

# GENDER INCLUDES MEN: AN EXPLORATION OF FEMINIST THOUGHT ON MASCULINITY / ANN SNITOW

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As you have probably heard, the political atmosphere in the United States has, in the last few weeks, taken a huge turn, and pointed us in a new direction. What the protesters now occupying a square near Wall Street are saying is not new. Since Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980, many of us have been criticising all of it: unregulated markets, cuts in all public spending, the consolidation of US wealth in very few hands.

So, what, then, is new? The financial crisis has now affected almost everybody in the United States, changing everyone's life expectations or hopes for a secure old age. In this time of crisis, Occupy Wall Street has revitalised and popularised common Left criticisms of our oligarchy and the conservative, right-wing government that supports the very rich. Now, finally, these obvious critiques can be *heard*, and *felt*, and *recognised* as urgent; the insight that the US government and economy have taken a wrong direction is now shared by a large majority of Americans. The slogan of the protests is 'we are the 99%'. 1% of Americans have almost all the wealth, and we, the vast, varied majority are suffering – lost jobs, lost homes, poor education, blighted future prospects, no pensions, no health insurance, no welfare safety net.

While I've been going around, giving talks about the importance of Occupy, people keep asking me – presumably because I am the feminist activist and theorist – 'Is feminism a part of these new protests?'

In answer I find myself saying 'Feminism isn't the main point here. To succeed, we must forge a partnership among differences, a shared enterprise. Women and men need to struggle towards inhabiting some kind of shared political ground.' Does this shift in emphasis sound familiar to any of you here today?

If you are old enough to remember those East/West conversations feminists had in then Czechoslovakia in the early 1990s, you will remember that this is exactly what many Czech and Slovak women said to that horde of Western, mostly American feminists who descended on the country around 1991, twenty years into their own history as activists. Prague, in particular, was more burdened with US visitors like me than any other Central European city. Pushing back against what felt like undue and officious influence, the Czech theorists I met offered their many visitors two paradigms to describe their relationship to feminist movements outside the former communist bloc. Some argued: 'We are behind. Be patient. Let us catch up.'

Others argued: 'We are different. Leave us to develop our own feminist thought in our own way.'

In either case, Czech feminists were saying: 'Please listen. We are in a different situation with a different history of women's considerable public participation behind us. The particular alienation we experienced between the sexes has hurt us, made men and women unhappy strangers. What we want now is partnership to build a post-velvet revolution world.' In these Czechoslovak discussions, a theme arose that had a different emphasis and vocabulary from any other women's movement I was visiting in the region at that time. Feminists were telling me that their deepest concerns were about the feeling of abjection among men. They repeatedly stressed the deep damage done to men in the old – and now, the new – structures of social meaning and success. One of the most important subjects of Czech feminist work was men.

Today we gather at a moment of 20th anniversaries. The little NGO I helped found, the Network of East-West Women, is 20 and so is the Prague Gender Studies Centre. And now I can finally say, 'Yes, I get it'. I am now where you were then. I want feminism to be part of a national project to reshape political values and priorities. But what does this mean? What are the structures, the dynamics, the daily experiences of men and women as they struggle to share national space?

Czech and Slovak Gender Studies researchers have been in the forefront of the theoretical and political consideration of masculinity for 20 years. Some of these fascinating studies have been empirical efforts to understand the daily, lived constructions and emotions of masculinities. Others have been theoretical, often deconstructive accounts of maleness. In whatever mode, this work has been revealing and politically suggestive, offering feminists everywhere important models for the field.

Here I'll give but one example to indicate the versatility and flexibility and inventiveness of the study of masculinity in Czech and Slovak Gender Studies. When I first began talking to Iva Šmídová in the 1990s, she was working on making a Gender Studies curriculum. Her plan was to have one semester about men, one about women. I asked, what if all the men take 'men' and the women take 'women'? Her answer struck me as a case of practical genius: one can't get credit for the course unless one takes *both* halves, men and women. In one stroke, Dr. Šmídová established, first, that gender studies is about *both* genders; second, that the gen-

ders are mutually constitutive and don't ever stand as solid, separate entities; and finally, that this border between is socially and psychologically unstable. As the course evolved, so too did masculinity and femininity as concepts, thus developing a social history beyond biology.

Šmídová had taken that so common question of Czech and Slovak feminists to their early visitors – 'But what about men?' – and had begun constructing some methodological tools to examine this question. In her early research, she studied Czech men who were resisting the new, driven, success-mad masculinity of neoliberal marketisation (Šmídová 1999, 2009). While many men were reproducing earlier traditional forms of maleness, she was identifying some genuinely alternative male pathways; some men were refusing to compete within the new, often corporate, models of post-communist masculinity.

