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The Price Men Pay: Individualism, Privilege and Masculinity

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Abstract

In this essay I explore what is required of men in order to enter the gates of individualism, and what the content of that experience is. Through the lens of social contract theory I look at the ideal Individual's relationship with their body, their relationships with others, and the specifications for equality, and argue that each aspect excises crucial human aspects of experience. Men's bodies become some sort of enemy or protagonist, rather than a source of pleasure, or a means of relating with other bodies. The threat of physical violence if men's body and relational boundaries are transgressed means that men come to learn to deeply distrust and fear feelings of love, affection, and desires for closeness. And the current interpretation of equality divorces men from an awareness of what things in their lives make them the unique, special, and therefore valued, persons that they are. In particular, men are encouraged to delete, mute or ignore stories of what constitutes them as unique in relationships of any sort. I conclude that, while Individualism shapes people with penises to take their privileged places as fully legitimated men and individuals in one of the most powerful and affluent societies of all time, this privilege comes at a horrendous and largely unnoticed cost in simple human terms. While this cost remains structurally obscured, men cannot make informed choices about power or about their lives.

4,500 words

Introduction

For more than two hundred years women have reported experiencing considerable difficulty in being seen as proper persons in the social arena. A core conclusion of feminist theory is that the difficulty primarily arises from the structures of the sites at which personhood is generated in our society, rather than from deficiencies in women themselves.

Further feminist work argued that women are excluded from authorised sites of personhood not only because they are not worthy to be considered as persons but more specifically because they are not men. Into the ostensibly neutral description of what it is to be an 'individual' in this society is smuggled a secret: before any other considerations - you must have a penis. Feminists argue that this is, to say the least, a problematic assumption – which is not noticed by those who are accepted *a priori* as individuals because all such people have a penis and they all know that and so it is not

an especially interesting or relevant issue. In other words, feminism points to a conflation of what it is to be an individual in this society with masculinity, and argues that this conflation has the effect of marginalising women in public social process.

From my point of view, as a straight white middle class man (a “swhim”) who is deeply involved in men’s work and gender change, the possibility that this conflation exists is especially interesting. One question I have explored for over 20 years is why other swhim don’t get involved in gender change. The short answer appears to be that most swhim don’t see any advantage in changing the current gender arrangements. As Bob Connell (1987) says, men receive a “patriarchal dividend”, and even if they want something better for themselves, men can’t seriously make a claim to any sort of liberation of the sort non-whites or women claim, since “the group with predominant social power cannot be liberated.” (Connell 1987; 276) Nevertheless for about 10 years the idea of “masculinity in crisis” has circulated in public discourse. And over the last 5 years there are more and more stories in the press around the theme that “men are hurting”, to the extent that it increasingly appears that predominant social power may still be held by men but somewhere for men there is a lot of pain. Two oft-repeated sources of that pain are isolation from one’s father and the fallout from divorce and separation from one’s children.

In this essay I argue that the sources of men’s pain go far deeper than this. The feminist explication of the link between being an individual in our society and being male allows me to assert that men’s pain does not simply arise because one is a man. The modern Western ideas of social order such as democracy, equality, justice, morality and so on are enacted by very particular and specifically shaped sorts of people. Those people are called ‘individuals’, and come into existence through socially constructed ‘sites of personhood’ in our society: amongst the chief sites are political and moral philosophy, the law, medicine, the workplace and commerce, and marriage and family. This special sort of personhood generated by modern Western societies is, I suggest, riven by internal splits that are deeply painful for men to live through by setting men against themselves, and rely upon habitual emotional stances that are designed to actively inhibit close relationships with others. Thus, I argue, the taking up of ‘masculinity’ and its attendant privileges by those with penises is an inherently painful experience because of the way in which masculinity/Individualism is constructed.

Modern Western society has taken the shape it has partly through what I might call a modern creation myth: the story of the “Social Contract” (Benhabib 1987: 85; Pateman 1988: 5). The social contract was first articulated by Thomas Hobbes in the 1640s, who imagined that, prior to society, there was a “state of nature” in which each man stood alone and defended his property. This state of affairs meant that men couldn’t get on with much else since they were constantly defending their property and themselves from attack – life was, in Hobbes’ famous phrase, “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short”. So they all got together and collectively agreed to create a ‘commonwealth’ that had more power than any of them, so that it was given the power by all of them to create some social order and peace. This collective agreement was called the ‘social contract’, and contains the fundamental idea that people voluntarily agree to be governed by some sort of apparatus that is seen to have the legitimate authority to enforce its will.

