

Ideologies of the Men's Movement

David Bloodwood

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Abstract

This essay examines the major idea strands in the Anglophone Men's Movement in the mid-90s, and map the origins of those ideas and their relationship with Feminism. I identify the three main current ideologies: Pro-feminism, Mythopoeists, and Men's Rights, and explore their major ideas, and via tabulating those main ideas, their main political agendas, and how they compare with each other.

2,270 words

Introduction

Because the feminism that arose in the 1960s and 1970s critiqued so much about men and men's position in society, men felt either pressured or obliged to respond. Men initially responded in two ways. The major form of response took the form of rejection or critique of feminism from within the currently existing patriarchal structures and values; i.e. men as the dominant gender in society 'handed down' judgments on feminism's claims and programs. An excellent documentation of the history of this response is to be found in Kimmel (1996), and does not concern me in this study.

For instance, it could be argued that a major strand of the Men's Movement, especially in the USA, is the 'Muscular Christianity' school. I do not include it here following Kimmel's (1996; 312-313) view that Muscular Christianity is a Masculinist response to a perceived lack of leadership and certainty, rather than a response to feminism. Likewise, Connell (1995; 212-215) points to the Gun Lobby's focus on trying to preserve hegemonic masculinity and the gender hierarchy, rather than responding to feminism.

The second, and definitely minority, response was acceptance and examination; i.e. men said 'how do these new ideas affect me as a gendered person - rather than as a holder of a dominant position, and what do they mean for the ordering of our society?' The ideas, actions and programs of this minority group I will call "the Discourse of Masculism", and those workers in this area I will call "Masculists".

This study attempts to follow the main threads within the masculist discourse and to identify the arena which the inhabitants claim is the Men's Movement. To help weave the story of the various strands of masculist thought, I give names to each strand. These names appear in single quotes initially, and thereafter with an initial capital letter. These labels are my own and are used merely for convenience.

This study assumes that "men" are primarily white anglo heterosexual men. As such, it runs the danger of repeating the patriarchal error of treating white anglo heterosexual men as normative. In this case, however, the subject of study, the Men's Movement in English speaking countries, is in fact primarily made up of such men.

The Masculist Tapestry

The first written masculist responses to feminism took the form of apologising for men's bad behaviour towards women and for the apparent inadequacies in men's personalities. This path, the 'Apologist' path, needless to say, had a very short life and had almost entirely died out by 1980. But the Apologists were the first to take feminism seriously and, in the mid-70s, developed an ideology known as 'Men's

Liberation' (see Nichols, 1975; Pleck & Sawyer, 1974), in which the central idea was that men are also oppressed by their 'male role'. A men's liberation movement in parallel with the women's liberation movement was seen as the vehicle for freeing men and rebuilding the male role into something more positive.

This approach did not address the major power imbalances between men and women, nor, apparently, did it fire men's passions in the way feminism did for women. However, it did have the benefit that it proposed a way out of the inhibiting Apologist guilt through action for men's benefit. As the gap between impulse and action widened, in the early 80s the Men's Liberation strand frayed into three threads.

The strand which held closest to the original feminist impulse, the 'Pro-feminists', felt it was necessary to keep focused on the central issue of power and marginalisation, and have ever since followed a "pro-feminist, gay affirmative, male supportive" (Kimmell 1987) thread which forms the intellectual powerhouse of the Men's Movement. The works of Kimmel, Brod, Pleck, Kaufman, and Connell, (see bibliography) in some cases over 20 years, form a comprehensive and challenging analysis of gender and especially masculinity. This work takes the standards and concerns of feminist scholarship as its main concern, and applies feminist and other ideas to the study of masculinities. As such it often sits on the margin of the Movement, influencing and shaping rather than directly participating. Connell (1995: 243), especially, claims the Men's Movement cannot exist and so is clearly outside it. However, other workers clearly locate themselves within the Movement.

The strand with the highest profile and which arguably forms the central strand of the Men's Movement, is the 'Mythopoeists'. Robert Bly (1991) initially proposed the idea of 'father-hunger' as the reason why men are able to oppress women, destroy the earth and have such a miserable time in the process.

The third strand from Men's Liberation is the 'Protest School', a small group of former pro-feminists or neutral commentators who, since the early 1980s, have become increasingly concerned by the excesses of feminist orthodoxy. Farrell (1994) and Thomas(1993) ask challenging questions about the nature of the supposed male privilege, examine some double binds into which feminism places men, and document areas of 'reverse sexism'. The Protest School, although very small, inhabits the Men's Movement as an unintegrated yet very passionate set of ideas regarding men's self-interest.

Going back to Feminism as the source again, another major thread which arose almost in opposition to the Apologists was the precursor of 'Men's Rights'. In the late 70s Asa Baber (1992) in Playboy magazine, and Sidney Siller, through the National Organisation for Men's column in Penthouse magazine, pointed out that feminism was merely treating men as badly as women have been treated in the past, and that both approaches are as bad as each other. They were the first to call for men to speak up, and in many ways influenced the Protest School. Men's Rights ideology does not necessarily sit within the Men's Movement; rather it sits uneasily on the right flank, influencing and defining the Movement rather than wholeheartedly participating.

