

Everybody wants to be a manager: On masculinity, microfascism, and the manosphere.

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Abstract The emergence of the manosphere with its online promotion of a blinkered view of masculinity associated with the alt-right, its hostility to feminism and explicit misogyny has been characterized as aberrant in relation to mainstream psychological and cultural values. Partly expanding on Guattari's *Everybody Wants to be a Fascist*, this paper argues that there is instead a profound continuity between the two. They both share an ideology of resilience: a misleading notion dominating current representations of masculinity. They both share the ideology of dataism, i.e., the view that the world can be reduced to abstracted data and measurable logic. They both share practices of microfascism, i.e., a yearning for more management, order, and control in relation to the intrinsic ambivalence of being human. In our post-civil rights era of identity politics, white 'injured' masculinity masquerades as a 'different' and 'marginalized' identity in relation to which the bland slogans of woke capitalism and woke consumer-culture present no real opposition. At present, most cultural representations of masculinity are essentialist. Can psychotherapy theory and practice help construct new representations of masculinity as performative, fluid, and as a turning point to a deeper form of inquiry?

Going down, going under

Personal experience of men's work, first as a participant in the early 1990s, and later as a facilitator, has alerted me to a rather disturbing trajectory. At the origins of men's work, the influential mythopoetic work of Bly, Hillman, and Meade (Bly et al, 1993) had at its core *katabasis*, from the Greek *Katá* (down) and *Báino* (go), representing the necessary process of a man's *descent*: a 'going under', a journey to the land of mourning – the mourning of absent fathers the world over, the mourning of one's own sense of direction and purpose as a man – which alone could prevent and/or cure the onset of unremitting melancholia. In its original acceptance, *katabasis* is not allied with any of the notions prevalent today in a culture arguably permeated by neopositivism. It is not resilience, that equivocal term popularized by Positive Psychology and eagerly embraced by neoliberal culture at large. It has also little to do with the trauma industry and its reductive understanding of attachment theory and addiction (Bazzano, 2021). Finally, *katabasis* is not allied to a *politics of injury* which classifies individuals and

entire communities on their trauma alone rather than their ambitions and their humanity (Estes, 2019).

Katabasis is a term rich in meaning: Socrates used it when referring to his journey away from Athens to the port city of Piraeus. Katabasis also denotes, among other things: a sobering of tone from the shady peaks of cunning rhetoric; the sinking of the sun or the wind; a military retreat and, crucially, a journey to the underworld. In the men's work of the 1990s it often meant a journey to the land of sorrow, of eating ashes, of suffering on one's own skin the irremediable limitations of being a mortal body laden with the heroic demands of having to perform as a 'real' man. It retranslated and condensed several ancient mythologies – Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Greek, Roman, Japanese – and fused them with contemporary anxieties. It felt crucial then that this delicate and often painful process should be experienced first-hand, with the help of a mentor or the group of men engaged in creative ritual space, in storytelling, in the communal expression of poetry and of personal struggle, rather than vicariously, through dependence on someone else's wisdom, including the tender and fierce wisdom of women. Descent, going down, going under: the notion of katabasis implies there may be considerable value in failure – a counterintuitive, even countercultural position particularly at a time when the archetype of the 'loser' is more reviled than ever in a culture hooked on ascensional success. There may be considerable value in the experience of defeat, as many writers have testified, from Christopher Hill's seminal study of Milton (Hill, 2017) to T.J. Clark's reflections on the contemporary Left (Clark, 2012), to Aeschylus (2009) who in the *Persians* invites compassion for the Persians defeated by the Athenians.