Contract theory was a radical social advance at the time, hotly contested because it disrupted the existing monarchy/aristocracy social order by portraying all parties to the social contract as being equal. This radical claim to equality has been the basis for many social advances, notably Marxism and more recently some claims in feminism (Pateman 1988: 14). But contract theory has its drawbacks, not least because it arose out of an existing historical context which already had a shape and a defining set of values. A very significant part of that shape is pointed out by feminists: the parties to social contract are almost always assumed to be male. In what follows I will look at three aspects of how modern Western individualism is constructed, and then reflect upon what these aspects of the institution of Individualism mean in terms of the subjective experience of those who have, for centuries, been expected and, I suggest, coerced to live within its parameters – i.e. men.

Individuals in Their Bodies

Carole Pateman (1988), in her examination of the social contract tradition in political philosophy, finds that all contractarians of whatever hue, meet

...at the idea that, in Locke's famous formulation, 'every man has a *Property* in his own *Person*'; all individuals are owners, everyone owns the property in their capacities and attributes. (ibid; 13)

Pateman argues that this stance of ownership is core to the idea of the 'individual' as a stand-alone unit complete in itself:

The individual's capacities and attributes owe nothing to any other individual or to any social relationship; they are his alone. ... The individual owns his body and his capacities as pieces of property, just as he owns material property. (ibid; 55)

If the individual owns his capacities, he stands in the same external relation to this intimate property as to any other. To become the owner of the property in his person, the individual must create a relation between himself and his property, he must take possession of himself and put his will into his person and capacities to make them 'his'. (ibid; 56)

This extremely detached and distant picture is of course an ideal. But detached though it is, this ideal is a powerful shaping force in society, finding its way into, among other things, the law.

Nicola Lacey (1998) uses a Foucauldian analysis of legal statutes in attempting to pinpoint why rape trials are so unsatisfactory for victims, even when the accused is convicted and jailed. She finds that a major difficulty for activists trying to improve the legal sanctions against sexual crimes of any sort is that the law sees legal subjects as something apart from their bodies, standing in an ownership relation to their bodies. Thus the harm of rape can only be constructed as a property issue: the victim did not give permission for the entry of the defendant to the property of her body. The wrong of rape looks like something between the "expropriation of a commodity and violation of a will." (ibid; 59)

The body that appears in criminal law is thus

... an image of the body as territory, both as bounded space and property; divorced from both reason and emotion, bodies are boundaries which separate autonomous individuals rather than aspects of lived subjectivity through which

people relate to one another. This atomistic view marginalises relational values which one might hope to see criminal law seeking to protect. (ibid; 61)

This view of bodies as boundaries is not confined to the law. Another important social discourse that deals with bodies is medicine. Catherine Waldby (1996) explores how biomedicine creates for us a picture of the ideal human body. The significance of the conception of the body as a property of the self is central to modern ideas of medicine and hygiene. She finds support for the idea that

... the nineteenth century rise of individualism, the concept of the proper body as a singular, self-contained and self-possessed entity, [relates] in part to concerns with the control of epidemic disease. The discourse of hygiene which was addressed to the control of infectious disease strived for an individuation of bodies, their separation in space and their self-containment, because infection was understood to take place when bodies exceed their proper borders and mingle with each other in various ways. (Waldby 1996; 40)

But the bodies under discussion here are not simply human bodies; they are more specifically male bodies. Waldby explores “some elements of the relationship between sexual identity and body boundary” (ibid; 46). She suggests there is a close relationship between the idea of a normal or healthy body and the presence or not of a penis, and uses the term “phallogentrism” to describe this usually unquestioned assumption.

... phallogentrism is a form of homosocial thought which places the phallus at the centre of bodily signification. It specifies sexual difference as absolute, mutually exclusive difference, figured around the possession or lack of a penis, taken to be a phallus. ...