It seemed to me then that Iva Šmídová's work represented the Czech insight that it is a centrally important research problem to confront the conflicts and dramas of masculinity in order to recognise men's new challenges and to recognise, too, that some men resist new forms of male dominance and hegemony. In other words, I saw Czech work on men as arising from sympathy, recognition, and respect, from a sense that maleness was an important area of study – and of potential social change. Men differed in the choices they were making, an insight that undermined any monolithic reading of maleness in the chaos of transition.

So, when I turned to Šmídová's more recent studies of men who are present at the birth of their children (Šmídová 2011a, 2011b), I expected that she would find at least some cause for celebration – a picture of men joining women in partnership, mutual recognition, mutual care for the new baby.

But, not at all! In fact, looking closely, attentively, Iva Šmídová's research uncovered:

- 1) men who were adventure tourists, excited voyeurs at the birth;
- 2) men who chose to interpret the situation by seeing their women as helpless victims who needed their protection;
- 3) men who were horrified by the power and intensity of birth and encouraged their partners not to scream and scare them to death;
- 4) men who took charge and told their wives what to do; these men were coaches, managing a team effort, in which they cast themselves as the chief actors;
- 5) men in white coats who were really in charge, the doctors, who made the medical decisions.

I find current Czech feminist theory to be particularly well positioned both to deconstruct masculinity, identifying its instabilities and contradictions, and, at the same time, to recognise how persistent male status regimes remain, how hard they are to dismantle. The father is now there at 70% of births – an amazing change, the fall of a taboo – but he is usually projecting and enacting various forms of ap-

propriation of what women do. He is still living in the old imaginary of male/female interaction, failing to empathise with his partner. There is a real opportunity for change here, new ways for men to support women, but resetting the terms of mutual recognition and regard is a psychological and social process fraught with difficulty for both men and women. We are now at the border between scholarship and politics – where this conference strives to place us.

At this point I'd like to introduce a concept I'll call 'the gaps'. These are not tensions or contradictions reflected in debates. By 'gaps' I mean blank spaces – unrecognised, outside any debate, undertheorised. I'm going to give just a few examples of how further analysis of a set of gaps between He and She in the Czech Republic and Slovakia might clarify matters and push feminist studies and political work on masculinity into new channels. We feminists desire men and women to cooperate in love, family, work, and state, but achieving such non-hierarchical structures is elusive.

### Gap #1: Treasured Forms of Unity

I'll call this gap the space between individual interests and goals, and group survival. Do they really need to be in contradiction? For example, many have written of the fragility of Czech and Slovak national identities and the necessity of communal action. Here I obviously can't recount the Czech history of facing very real threats, of domination from outside, of the ever-looming possibility of national humiliation. At times it has been argued both by feminists and their antagonists that the need to maintain the nation has muted contradictions between men and women. In other words, shared national need pulls people together, superseding any gender divide.

Surely, there is much truth to this. Yet, it leaves a gap, a missing step in recognising the structure on which this kind of shared national pride and group self-defence depends. In an elision that is not enough recognised, this strong national unity is ultimately associated with men; men must be strong and dominant, because otherwise the nation will be weak.

We have just had a stunning example of this slippery slope in nationalist imagery in the United States. After the attacks of 11 September 2001, a right-wing commentator addressed feminists angrily, saying: 'You see, you feminists, we need national strength and protection now. You made a big mistake "defanging men".' (Faludi 2007)

In other words, feminism weakens the nation. Feminism is divisive. The only *safe* partnership is the old partnership, where each knows his or her place and traditional responsibility. How inconvenient for such nationalisms that this protective patriarchy is largely dead, and that women can't rely on men or on traditional militarism for safety.

Hana Červinková explores this gap, this fiction of patriarchal security, in her book, *Playing Soldiers in Bohemia* (Červinková 2006). The Czech army is a collection of na-

tional symbols, and the Czech Republic's effort to join NATO is a male performance piece that takes up a significant percentage of the national budget.

As feminists we always argue that the job of building civil and political society cannot be done by military stalwarts alone. But nurturant mothers can't do this work alone either. These two stances are in their extremes either damaging or impotent. Real connections between public responsibility and private care will require a new political sensibility altogether.

In the Czech example, both men and women have lingering memories of enforced passivity and alienation left from the communist years. One path to change might be to face, and seek to close, the gap between men's and women's different relationship to that past, when both men and women suffered powerlessness, though in different ways. Is a community of memory and feeling possible here? Feminists are the ones most likely to ask: Why would a recuperation from this past be a return to patriarchal arrangements, which have shown themselves to be so limiting and dysfunctional?

