

MAN ENOUGH

Embodying Masculinities



VICTOR JELENIEWSKI SEIDLER

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SAGE Publications
London · Thousand Oaks · New Delhi

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First published 1997

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SAGE Publications Ltd
6 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4PU

SAGE Publications Inc
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
32, M-Block Market
Greater Kailash - I
New Delhi 110 048

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN 0 7619 5407 4
ISBN 0 7619 5408 2 (pbk)

Library of Congress catalog card number 97-068533

Typeset by Typestudy, Scarborough

Wiltshire

Man Enough

*For David Boadella, Terry Cooper and
Bob Moore who have each, in their own way,
helped me explore my own path.
With love and appreciation.*

Do not threaten a child. Either punish or forgive them.

Semachot

A father complained to the Besht that his son had forsaken God.

'What, Rabbi, shall I do?'

'Love him more than ever,' was the Besht's reply.

Some are born humanized, and others have to humanize themselves slowly.

Czeslaw Milosz

The path to one's own heaven always leads through the voluptuousness of one's own hell.

Nietzsche (1974) *The Gay Science*, p. 269

If Nietzsche and psychoanalysis have shown that instinctuality, especially in the form of sexuality, extends its reaches up to the highest pinnacles of human spirituality, then we have attempted to show the degree to which spirituality extends its reaches down to the deepest valleys of 'vitality'.

Ludwig Binswanger (1932) *Being-in-the-World*, p. 2

At stake, was knowing to what extent the effort to think about one's own history can emancipate thought from what it silently thinks, and permit it to think differently.

Michel Foucault (1985) *The Use of Pleasure*, p. 15

Preface

Do such efforts actually lead to a different way of thinking?

Michel Foucault (1985) *The Use of Pleasure*, p. 17

The preface brings the writer face to face with the reader. It comes at the beginning as a way of introducing the work but is often the last thing written. Thinking about the preface takes you back to the beginning, to the early inspirations that inform the writing. Often there is a question that is rarely far from consciousness but cannot readily be put into words. It takes the process of writing sometimes to discover the questions that have been disturbing you. The question 'am I man enough?' is often a question that remains unasked though it hovers at the edge of so many men's conscious minds. Sometimes it is too threatening to put it into words. But it has remained a defining concern for dominant masculinities in the modern West.

Within an Enlightenment vision of modernity masculinity can rarely be taken for granted. It is something that always has to be proved. This creates an uneasy intensity in many men's lives as they can feel haunted by a sense of inadequacy, a sense that they are not good enough, but have to prove that they are 'man enough'. This can force many men into compulsive activity and can make it difficult for men to feel at ease and accepting of themselves. In contemporary Western society this has developed into a crisis of masculinities where traditional forms of affirming male identities are no longer readily available to many men. Robert Bly in *Iron John* saw this in terms of the West having lost a sense of how boys can be initiated into manhood and he was tempted to return to traditional notions of masculinity. I was excited about much of his work and was ready to support it in the face of the disdain that it so often met with. There was a fear of the emotional depths he was revealing.

Often as men we grow up fearful of the revelations of our inner natures, for emotions are deemed to be 'feminine' and so threatening to male identities. But this blocks men in developing an inner connection with themselves and often creates a gap between the ways men might be feeling inside and the ways they present themselves even to those closest to them. This fear of intimacy can make it difficult for men with diverse class, 'race' and ethnic identities to establish open and loving relationships. But I was also uneasy with the directions working with men was taking under the influence of Bly. It could easily set up new ways for men to feel inadequate and not 'man enough'. It also threatened to minimize what men could learn from feminism and from gay men. I thought that we needed different visions of masculinity and a different sense of how boys could grow up to be men.