In other words boundary difference is displaced outwards from (imaginary) genital difference. The fantasy of the always hard and ready penis/phallus characterises the entire surface of the male body, whose stable borders, internal hierarchy and integrity correspond to a certain social status. (ibid; 47)

The male body, on this account, is capable of individuating, of differentiating itself from other bodies and creating a stable identity, thus allowing it – and therefore it’s “owner” – to take up a privileged place in the social order. In order to enact this a man must maintain some distance, then, between what he calls ‘himself’ and his body. Lacey points out that, at law, the subject of the law is more or less a mind that lives in a body, or has a body attached to it. She examines the legal idea of the autonomy of the subject – the basis that people are responsible for their actions – and discovers that the law sees autonomy as essentially a mental and rational thing: autonomy is assumed to extend from the self to the self’s body – which leaves the self located more or less as a person’s mind. On this account, bodies come to be seen, not as actual parts of persons but as, in essence, the private property of a mind. (Lacey 1998; 53-54)

Individuals in Relationship

Another hugely significant impact of the modern Western concept of persons as Individuals and parties to a ‘social contract’ is in the area of relationships and what is considered a proper relationship with others. Again I will go back to Pateman’s work. The modern conception of the social contract assumes that the parties to that contract are stand-alone units:

... the boundaries that separate one individual from another are so tightly drawn that an individual is pictured as existing without any relationships with others. The individual's capacities and attributes owe nothing to any other individual or to any social relationship; they are his alone. The contractarian individual necessarily is the proprietor of his person and his attributes.... The individual owns his body and his capacities as pieces of property, just as he owns material property. According to this view, each individual can and must see the world and other individuals only from the perspective of his subjective assessment of how best to protect his property, or, as it is often put, from the perspective of his self-interest. ... The individual's task is thus to ensure that his property right is not infringed. (Pateman 1988; 55)

This view is borne out above in Lacey's analysis of the law: the wrong of assault – sexual or otherwise – is seen as a violation of property rights. Up until recently, the law made it clear that only men could “own” property: rape law was the infringement of a man's property in his woman. (Lacey 1998; 53)

When the boundaries between individuals are so strictly drawn and individuals are seen primarily as property owners with interests to protect, how and why are relationships with others formed? Pateman again:

... if the individual has no natural relation with any other, then all relationships must be conventional: the creation of individuals themselves. Individuals must will their social relationships into existence. They do this if, and only if, they can protect their property by creating a relationship. A necessary condition of such protection is that each individual recognise the others as property owners like himself. Without this recognition others will appear to the individual as mere (potential) property, not owners of property, and so equality disappears. (Pateman 1988; 56)

Seyla Benhabib (1987) does a similar analysis of the ideal political/moral subject and finds an anxious “mushroom” (ibid; 90), one who has just appeared in the world “not bound by prior moral ties to another” (ibid;89). This self is defined against a similar other, whose interests are antithetical to the first, but who in all other respects is similar.

These readings of contract theory around relationship suggest three conclusions. Firstly, this gives a particular colour to men's relations with women – because women, not being individuals, are potential property. Secondly, it explicates the competitive basis for men's relationships in the public sphere – the need to protect one's self-interest against depredation. These two conclusions together point to why it is that, although men's relationships with women are not of public moment, they are nevertheless psychically vital for many men: relationships with women allow scope for considerably wider range of relational transactions than those sanctioned by Individualism. Thirdly, it suggests an emotional stance that men need to hold in relationships with each other: that of fear, distrust and defensiveness. With this as the emotional atmosphere in which men interact, it is not surprising that men's relationships are relatively limited.

Individuals as Equals

A third problem with Individualism for men is the extent to which Individualism supports the obscuring of men's personal biography and the glossing over of the details of a man's distinctly unique life through deployment of the concept of equality.

Although equality is a cornerstone of modern Western political discourse, at its core is a disturbing paradox. Individuals are all equal but, as Alison Jaggar (1990) argues,

... the idea of sameness is at the core of equality, the idea that people should be treated similarly because they are in some relevant respect alike. But at the same time that it emphasises human similarity, the call for equality may be thought to obscure difference. Equality deliberately turns away from the particularity and uniqueness of individuals and groups in their history and in their daily experience. Rather than responding directly to needs that are perceived immediately, equality abstracts from concrete people in their specific situation. It seeks to resolve conflicting interests by the application of an abstract rule. (ibid; 251)

She goes on to put the claim of equality in an historic context of rigid class and caste delineations, and says that in such situations cries for equality arise spontaneously. This claim must continue to be made for and by people who do not enjoy equality, but beyond a certain point it becomes counter-productive.