Unlike positivist and neopositivist narratives such as that of 'resilience', katabasis implies in its best expression an embracing of the tragic dimension of existence, with the tragic understood as the very enigma of existence rather than mere horror. It potentially implies appreciation of the wayward ways in which individual and collective destiny moves. Crucially,

it is removed from the present infantilization of human needs in the language of politics and in the language of psychotherapy alike. Taking on board the lessons of katabasis might mean constructing a psychotherapy in a tragic key rather than in obeisance to the dictates of ‘mental health’. In this sense, the trajectory of men’s work over the last three decades uncannily reflects the trajectory of psychotherapy as a practice and a culture. There is a world of difference between journeying to the underworld in the attempt to sanitize it and descending to that realm in order to learn. The initial stirrings of men’s work were in my experience all about receptivity and humility about the depth of learning present in sadness, mourning and in the eventual loss of a naïve ideal of manhood. Current men’s work is overall about controlling and managing those very same deep feelings. A parallel process has taken place in mainstream psychotherapy: the unconscious has been variously ignored, reified, and pathologized. What was glimpsed for a brief moment in early men’s work was that darkness could be a place of enlightenment rather than an experience to be mastered. It was all about facing one’s demons, rather than facing them down. Even the bravest of men shudder, as the stoics (Seneca, 2008) are fond of reminding us. The ‘best’ men are the ones who can shudder openly. And there is more: from Emily Dickinson’s letters we learn that shuddering is a sure premonition of poetry as much as of pain, a deep act of imagination and an emotional affair as much as a muscular reaction to a pain that is yet to happen:

If I read book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know that is poetry ... if I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry (Dickinson, cited in O’Leary, 2021)

I would go one step further and suggest – perversely perhaps – that Katabasis is in fact a necessary form of self-destitution, understood as a finely honed technique of the self, a practice that, in a Foucauldian sense, constitutes the self (Foucault, 1984). Another way of thinking about the value of feeling and expressing vulnerability, especially but not solely in a man, comes from the Zen tradition. This is illustrated by Pat Enkyo O’Hara, who, at some point during her Zen Buddhist training with Taizan Maezumi Roshi at Zen Mountain Center in the San Francisco Jacinto Mountains, was in charge of the

altars. One day, the ancient wooden cup she was carrying fell from her hands and cracked horribly. She was very upset: the cup was so beautiful, and she knew the Zen centre was far from rich. She went to her teacher and promised to replace the cup. Roshi's reply was: 'Look at the cup, Enkyo; it's more beautiful now than it was before.'¹³ Alongside Shunryu Suzuki, Taizan Maezumi Roshi (1931-1995) led the way in transmitting genuine Japanese Zen to the west. The episode took place at a time when Maezumi had been publicly humiliated and abandoned by many of his students, following scandals about his drinking and related indiscretions. And yet, O'Hara writes, "here he [was] still teaching, still doing this work, and he [was] more valuable after all those scandals than he was before... I just saw the beauty of our humanness through him"

From katabasis to moralism

For a while at least, texts like *Iron John* (Bly, 1990) and *The Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart* (Bly et al, 1993) captured the zeitgeist. They answered the tangible need (especially, in my view, for men weakened by their own obsequiousness to the female archetype, or variously disoriented by the ingestion of one stimulant too many and by too much Jungianism) to 'man up' in more intelligent ways than what the collective imaginary inherited from the 1980s could ever provide, a decade which gifted neoliberalism to the world. Neoliberalism later appropriated, alongside just about any innovative idea and practice produced in earlier decades, the soft power of mythopoetic work and sold it back to us through the faux naiveté and the arguably malignant obliviousness of *Facebook* culture. (Bazzano, 2019). There are antecedents dating back a long time, for it could be argued that one of the key mythical figures who announces civilization is an insecure and 'soft' young man named of Jason, the hero who acquired the Golden Fleece through scheming, cool rationality, and treachery towards Medea. His great achievement is that his cruelty is cloaked in sensitive language. Similarly, the touchy-feely interface of Facebook hides what is really running the show: algorithms and the greedy dictates of the market.

Was the mythopoetic project doomed from the start? It would be ungenerous to say so, especially considering how useful and inspiring it has been for me at a crucial point in my life. To this day, I do find myself working with young male clients who have benefited from those insights and understood the confusion and sadness of their experience as a necessary step towards greater psychological maturity.