Closely related to Men's Rights is the 'Father's Rights' strand, an ideology developed in response to the appalling experiences of thousands of men in the Family Courts and Divorce Courts. In a sense, it relies on the validation of fathering put forward by the Mythopoeists, yet its passionate pro-male stance and understanding of the social influence of feminism is clearly from Men's Rights. Fathers' Rights inhabits the Men's Movement, although sometimes in opposition to pro-feminists, and continues to agitate for legal changes.

Another thread which, like feminism, underlies Masculism, is the 12-step movement. This thread, being very well established by the 1970s, has provided a basis for men's

responses to feminism. Two distinct strands from the 12-step movement can be identified.

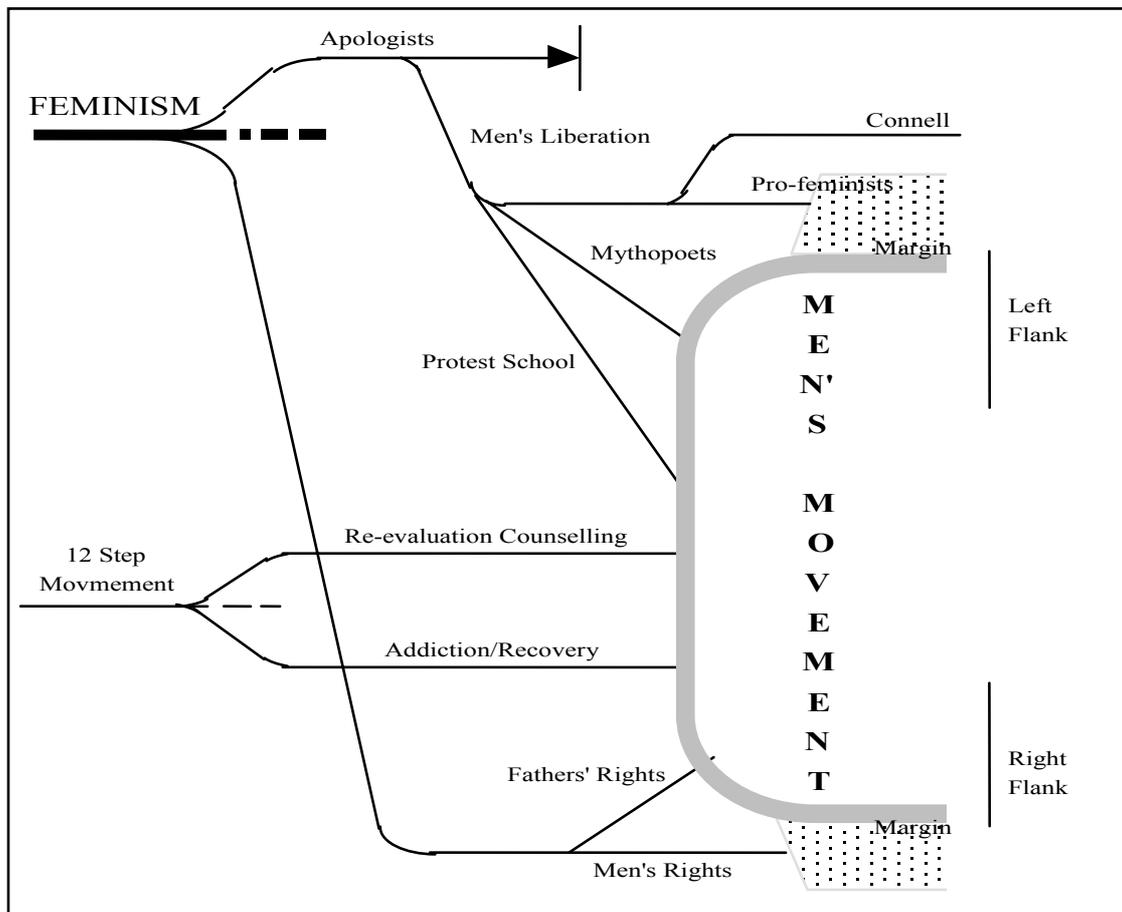


Diagram 1. The major strands of the Men's Movement.

The first strand is the Re-evaluation Counselling (RC) school (e.g. Irwin, Jackins & Kreiner 1992), which is singular in that it stays closest to the original feminist concept of developing an ideology through listening to people's actual experiences. RC is a normative school but, because of its philosophical basis, is centrally concerned with inclusiveness. Thus it was possibly the earliest (in the early 1980s) to validate men's actual experiences as individuals, and to record in detail the many mechanisms by which men's emotional lives become stultified. Despite its excellent self-help action model and powerful personal growth tools, this strand has had minimal impact on ideologies of the Men's Movement, perhaps because of its uncompromising (though admirable) normative model and in-house jargon. RC has possibly acted more as a point of entry for men to the Movement, and I include it because of its many cross-overs with other centre-stage Movement structures and ideologies.