In its prevailing interpretations it is [couched in] a language of impartiality and abstraction, a language of rational distance rather than of close connection. It presupposes scarcity and a preoccupation with getting one's fair share. (ibid; 251)

Seyla Benhabib, in the article quoted above, constructs a complex but very effective argument to show that the ideal moral agent is an imaginary abstraction from the actual details and lived experiences of people's lives. She argues that the modern definitions of self are "substitutionalist" in that they "surreptitiously" define a small set of experiences/areas of life as paradigmatic norms for all humanity (Benhabib 1987; 81). Achieving the goal of ensuring that one's life can be described within small set of experiences means that men are enabled to take their privileged places in the public sphere as autonomous and legitimated selves. While this is certainly one outcome, another outcome is that the modern autonomous self is a "disembedded and disembodied male ego" (Benhabib 1987; 95), split off from his body, existing without relationships, divorced from key details about his personal biography, and assumed to have identical morality and values to all other men.

Discussion

In this section I attempt to relate the structural aspects of Individualism outlined above to common aspects of men's subjective experience. I will say immediately that the above portrayals are all symbolic in the sense that they represent only ideals of social and personal organisation but at the same time have a powerful hold upon us. They are of especial relevance for men because, as feminists argue, men are assumed to be individuals. This assumption is extremely powerful in men's lives – we are assumed to be pursuing those ideals as much as we are able to, and in practice we do in fact pursue them. Naturally nobody ever succeeds in meeting the ideal, except momentarily or partially, but I want to say that it is these myths of masculinity and individualism against which we measure ourselves and in relation to which we generate feelings of self-esteem and shame, success and failure as affective and effective members of our community.

Firstly, the splitting of mind and body has profound implications. Along with the idea that the body is controllable is the socially created demand that one's body

must be controlled. I suggest the felt and subjective experience of that split looks something like this: there is “me”, and there is “my body”, which is a thing which must be controlled by “me”. Since “I” am responsible for “my body”, when “my body” does not behave itself, “I” am shamed and am motivated to fulfil my responsibility by attempting to get “my body” to behave. On this account, “my body” becomes some sort of enemy or protagonist, rather than a source of pleasure, or a means of relating with other bodies.

Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth* (1991) argues that conventional ideas of beauty support women to separate from their bodies, and in the process become subject to patriarchal discourses of control which reiterate women’s secondary position. The account I sketch above indicates that a very similar process goes on for men, except that the outcome for men is to reiterate patriarchal notions of men being in control and privileged. The subjective experience is very similar, though the outcome is starkly different: when men gain appropriate control of their male bodies they also gain social status. This raises a personal question for every man: is the cost of this control in terms of shame, humiliation, and inability to experience my body pleasurably worth the outcome? Without solid and accurate information about what the costs are, an informed choice cannot be made.

Secondly, the attitude to relationships suggests that a core skill for men is learning to be able to do things with other men while at the same time remaining wary and ready to defend my ‘interests’. This is an immensely painful stance to hold when I may come to really like or even love some men who I work with and want to get closer to them. If I do not hold these conventional boundaries via my own feelings of fear and distrust, other men will support me to do so by condemning any overtures to further closeness, humiliating or assaulting me, or even killing me. The threat of physical violence if men’s body and relational boundaries are transgressed is palpable in many schoolyards, workplaces and public spaces today. Thus men come to learn to deeply distrust and fear feelings of love, affection, and desires for closeness. It is unavoidable that this distrust and fear shapes all relating with anyone, not just other men, since the experiences in which these emotional habits are formed are so intensely charged. As with the split of men’s self from their bodies, the result is a social status and privilege that comes at the cost of immense pain and relational isolation. And again, for me the same point is relevant: a realistic assessment of the privilege cannot be made without realistic information about the cost of that privilege.