Perhaps mythopoetic men's work relied too heavily on the notion of the absent father, whose factual and/or symbolic re-enactment and restorative presence through mentorship and psychical/communal work could repair what did not need repairing in the first place. Perhaps excessive reliance on familialism as well as on Jungianism meant that the project remained moored within traditionalist rather than transformative psychological work. Yet the spark and inspiration experienced by those of us involved in men's work was very real. The rare, precious mixture of vulnerability and strength was and remains valuable. And it is miles away from what is taking place now in current manifestation of masculinity. The fact that a psychologist such as Jordan Peterson should nowadays be an inspiration for several young men, some of them involved in men's work, should give pause for thought. There are differences, as well as similarities between the men's groups of the 1990s and current incarnations. Let's have a look at differences first.

Early on in his first book, *Hölderlin and the Question of the Father*, Laplanche (1961/2007) traces the poet's depression in Jena, during a crucial phase of his life, stating that while Hölderlin rightly perceived the difficulties he experienced "in terms of maturation, of passage ... [his reflections are] completely permeated with Kantian philosophy" (p 19), tarnished with a moralism and sternness that is evident in his letter to his brother of 21 August 1794 where he rather earnestly writes:

It is through incessant activity that one matures into a man, through striving to act out of duty, even if it brings little joy with it and appears a petty duty, one matures into a man; by denying one's desires, renouncing, and overcoming he selfish part of our nature (cited in Laplanche, 2007, p. 19).

While Hölderlin's stance is entirely reasonable (a degree of austerity certainly assists the passage to adulthood), his "Kantian legalism is a totally inadequate mode of expression for his thinking": it is at variance with his own organismic proclivity "towards a much more holistic and naturalistic idea of individual fulfilment". Kantian moralism, let alone "a too-narrowly conceived Kantian moralism" (Laplanche, 2007, p. 19) is inadequate in helping a man develop, and realise what Hölderlin in his letters repeatedly refers to as *Bildung*, the drive to give shape to oneself. Setting 'naturalism' against 'morality' in this rather generalized way does not imply that the former is devoid of duty, but that it entails a different responsibility directed at "knowing one's own nature and needs, the necessity of 'nourishing [one's] heart and mind" (Laplanche, 2007, p. 20), rather than obeying to the voice of an interiorized sergeant-major spouting categorical imperatives. These two wholly different forms of answering the inner necessity of becoming a man neatly represent in my view the difference between the early men's work on the 1990s and contemporary men's work. The mythopoetic work of Bly and others emphasized working with soul, organism, naturalness. It echoed somewhat the ethos of a humanistic, archetypal psychology open to experimentation, exploration, and the inevitable pitfalls. Contemporary men's work, on the other hand, appears to regressively fall back on a self-punitive, moralistic call to duty, steeped in that very same patriarchal worldview which decades of psychotherapy worked hard at deconstructing.

Dataism

There is a wider, multifaceted cultural and political context within which the shift outlined above can be understood. The following example may be useful. Google engineer James Damore was famously fired in August 2017 for writing a memo which stated that women are by nature less capable to sustain high-powered, high-stress jobs in technical employment. He gained instant status as hero of the alt-right and the manosphere (i.e., online forums, blogs, and websites promoting misogyny in the name of noxious and regressive notion of masculinity),

was feted by the likes of Jordan Peterson, Milo Yiannopoulos and others, and ludicrously yet interestingly compared to the fifteenth century theology professor Martin Luther for standing up against Google's 'Vatican' (Little & Winch, 2020). In addition, he was also flattered by the liberal press who predictably pop-psychologized and explained away his views in terms of his autism (Lewis, 2017).