The other strand to make up the warps of the Men's Movement is the 'Addiction/Recovery' school. Originating from the conservative 12-step recovery programs of the 1930s, it is often a point of entry to the Men's Movement for men with addiction problems. Because of the age, strength and effectiveness of the 12-step ideology, it has been minimally affected by Men's Movement ideologies, but many Addiction/Recovery workers have contributed much to the Movement, primarily through interaction with the Mythopoeists (e.g. see Lee 1991).

Ideologies of the Men's Movement

With these various strands and their histories as background, I will now outline the programs of action put forward by four major strands, and then highlight the disjunctions and contradictions between them.

Pro-feminist school

This school forms the intellectual arm of the movement, and unfortunately is very weak on programs of action. Its analysis of men's situation is similar to Connell; masculinity holds a hegemony in gender discourse and it is enormously difficult for men to hear that (e.g. Brittan 1989: 204). The Men's Movement has done almost nothing so far: "What has changed is not male power as such, but its form, its presentation, its packaging" (Brittan 1989: 2). In consequence there has been no valid responses from men, except through being allies with women and gays. As such, pro-feminists have been most active in men against violence actions such as Australia's Men Against Sexual Assault (MASA) and Canada's White Ribbon Campaign. In the mean time, the pro-feminists are developing the academic discipline of "Men's Studies" to study men as subjects, not as normative objects (e.g. Brod 1987). Through this work-in-progress, a more complete and complex understanding of the power structure in gender is unfolding.

Mythopoeists

Following Bly (1991), the mythopoeitic ideology says that male identity has to be built by men as a boy separates from mother, unlike the female identity which is 'given' by mother. Thus, for males, the presence in their lives of older men is of central importance. Without this, boys do not become truly adult and spend their adult lives pretending to be men or trying to prove they are men. In Western cultures, the Industrial Revolution was the point at which men were separated from child-rearing, and ever since then the masculine identity has become increasingly fragile and correspondingly violent. The required compensating action for men today is quite clear: connect deeply with other men, especially one's father, connect with the 'deep masculine', find mentors and mentor others, and build deep relationships with children, especially boys.

This is a clear ideology, explaining men's internal conflicts and many social ills, and providing a clear course of action. As such, it has proven enormously popular.

The Protest School

The basic tenet of the Protest School is "enough is enough". Because of men's deafening silence, feminism has had no limits set on it, and is in fact floundering because men are not sharing experiences from their side of the gender fence: "Women do not hear what men do not say" (Farrell 1994). While men have public power, women have private power; men are the disposable sex (Farrell 1994) and "The balance of power may far more complex and flexible" (Thomas 1993; 8) than feminism claims. The program of action covers basically two fronts: addressing new feminist-inspired legal inequalities, and ensuring women get the message that men are human with understandable emotional responses to attack.

Men's Rights and Fathers' Rights

This school starts from the premise that men are basically good people - they have "sensitivity, generosity, courage, intellect, wit and humour" (Baber 1992: 4), and that the criticisms thrown at men by feminists are undeserved and unfair. The especial focus of this school is the disenfranchisement of men in family litigation. The problem is 'feminazis' taking over the family agenda in the legal arena. As with the Protest School, it is up to men to stand up and prevent this abuse. However, not standing up

for one's rights identifies one as a wimp (Siller 1994, pers. comm. 24 April, New York) and little deserving of sympathy. It is this attitude of ignoring the tremendous social prohibitions on men speaking as ordinary humans which marks the Men's Rights school off from the Protest School.

Conclusion

The Men's Movement is alive and well, not perhaps setting the public arena afire, but moving perceptibly forward and having an increasing impact on an ever-widening circle of men. It is primarily an individual-focused movement, perhaps falling into the change category of "Alterative". Shiffman (1987) claims the pro-feminist school is both socially and individually focused since it operates under the feminist adage that "the personal is political". The same could be said even of the Mythopoets: "the core issue is *facing up to ourselves*, instead of running away or being self-destructive and hurtful to those around us" (Biddulph 1994; 8) alluding to social and domestic violence.

The three main strands, their core ideas, their major goals and strategies are presented in the following table.

School	Idea	Goal	Strategy
Pro-feminist	Inequality	Non-hierarchical gender order	Disrupting current order through alliances with marginalised groups
Mythopoet	Father-hunger	Mature, adult men	Deep connections with other men, and with children
Men's Rights	Affirmation	Highlighting men's positive abilities	Opposing reverse sexism; championing men as fathers and carers

Table 1: Major Ideologies of the Men's Movement

In summary, it seems that in combining all three strands together, a realistic and compassionate picture for men emerges. Men need to stop inhabiting a dominant position, they need to connect deeply with other men, and need to affirm their positive humanity. Possibly the only drawback to the Men's Movement is the deep rifts between the various strands.

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