I started writing this work when my son Daniel was eleven and daughter Lily was six. I was concerned with the ways he was to be initiated into

manhood but I was also concerned with my place as a father in Lily's development into womanhood. Initiation seemed within the modern world to have less to do with an event, though Daniel's Barmitzvah at 13 did mark an important entrance into the public world and his assuming particular responsibilities for himself. It meant an important step in becoming his own person, in being able to take moral decisions for himself. But as he acknowledged, it was part of a process into manhood. As a father it was a matter of sustaining a meaningful relationship with him which could validate the changes he was going through. It is a relational vision of initiation which does not separate out the psychological from the social and political. It opens up new ground, which helps to connect the personal with the theoretical. Too often accounts of men and masculinities have insisted upon separating the personal from the structural, so finding it difficult to illuminate the lived contradictions of men's experiences.

I am writing this preface on Daniel's fifteenth birthday, 15 years after some of the experiences around his birth which I share. It is difficult to reflect upon experiences without unwittingly generalizing from a particular experience. Some of the anguish, frustration and difficulty so easily gets lost and you can feel the inadequacies of memory and the ease with which stories come to assume a life of their own. I wanted to find a voice in which I could share more of my own learning whilst also opening up ways of thinking about the predicament of contemporary masculinities. Since an Enlightenment vision of modernity has been set within the terms of dominant masculinity, this involved unsettling rationalist forms of social theory and philosophy. It called for different ways of thinking and feeling. Somehow we need to link new psychologies, informed by psychotherapy but not limited by its disembodied visions of mental life, with social theories that have learned from feminism and ecology to reinstate emotions and feelings as sources of knowledge. Discontented with some of the paths opened up within postmodern thinking, I wanted to learn from its more complex notions of the fluidity and fragmentation of identities while refusing the erasure of emotional and spiritual depth and experience.

I have had the love and support of many men and women who are also struggling with the issues in this book. Many of the ideas have been developed with others in the context of different groups. In the 1980s the diverse responses of men to feminism were sharpened in the collective practice that developed around the magazine *Achilles' Heel* that served as an important catalyst for men's writing and politics. There was an important conversation between politics and therapy as well as between straight and gay men. More recently I know how much I have learnt from being part of the Men for Men group at Spectrum, London. It has been a constant source of insight and support through the difficult process of writing. It constantly helps to ground my experience and values.

I appreciate the support that I have had in completing the manuscript. Anna, my partner for 20 years, has watched it grow from its inception. She has constantly challenged me to be more honest and critical in my thinking

and to appreciate the significance of a sensitivity and intuition so often devalued within the academy. The Gender Studies group in the Department of Sociology at Goldsmiths, Ross Gill, Caroline Ramazanoglu and Fran Tonkiss have provided crucial support. The many students who have taken my course Knowledge, Science and Nature have been a constant source of inspiration in their search for more meaningful forms of social theory. Steven Frosh and Mary Maynard provided helpful remarks for the rewriting of the manuscript and Chris Rojek believed in the project at a moment when it really mattered. I also remember crucial conversations with David Boadella, Larry Blum, Terry Cooper, Mike Dalton, Sheila Ernst, Carol Gilligan, Lucy Goodison, Michael Ignatieff, Michael Kimmel, Paul Morrison, Piers Partridge, Sally Potter, Janet Ransom, Joanna Ryan, Janet Sayers, Dennis Scott, Carol and Hilmar Schonauer, Tony Seidler, Rob Senior and Angelika Strickner.

Over the years I have also learnt a great deal from the English Group that has worked with Bob Moore in Denmark. It has enriched my understandings of processes of growth and development and helped me recognize what was involved in establishing a deeper connection with aspects of ourselves. It taught me a great deal about the emotional and spiritual life of the body and about the connections between psychotherapy and healing. Specifically it has helped me rethink the relationship between beliefs, emotions and the heart connection established through feeling. These groups provided me with the support of a spiritual community that has sustained me in my thinking and relationships. They have challenged me to rethink the Eurocentrism of much social theory, through giving me ways of taking seriously different Eastern and Western spiritual traditions. In their different ways they have shown in practice what is involved in treating the body and feelings as sources of knowledge.