Posted in a webpage studded with endorsements to books written by his heroes Steven Pinker and Jonathan Haidt (<https://firedfortruth.com>), Damore's memo makes for a fascinating read. It eulogizes evolutionary psychology, a discipline critiqued by many feminist writers for defending and biologizing patriarchy (e.g., Buller, 2005; hooks, Internet file; Grossi et al, 2014). It draws on sources such as the so-called new atheism movement, "an online subculture that moves between islamophobia and hyper-rationality" (Little & Winch, 2020, p. 53) inspired by authors such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and others. Damore berates a generic "dominant ideology" and its biases for "preventing honest discussion". The core of the argument is that "men and women biologically differ in many ways [and these] differences explain why we don't see equal representation of women in tech and leadership". Biological differences between men and women are "universal across human cultures". He goes on to say:

[Biological differences] have clear biological causes and links to prenatal testosterone. Biological males that were castrated at birth and raised as females often still identify and act like males. The underlying traits are highly heritable. They're exactly what we would predict from an evolutionary psychology perspective (<https://firedfortruth.com/>)

A recently published study by Ben Little and Alison Winch (2020) painstakingly traces a coherent linear continuum and the similarities not only between Damore and Google, but also between views uttered in the manosphere and the overall ideology propagated by Google. The name of this ideology is *dataism*, the belief that the world and human experience within it can be reduced to quantifiable data and decontextualized information. Like all corporations, Google champions diversity (<https://www.google.com/diversity/index.html>), while some of its

employees invariably tell a different story, speaking of Silicon Valley as segregated valley (e.g., Wong, 2017). More to the point, Google's feat arguably consists in taking to a different level the dot.com neoliberalism denounced years ago by Barbrook & Cameron (1995) in their seminal study of the Californian Ideology, in their view a successful example of "Jeffersonian democracy [morphing into] a hi-tech version of the plantation economy of the Old South" (ibid). The seeming innocence and neutrality and data betrays at close scrutiny underlying and flagrant biases which propagate misogyny, racism, and a lopsided view of masculinity.

Data is not neutral – it is always an applied form of knowledge gathered (i.e., removed from context) and organised in specific ways. So not only is data radically decontextualized knowledge, but it is also constantly being recontextualized in the service of finding solutions to problems (Little & Winch, 2020, p. 56).

While data may be useful in other contexts, it is invariably inadequate and misleading when describing human experience, including the understanding of complex notions such as gender. The decontextualization and recontextualization constantly at work in the way a corporation such as Google-Alphabet operates favours and augments existing racialized patriarchal constructs. It also provides, at this historical conjuncture, consistent support for the alt-right online network. There appears to be a continuum between the two: while the tech industry is set apart and ranked along the lines of race and gender by "formal and informal work practices", in online (sub)cultures these exclusionary practices are exaggerated and amplified, harnessing ... hyperbolic language" (ibid, p. 58). The problem is wider and it involves the increased use of Artificial Intelligence (A.I.). An added aggravation is that the use of algorithms, data, and cloud designs depends entirely on the use of minerals and other resources necessary for building the computer components (Crawford, 2021). While it is useful to advocate the value of human compassion, intelligence, and creativity alongside a healthy revulsion of a technological take-over, it is important to remember that biases, including gender biases, are *introduced* into AI systems, as recent studies have shown (e.g., Chesterman, 2021). Facial recognition systems, for instance, were found to fail to "identify gender just 1 percent of the

time when the subject was a white male”. However, “when the subject was a darker-skinned female ... the error rate was nearly 35 percent for the third” (Halpern, 2021, p. 30). For these reasons, it is not unreasonable to conceive of tech culture as providing a fertile ground for the manosphere and there exists a continuum between the two.

Microfascism

This continuum echoes to some extent the one between two ‘entities’ which are often examined separately: the domain of *money* – the economy as it is conventionally understood – and the domain of *desire* – the libidinal economy. A set of theories and practices attempted in the 1930s and the 1960s to bridge two influential discourses which had offered a sophisticated critique of each: Marxism in relation to capital, and psychoanalysis in relation to the realm of libido. One of the merits of writers such as Guattari – especially his seminal essay *Everybody wants to be a fascist* (2009), and of Deleuze & Guattari (2000; 2005) is to have explained these two seemingly separate domains as one and the same, reconceptualized as the assembling of a necessary micropolitics of desire (detached from fashionable discourses on ‘pleasure’ and its attendant associations with individuation and subjectivity), closely linked to an analysis of microfascism as an expedient way to police/control desire in political/private domains, including a domain that is currently idealized by most therapeutic orientations thanks to the acceptance of the alleged universality of Attachment Theory: the *family*. For Guattari (2009), the tyranny present within family relationships emerges “from the same kind of libidinal dispositions that exists in the broadest social field (p. 156). Similar authoritarian attitudes and dynamics are at work in the family as in public institutions, and “a struggle against the modern forms of totalitarianism can be organized only if we are prepared to recognize the continuity of this machine” (Guattari, *ibid*, p. 162). Men’s work can potentially subvert the dominant role assigned to men by a patriarchal social milieu and in this way contribute to emancipation rather