### Gap #2: Uni-Directional Empathy

I'll call this one the empathy gap. Czech feminists have written eloquently about the damage Czech men have sustained in various stages of modern history. This was a central narrative feminists presented to me when I first came here. In 1991, women in the United States were very angry about the destructive, hegemonic power of our country, where almost all this great political power was concentrated in the hands of men, but this rage seemed ugly and extreme to Czech women who had witnessed the powerlessness of the men in their lives to control the terms of private life or to be public actors in national decisions. Of course, women didn't have these powers of self-determination or public influence either, but no one *expected* them to have power – least of all themselves. Humiliation was more typically male, while women often had covert pride in their knowledge that they were holding everything together.

If your role is to run things, it is humiliating to lose that power. Women were in the right to recognise this gender-specific form of pain.

The gap comes not because men often suffered differently from women, but because empathy about past suffering usually travelled – and seems still to travel – in only one direction, from women to men. Part of a sympathetic female identity is to empathise with men, to notice, to care. But the distortion of women's lives is not similarly grieved over by men.

This asymmetry leads me to the rogue thought that women's traditional role of empathy may be the enemy of gender equality. In other words, to empathise is ultimately to patronise: poor, powerless, incompetent (and, to obliquely include issues of sexuality here, emasculated) men. Meanwhile, men's lack of recognition of how women have been frustrated and thwarted by patriarchy means they too can't recognise the fellow creature in women. Both sexes remain

Other to each other. Both feel their own kind of contempt. And in this empathy gap, equality and mutual recognition are defeated.

Of course, I'm not saying empathy is a bad thing. Rather, women might well decide to empathise a bit less, while men need to learn this important skill, with all its possible political implications, both for policy and for daily life. This idea, that women need to feel sad for men *less*, leads to Gap #3: Less empathy might well make space for more outrage.

### Gap #3: The Anger Gap

It was startling to read the variety of male misogyny expressed everywhere after the Velvet Revolution. Not only were women to step back, but they were to be roundly insulted for any manifestations of power or protest. In this virulent male discourse, rape was a return to nature after an artificial repression; women's continued presence in the public space was a distortion that had rendered women grotesque, or unfeeling, or unhappy.

The men who expressed this rage at women seemed to assume their blithe blaming of women was a healthy gesture of renewal, the happy return of a lost structure of rightful domination. But women's anger in return? Monstrous, arrogant, again a distortion of women's natural character – to endure, to understand, to support others in their ventures out into the world.

Of course, these are only sketches, not scientific descriptions. Only you can say if my 'gaps' resonate with the styles and forms of current conflicts you experience. Where I see repression of female anger, you may see something else entirely – for example, a strength in women that makes such expression of furious frustrations quite unnecessary.

I'll end by returning to Occupy Wall Street. As I've said, when people ask me where feminism is in these newly intense protests, I answer that feminism is not central – and maybe that's okay. What I mean is that, after 40 years, I hope we've bridged the gaps enough so that men and women can join in this protest as genuine partners.

Sometimes this hopeful strategy fails; there were rapes at the encampment, and some women complained of an old problem: men don't listen when women speak. No one is surprised. But I treasure, too, a wonderful vision: One night at the encampment I saw many men with brooms and buckets of soapy water scrubbing down the cement pathways of the park. Perhaps it was merely a public performance, more heroic than cleaning floors at home. But, still, to my eyes they were – as you so often seem able to see them – beautiful. With you and with us, the struggle continues. A knowledge of each other's feminist strategies and histories enriches what we do.

### Postscript: Four Years Later

As I write this postscript in 2015, Occupy is dying down, but it has left its strong mark on our politics. And, happily, US feminism is experiencing a vigorous revival. Many US



women now seem to feel that the large crises we face – and the parallel, dramatic attacks on women's rights – require some specific gender-based attention and outraged response. Climate change is the burning theme of current politics and feminists claim the critique of male styles of enterprise as their home ground. My students are finding feminism 'cool' and 'sexy' again – quite a pleasant surprise for a grey-haired activist like me.

A generic hatred of men is entirely out of style in this young cohort. But these college age students – male, female, gender queer, or trans – freely express anger at those men who don't struggle to understand their own privilege, who don't join in criticising patriarchal forms of success, progress, and domination. Frequent and passionate feminist protests against male violence are coupled with male/female alliances 'to stop the rape of the Earth'.

In the United States, feminists are finally paying close attention to how masculinities are formed and re-formed, joining a project you have engaged in for decades. Queer thinking and transgender discourses are carrying us far beyond old debates about He or She. Travelling feminism is coming of age, and we are looking at each other's work to gain new insights in an expanding global conversation among feminists. The Czech work on masculinity is now a shared discourse, foundational and useful to us all. For feminism, it's a promising time.

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