I have also learnt from alternative forms of psychotherapy the importance of open and honest communication with partners and with children. The place of honesty and truthfulness is rarely acknowledged within social theory, which has yet to focus upon the difficulties of living a just life within unjust social relations. This is also part of the challenge of feminism and sexual politics. In terms of psychotherapy the work of Virginia Satir (1989) reminds us of the importance of honest communication. This was not easy for me to learn since I had so little of it in my own childhood. But if changes are to be made we have to make them for ourselves, for otherwise we will unwittingly relate to our children in the ways we were related to. This is something Anna has constantly challenged me with. Daniel and Lily have grown up in this process and have shown an equal patience as I struggled to complete this work. Sometimes it feels as if they have learnt a great deal more for they both have a wisdom and a clarity that I did not know at their age. In many ways they have been teachers too, for their experience also finds its way into these pages.

In the months that I was bringing the manuscript to completion three men died who had in different ways been encouraging and supportive to me,

though sometimes they did not even know it. Lily and Bee Davis had been helpful in their enthusiasm for some of the themes, and they suggested a title *Of Boys and Men*. Sadly Bee died in August 1996. He had been there as a supportive older man from my earliest boyhood days. Rabbi Arthur Katz had also been there as a source of advice and as a link with a generation before the Second World War. He constantly warned against a narrow materialism. Along with the death of Bee Davis I was also to hear of the death of Rabbi Hugo Gryn who had in countless ways, as a survivor of Auschwitz and as a man with an enduring sense of ethics, been an inspiration to so many in Anglo-Jewry. In very different ways these men served as mentors, as guides in a difficult world. This book is also dedicated to them.

As we open up a dialogue between different generations of men, so we can begin to learn from each other. We can respect differences and know that we are struggling with diverse masculinities, locked in relationships of power and dominance with men and women. As different men explore their inherited masculinities and discover their own voices, they can begin to share their pains as well as joys, their sufferings as well as blessings. As Tony Bayfield (1996) recalls, 'Hugo's prophetic picture was a globe composed of numerous beautiful gardens, cultivated by the many faith, ethnic, and cultural groups of which the world is made up. Each person should be able to wander peacefully and admire the other gardens, whilst always returning, enriched, to their own.' As men living in relation to diverse masculinities we also know where the garden is in which we can find peace and nourishment. We also need to learn that reaching out to others for support is not a sign of weakness, but rather a source of strength, love and solidarity.

*Victor Jeleniewski Seidler
Dalston, London*

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Introduction: Hopes, Dreams and Uncertainties

Nobody can build you the bridge over which you must cross the river of life, nobody but you alone.

Nietzsche (1983) *Untimely Meditations*, p. 165

Hidden Anxieties

In the West heterosexual men have responded to the challenges of feminism and gay liberation in different ways, but they have left many men feeling uncertain and confused about what it means 'to be a man' as we approach the millennium. There seems to be a crisis of masculinities initiated through the feminist questioning of traditional forms of male power and superiority that have been structured into the very terms of an Enlightenment vision of modernity. Often as white middle class heterosexual men we have grown up to feel self-assured, at least on the surface, for the modern world has been very much made in our image. Men often expected to be the centre of their social worlds. It can be hard to accept a period of uncertainty and change. The 1980s witnessed a backlash against feminism in the United States and Europe and the reassertion of traditional forms of masculinity. For younger men this has shown itself in a laddish culture which takes refuge in irony whilst glorifying sexist behaviour.