than perpetuation of stale narratives. What is a 'patriarchal social milieu'? In the words of Kate Manne, author of *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (Manne, 2017):

A social milieu counts as patriarchal insofar as certain kinds of institutions or social structure both proliferate and enjoy widespread support within it ... These patriarchal institutions will vary widely ... But they will be such that all or most women are positioned as subordinate in relation to some man or men therein (p. 88).

Despite its tremendous potential, the ways in which men's work has evolved in recent years gives plenty of reasons to believe that it is an expedient conduit for culturally and politically regressive positions.

The punitive turn

And then there is the inevitable twist in the tail. Right at the heart of the rightful indignation animating feminist campaigners the world over during *#MeToo*, some writers have identified the persistence of a questionable enthusiasm for punishment against men and an equally questionable assertion of retribution as a social good. In her persuasive, impassioned, and poetic book *What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About #MeToo*, JoAnn Wypijewski (2020) questions the omission of a critique of capitalism in mainstream feminist argument, the unholy allegiance between liberation and criminalization (she points out that one in two black women love someone who is in jail), and the swift verdict with which too many different behaviours are shepherded into the 'sexual abuse' definition. She questions the glee with which Harvey Weinstein was described in the media and in the popular imagination: 'deformed,' 'abnormal,' 'intersex,' with no balls but a vagina, 'disgusting,' 'scarred,' 'grunting,' with bumpy skin, lumpy semen, 'fat,' 'hairy,' stinking of 'shit, sorry poop,' a beast, unmanned, subhuman and so forth. It would be wrong to blame young activists and their sacrosanct anger for this upsurge of terrible enthusiasm, but Wypijewski doubts that in the victims' rights movements, the sympathetic aspect of the victim may disguise the real purpose of the

campaigns, namely, to affirm retaliation as a social good. It would be interesting to investigate in some depth how much of the above affects how psychotherapy's professional bodies handle ethical complaints. Wypijewski is not alone alerting us to the current resurgence of what Elizabeth Bernstein (2007) called *carceral feminism* and what may be construed as the punitive turn in contemporary conversations about gender. In her book *The Feminist War on Crime*, Aya Gruber (2020) reports that working as a public defender she started worrying that women's criminal law activism had not rendered punishment more feminist but had made feminism more punitive.

Concluding Remarks

Guattari (2009) questioned the established notion, still rife today, that psychotherapy deals solely with so-called private matters (the realm of family and the person), whereas politics addresses the larger social domain. As he saw it, "there is a politics which addresses itself to the individual's desire, as well as to the desire which manifests itself in the broadest social field" (p 155). The formulation of a micropolitics of desire, paired with an analysis of how 'private' and 'public' institutions variously curb, corrupt, and co-opt the emancipatory force of desire led him to a detailed analysis of microfascism. The latter was studied alongside what he called "bureaucratism" (ibid), another effective way in which desire is suppressed and, as present psychological language has it, 'regulated'. We would be wrong, he warned us nearly four decades ago, if we were to believe that fascism has been defeated. It is alive and well through new variants. One of these variants, as the current paper attempted to show, is provided by closely related forms of suppression, be them managerialism, dataism, and excessive reliance on decontextualized and biased knowledge and reading of experience. The overriding illusion in psychotherapy practice as in men's work is that if the complexity and messiness of life could be somehow 'managed' – if everybody could become a successful manager of their

lived experience, things would be better. What is wilfully forgotten is that in doing so we would turn psychotherapeutic exploration into another form of policing.

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