For example, a striking somatophobia, or 'fear of flesh' is retained in which the perceived ability to retain *control* of one's own body is given great weight in determining one's 'human' status. Thus, we can note how most oppressed groups in the Western context have had a 'lack of control' essence projected upon them – think of oppression by gender, 'race', class, nature (animals), age, disability, sexuality and so on. The perceived inability to control one's body takes many forms be it a lack of sexual restraint (though less of a problem if that happens to be 'normal' male

heterosexual desire), or some other assumed physical 'weakness'. The 'human' in this perspective is one largely devoid of weakness, fragility and vulnerability.

The reader will note how this identity is rather similar to that dreamed up by hegemonic masculinity. However, as the ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood suggests, you can not reduce all oppression to hegemonic masculinity (1993). She believes that what is required is an understanding of a more complex dominator identity which she terms the 'master identity'. This term it can be argued allows us to think out the importance of other categories alongside gender. Just as we cannot reduce all oppression to class, we can neither reduce all to gender. It also makes a space for thinking how this identity, that has been formed through the complex system of dualistic associations that many liberation movements have problematised, *does* rather arbitrarily colonise what we have come to regard as 'human'. Ecofeminism is a decisive social movement since it is one of the first to coherently question this particular 'human'. Historically, emancipatory movements have been concerned with tackling de-humanisation. I suggest that they now should be as much about creating new human identities.

Instead of taking the woman-nature connection as a degrading association for women, ecofeminism takes a step back and considers how this association, which is the flip side of the 'men with culture connection', is part of many which stem from a whole legacy of Western dualisms. This is a legacy that not only informs gender, but also 'race', class and the separation of humanity from nature. To give just one example of it's structure it is not only women that have been historically associated with nature, but also 'non-white races' and the working classes, often through their animalisation, and more indirectly by associating these constructed groups with the body and emotions, but never reason or rationality.

Ecofeminism has intensified over the last twenty years. While it began by outlining the interconnections between the oppression of women and nature (including animals), it has broadened into a more intricate liberation theory picking out theoretical interconnections which it is hoped can ground political coalition/s. Sadly in academia feminism flexes it's own muscle by largely silencing ecofeminism which is seen as threatening in some way. It is mistakenly stereotyped as essentialist by people still living off 1970s misunderstandings of what ecofeminism actually is. It is prudent not to fall into the same stereotyping process. This usually consists of taking one problematic ecofeminist statement and pretending that it represents the entire philosophy of ecofeminism. This is plain poor research or something more spiteful. Most people still seem to think that ecofeminism consists of the romanticisation and reproduction of the belief that women are 'closer to nature'. I refer to the reader to the 'further reading' that follows. Moreover, humanism remains a very important political myth for many with the spread of ethical concern to nonhuman spheres seen as a step too far or a misplaced priority instead of an important addition to liberation theory.

If the historical tradition in the West has been to associate women with nature, as ecofeminism suggests, where does that leave the relation between masculinity and nature? How can men relate to nature in other than oppressive ways? Is it the fact of death and decay that nature represents which terrifies hegemonic masculinity as it disproves a fantasised-for omnipotence? One strategy for profeminist men has been

to point out the ways in which patriarchy has also skewed the experiences of men. So we have as a consistent argument that we have lost out in terms of our emotional lives and that we have lost out also in terms of health, thinking ourselves too invincible to take care of our bodies. If this method of critiquing patriarchy holds true then it can also apply to men's experience of nature. To reconcile masculinity with nature would go some way to confessing male physical and emotional vulnerability and easing the stress and illness that goes with its denial.

The clear history and mythology of men 'returning' to nature, re-evoking what hegemony has encouraged them to repress, strongly suggests that many men have felt diminished by the relation to nature that hegemonic masculinity has provided. Such 'returns' are only partial and clouded in romanticism as long as hegemonic identity continues to be defined as so excluding of nature. Moreover, they are liable to be expressed through essentialism especially since men have in some contexts certainly been associated with nature. This relates to a point about dualistic associations in that they are never total and are liable to periodic reverse. Thus whilst the typical trend throughout the course of Western history has been to associate women and nature we can recount examples which do exactly the opposite.

When men have been associated with nature it has been the norm for this to be done in essentialist ways that have reinforced accounts of hegemonic masculinity as 'fixed in nature', and so presumably timeless and 'normal'. For example anthropomorphic accounts of certain 'wild' animals have been used to reinforce the supposedly inherent aggressive nature of men. Similar narratives are seen in everything from contemporary advertising discourse to romanticised accounts of man as 'the hunter'. This is the very same trap that Robert Bly walks into when he attempts to revive the 'Wild Man' myth in his *Iron John*. This myth romanticises hunting and animal sacrifice as a way of male communication with nature. It is strange that hunting has been constructed in some discourses as a way of positive identification with nature since, at least in the UK, it is one of those very issues that have areas of overlap between different sources of power, being an intersection of class, gender and nature politics.

One of the reasons that makes it difficult to create truly positive ways of associating men with nature lies in the history of Western science's approach to nature. This approach in its theory of knowledge and methodology has been orientated towards dominating nature and constructing nature as an 'it', as already dead. The controlling ethos has been expressed through the colonisation of Western Science by different hegemonic masculinities that have been very resistant to change. This has been expressed by values that abstract, observe, isolate, control and yet keep at a distance that being examined. These values become so entrenched that they colonise areas of social life not directly related to Science. For example, we are taught to believe that observation or vision is *the* paradigm for accumulating knowledge to the neglect of other senses such as hearing (listening), and our dominant cultural value to control our bodies speaks partly the scientific distrust of flesh and emotion. New developments in gene technology and synthetic 'life' forms suggest that it's trajectory is striving for some form of pseudo-procreative ability, which would only appear to vindicate the charge of 'womb envy' sometimes directed towards hegemonic masculinity.

If, as I believe, there has been a clear link between hegemonic masculinity and the exploitation of the realm of 'nature' then I would like to leave you with the main argument of this article. Namely that ecological politics provides an important way in which (profeminist) men can subvert, albeit indirectly, hegemonic masculinity and then potentially create new, mutually enriching and non-oppressive conversations between men and nature. This claim should be accompanied with some warnings. The area of environmental politics is not immune to male dominance or the unwelcome re-surfacing of hegemonic masculinity. Thus the whole arena of environmental activism would be strengthened rather than diluted by some thoughtful profeminism, that would then pave the way for an ecofeminist imagination that is adept at picking out interconnections between oppressions and so, in turn, arguing for interdependent oppositional politics. The final warning for men specifically concerns falling into the various traps of feminising and/or romanticising nature, which historically have been indicative of dominating and/or repressed relations to nature and women. There are better relations to be had than these; ones that neither dominate, objectify, deny nor fear nature.

References and Further Reading

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