Thirdly, the idea of equality implicit in Individualism supports men to see themselves as the same as all other men, to highlight the commonalities and suppress the differences. The equality principle therefore centres ideas of self-worth for men around what they share with other, similar, individuals. As Benhabib says, this is achieved partly by focusing attention on only a limited subset of experiences, feelings, actions and states. A hugely significant impact of this aspect is to divorce men from an awareness of what things in their lives make them the unique, special, and therefore valued, persons that they are. In particular, men are encouraged to delete, mute or ignore stories of what constitutes them as unique in relationships of any sort, whether public instrumental relationships or private expressive relationships. While many men can tell well-connected and engaging stories of what they “do” in public life, these stories generally revolve around what is achieved, rather than the uniquely carried qualities or experiences that enable men to do what they do.

This approach is also supported by the habits of fear and defensiveness characteristic of relationships between individuals. The disclosure of ‘personal’ qualities or experiences can be felt as making a man too vulnerable to other men. The splitting of identity as an ‘individual’ from many parts of lived experience in order to focus on the ‘equal’ or same bits is also supported by the split of ‘self’ from body: when my body is a ‘thing’, it is not seen as a reliable source of information about my life, and I can develop ways to effectively filter its information flow. ‘Equality’ thus works in with other core aspects of individualism to underpin the inability of many men to ‘share’ about their lives, and to detect body symptoms which may indicate potential serious health problems. Such patterns are not simply men being ‘out of touch’ with themselves or ‘unemotional’. Rather it is an indicator that men are ‘in touch’ with the ideals of individualism, and are working hard to live up to those ideals.

Conclusion

In the early and mid 1970s a number of writers on masculinity proposed the view that men need liberating as much as women do because of the horrendous personal costs of masculinity. In the 1980s however, when radical feminism came to predominate in the gender debate, such a view became unpopular because the extent of men’s privilege was seen as a more immediate issue. A key implication, I believe, of the radical feminist view is, as I discussed in the introduction, Connell’s statement that, structurally, men cannot be liberated; we have as much privilege as possible and to ask for more is simply untenable.

One of the major devices explicated by feminism to account for men’s privilege is the conflating of being a male with being an individual. Naturally feminists examine this structure from the viewpoint of their exclusion from it. In this essay I have attempted a foray into exploring what is required of men in order to enter the gates of individualism, and what the content of that experience is. While, as many writers on the contract tradition make clear, social contract was and remains an epochal step forward from pre-existing forms of social organisation, at the same time the current state of social play is by no means at the point where we Westerners can hang up our overalls and quietly go home with the satisfaction of a job well done. On the contrary, I suggest from this extremely brief review and reflection upon the story of social contract in the modern West, that while Individualism shapes people with penises to take their privileged places as fully legitimated men and individuals in one of the most powerful and affluent societies of all time, this privilege comes at a horrendous and largely unnoticed cost in simple human terms.

That the cost, despite its size, is so difficult to see is explained exactly by the conflation of maleness with individualness that feminists have gone to such pains to point out. When our collective picture of the normal person is someone with a penis who is disconnected from their body, from those around them, from most of their emotions and a from a deep sense of their own unique value, then when we experience ourselves as men like this and see other men around us in this state, we naturally consider it ‘normal’. The internal splits, the constant defensiveness, the lack of connection with self are not noticed; they are not even seen as problems. Quite the reverse: they are seen as natural, as “how everyone is”, as the norm – in the same way that, up until feminists pointed it out, women were irrational not because they were ‘naturally’ irrational but because ‘woman’ is created irrational by social structure.

Unlike women and other marginalised groups, however, the payoff for the costs of masculinity is considerable power and privilege for swim. It is thus untenable to reject the payoff because the cost is too high – the payoff gives swim socially legitimated validation as full members of society. Rather, I suggest that a better approach is ‘informed choice’: when we know what it will cost us, we can choose the extent to which we subscribe to the statutes of individualism, masculinity and their attendant privilege. We may choose to have some privileges and reject others. Or we may choose to take up privileges in specific ways that enable us to better manage the costs. But choice implies more than one enactable and legitimated option; currently there are no other legitimated options for people with penises than to be “men”, and so an immediate task must be the creation and legitimation of other ways of being that have sufficient access to core social resources such as respect and safety.

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