A dominant Western vision of modernity identified a white, heterosexual masculinity with a notion of reason, radically separated from nature. As men learnt to identify with their reason so they were expected to legislate what is best for others as well as for themselves. Men were supposed to know what they wanted and needed. Not only were they the rulers of their own lives but they had the power to rule the lives of women and children. But often this has meant that, as heterosexual men, we had to *hide* our own anxieties and uncertainties, which we might only dare to whisper to our sexual partners in the dark of the night. At some level we recognized that we were less honest with ourselves than we could be. But the culture did not value truth and honesty and often we grew up to hide what we were feeling, for emotions could so easily threaten male identities. As men we can feel trapped into living out ideals that are not of our own making. It can be as if we have betrayed an inner knowledge of ourselves, in order to prove when we were still young boys that we could be 'man enough'.

The restructuring of democratic capitalist societies in the West in the 1980s and 1990s has often worked to undermine traditional sources of male identity. There are far fewer traditional working class jobs that could sustain men in their positions as breadwinners. Fathers cannot sustain their authority within working class families through being able to pass on a job in, for instance, shipbuilding or mining. Their sons can feel resentful at being left at the mercy of the educational system which itself cannot promise future employment. There are no longer the job opportunities around that can sustain a sense of ambition and self-worth. Not only as a wage earner but also as a father or family provider, young men can feel lost with the break-up of family relationships and the undermining of traditional sources of masculine identities. This has left many young men feeling vulnerable and threatened.

There is a widespread and growing feeling that as men we are living in a radically different world from our fathers. There is a feeling of cultural dislocation as young men can no longer rely upon what their fathers might have taught them. There are no longer the same certainties about what it means for a boy to make a transition to manhood. Often there is silence and unspoken resentment in the relationships between fathers and sons, as young men with different class, 'racial' and ethnic backgrounds feel that their fathers were not there for them emotionally and that now it is too late to establish a relationship. At the same time young men can feel strangely tied to their fathers, wanting at some level to feel closer to them but unable to reach out because of their hidden resentments. There is also a widespread feeling that as heterosexual and gay men we want to be able to relate more equally and openly to our partners and that we want to have different relationships with children than those we knew with our fathers.

Positioning Men

The first generation of heterosexual men who responded to the women's movement in the early 1970s often felt uneasy about a dominant heterosexual masculinity which had served to oppress and subordinate women and gay men. They were concerned with the injustices and the sufferings that were caused by men. They felt that masculinity had to be deconstructed because it was part of the problem and it seemed as if it could not be part of any solution. The focus on the development of an anti-sexist men's politics where it was clear that men needed to take a clear stand against male violence, rape and sexual harassment of women. The misery and sufferings that were created by a dominant masculinity had to be undone if there was to be any chance of greater gender equality. It seemed only right for men to give primary attention to the sufferings of women, for there was the major injustice and oppression. This has been a strong tendency, especially where men have been working with violence against women.

From the beginning there has also been a tendency towards men's liberation, which has felt easier thinking about ways that men can change. In liberal terms it thought of gender as role and it was ready to argue that as women were limited by the expectations of their role, so also were men limited by their roles. As women should be free to work in the public sphere, so men should be free to be more involved in the private sphere of domestic work and childcare. Helpful in being able to focus upon the experience of men, notions of men's liberation were unable to illuminate the structured character of gender relations of power. They tended to slip into a false parallelism between men and women and tended to avoid the power and violence that was often structured into gender relations.

In England the journal *Achilles' Heel* sought some kind of compromise between these positions, developing a third position that could recognize the structured relations of power whilst at the same time talk about the importance of redefining masculinities. It refused to theorize masculinity as exclusively a relationship of power and insisted on being able to illuminate the contradictions that men often felt in relation to dominant masculinities. Men were not to be identified with their masculinities, but we also needed to think about the contradictions in men's lived experience. We needed to take seriously what men felt and thought about themselves, rather than assuming that we had to confront them immediately with the power that a patriarchal society had provided them. This involved listening to men and allowing them to *voice* their experience in their own terms. It brought a recognition that men were not supposed to have emotions and feelings, for these were deemed to be 'feminine' and so a threat to dominant heterosexual male identities.

Achilles' Heel contained a diversity of different writings from a variety of different positions. It illuminated the contradictions that many men felt between the powerless feelings they might have in their personal lives and the power they might have in the larger society. It also showed the hidden injuries of diverse masculinities, as men were struggling to live up to images of themselves, partly out of fear of being put down or rejected. Drawing upon the experience of different masculinities, it soon recognized that there was no single homogenized vision of masculinity that all men felt they had to aspire to. At the same time with modernity there was a dominant masculinity that very much set the terms for the relationships of power between different men and different masculinities. We needed to analyse the power relations between different men, not just between men and women.

Personal/Theoretical/Political

As with early feminist work there was often a tension between the richness of these first person accounts and the terms in which they were to be theorized. The notion that 'the personal is political' was inspiring but it was difficult to think carefully about the ways it transformed classical forms of social

theory and philosophy. At one level it challenged an assumption shared by Marx, Weber and Durkheim that for oppression and injustice to be 'real' it must take place within the public realm of politics. It was in the public sphere that we had the play of power. Sufferings that took place within the personal realm were taken to be 'private' and a matter of personal relations. It was in this way that feminists provided a crucial challenge to the masculinist terms of modernity, though this has often been missed when the discussions around postmodernity have focused upon whether feminism assumes a unified notion of 'woman' and so of a subject who is oppressed and can be liberated. Sadly some postmodern feminism misses the point in its rejection of a discourse of oppression.

In the 1990s we have witnessed a fear of the personal and this has gone hand in hand with the rejection of experience as a theoretical category. Too often this is dismissed as a form of humanism and essentialism, before we have effectively grasped what these positions involve. As theoretical feminism has taken its place within the academy it has often lost connection with its activist and political roots. At some level there seems to be a tension between the 'personal' and the 'theoretical', as if to think in personal terms, rather than grounding what we have to say, somehow proves a lack of theoretical sophistication. Hopefully there are some signs of a shift and a recognition that we need ways of taking seriously both the text and the voice. Within the dominant terms of discourse theory there was a clear privileging of the text and a sense that we can only know experience through the terms in which it is articulated in a text. The later Wittgenstein helped me to appreciate the importance of voice and relation, and this helps provide a different reading of feminism from the emphasis on text and discourse which was influenced by the turn to Saussure.

In terms of the development of men's politics in the 1990s these tendencies expressed themselves in different terms. There was an attempt to marginalize the complexity of the *Achilles' Heel* work through arguing that it presented an attempt to reduce the political to the personal. This was a theme in Lynne Segal's *Slow Motion* (1990) as well as in R.W. Connell's *Gender and Power* (1987) which it tended to follow theoretically. There was an attempt to treat masculinity as a set of social practices and to theorize a hegemonic masculinity. Both these works were important contributions that did a great deal to open up the discussion of different masculinities and to contextualize them institutionally and practically. The emphasis was upon masculinities but it was not open to the contradictory nature of men's lives and their complex relationships with diverse masculinities. Rather it castigated these concerns as 'personal' or, as in Connell's later work *Masculinities* (1996), as 'therapeutic'. Somehow we had ended up with reinstating a distinction between the 'personal' and the 'political'.

This also meant that we could not think about how boys had grown up into manhood and the transitions that had taken place in the process. We might be able to study a diversity of different masculinities in the present, but we would find it difficult to grasp how these men had become the men

that they are. This also reflects another difference between this kind of theoretical work and my *Rediscovering Masculinity* (1989), where I drew upon the *Achilles' Heel* work. The idea was that though men had power they were also limited and in some ways oppressed by dominant masculinities. The lives of men were impoverished through the disconnections they had to make with their bodies and emotions. Within an Enlightenment vision of modernity, men were expected to be independent and self-sufficient. Emotional needs were a sign of weakness and therefore were often suppressed as a threat to male identities.

It was in the context of consciousness-raising groups that men discovered a space in which they could share more of their lives with each other. Rather than feel threatened by the closeness of other men who might take advantage of any sign of vulnerability, they could learn to draw support from each other. In their exploration of differences between them they could also discover what they shared in their experience as men. Sometimes these were not easy contexts for men, who often found it easier to talk about and intellectualize their experience rather than share it. At some level men often felt locked out of their own experience, trapped as observers of what was going on for them. In part this is what encouraged an interest in experiential forms of psychotherapy which could help some men break through their isolation and loneliness which too often they kept to themselves.

The argument against attempts to connect the 'personal' with the 'political' was that this has to be an attempt to reduce the political to the personal. What is more, masculinities were not impoverished or limited but rather were varied and offered men opportunities and possibilities that were denied to women. But these structural accounts of masculinity often retained traces of an orthodox Marxism which found it difficult to illuminate the identification of a dominant masculinity with self-denial, with a Protestant moral culture. There were difficulties in exploring contradictions in men's lives and the ways that men *could* change. While there was a recognition that men could change, there was little sympathy and understanding of the ways this could happen or the kinds of confrontations it would involve men in with themselves. Rather there was a disdain for therapy and a dismissal of emotional work as 'therapeutic'. Too often it sustained some of the weakness of the sexual politics of the 1970s, which otherwise it wanted to question in its moralism and its sense that people could change through will and determination alone.

Some of these differences show in notions of how to work with men who are violent. Some men deeply identified with anti-sexist men's politics think that the first step is to confront men with consequences of their violence towards women. The idea is that it is often through guilt that men will change. Other men have also recognized that it is important to establish links with the men themselves through an understanding of what experiences in their own boyhoods have made them into the violent men they are. Men have also to come to terms with their own experience as men and the ways they were treated in their families. If a boy has been treated violently

this is often the way he will go on to relate to others. The links between violence and masculinities are crucial to explore here. Of course it is absolutely crucial that men stop their violent behaviours towards women. It is also important that men come to terms with their own experiences as part of a process of change. This is emotional work that men have to do for themselves since others cannot do it for them.

Men have to come to terms with their power in relation to women and children. They have to question notions of male superiority that they have grown up to take very much for granted. But as I argued in *Recreating Sexual Politics* (1991a) it is also important for men to question the practice of self-denial they have grown into within a Protestant moral culture. The notion that men are 'bad' and that male sexuality is 'animal' are part of the dominant culture. Rather than help to question this, feminism unwittingly tended to reinforce these notions. It left many heterosexual men feeling bad about themselves, as if the impossible task they had to attempt was to abandon or forsake their masculinities. This was a further process of *denial* that could leave men feeling that women always had morality on their side because they were oppressed as a gender. Feeling guilty, men often withdrew into a sullen silence, unable to voice their own needs and wants. This reinforced the notion that men should not have needs and that to give time and attention to themselves as men is a form of self-indulgence.

Men and Masculinities

This was a weakness in some of the anti-sexist men's responses to feminism. Men were often left feeling uneasy and confused about their masculinities. They found it hard to define themselves as men. Sometimes they identified too closely with the sufferings and pain of women, feeling angry at their fathers and with men in general. It is as if they did not want to be men at all. This coincided in the culture with a widespread feeling that men were useless and that women could live their lives well without them. Women had found their diverse voices and had a clarity and self-definition that many men silently envied. But there was also resentment and a feeling of guilt, at some level, for the ways that men, including fathers, were being portrayed within the larger culture.

The publication of Robert Bly's *Iron John* (1990) resonated with this moment, both in its exploration of the ways some men seemed to have forsaken and lost a sense of themselves as men in their identification with feminism, and also in its expressions of anger at the ways that men were increasingly being demeaned in media portrayals. It reached towards a much broader spectrum of men than any previous men's book. It was taken up by many men who felt themselves to be unrecognized in the portrayals of feminism. It was also taken up as part of a backlash to feminism by many men who had identified with men's rights movements, especially in the United States. They were angry at the power they had lost to feminism and