Moving beyond the comfort zone of masculinity politics?

It has lately been a heated debate around gender equality and masculinity politics in Sweden (e.g. Järvklo 2008, forthcoming, Egeberg Holmgren 2011). In this critical stream of research that focuses on men as political subjects of a feminist state reformist agenda, certain discursive constructions have been outlined. In short, these are the discursive threads of a ‘good Man’, Swedishness, middle-classness, whiteness, and heteronormativity. These threads have been thoroughly discussed by feminist researchers, such as Dahl (2005) and Egeberg Holmgren (2011), calling attention to that constructions of good, gender-equal men are relatively harmless and do not actually challenge the underlying structures of classical patriarchy. As my colleague and co-editor Lucas Gottzén discussed in a previous issue of NORMA (Forsberg 2010) this also includes how the concept of hegemonic masculinity tends be fetishized as it is being dispersed through popular and academic use. The emerging critique of the ‘changing men’ paradigm is an extension of queer and postcolonial discussions, how identity constructions are being formed around a discursive set of attitudes that also have had a direct impact on masculinity politics. The latter being part of gender equality politics that have co-constructed a national self-image resting on the mentioned discursive threads. Masculinity politics have first and foremost been articulated as a matter of ‘double emancipation’, entailing that there would be no female emancipation without a corresponding male emancipation. The most important line of research connected to
such an emancipatory objective, in Sweden as well as the other Nordic countries, is the so-called fatherhood research that focuses on men’s parenting and state legislated reforms encouraging men to take a greater responsibility in family life. During the last decades this branch of masculinity studies has become the most influential and has been closely connected to male emancipation. It is through men’s fatherhood that we find the key to how men can improve as a ‘gender’.

It is however no major surprise that the imaginary, as well as the concrete subject of a politics aiming at changing men, has been configured from the core of the Swedish middle class much like the researchers, femocrats, and activists involved in and responsible for pushing masculinity politics forward in the welfare stateism of Sweden. As such they are connecting to a long tradition of reformism and social engineering in welfare politics. Issues around gender equality are a historical and contemporary prominent theme in the welfare stateism of the Scandinavian countries, in particular, Sweden. The famous social reformers Gunnar and Alva Myrdal, known as the architects of the modern Swedish welfare state, made their first attempts to reform gender relations in the 1930s (Myrdal and Myrdal 1934, Myrdal 1938). The inherit tensions in such a project that intentionally produces reform from a middle class perspective is becoming more and more visible as an intersectional understanding of masculinities is increasing with new studies diversifying the field of research. As I have argued earlier (Mellström 2004, 2008, 2009) and as masculinity studies grows both in terms of empirical diversity and geographical distribution we also need to go beyond the comfort zone of masculinity politics, fatherhood and parenting studies of middle-class men. I think this issue of NORMA is a good example of our ambitions of diversifying the research efforts in masculinity studies. In this open issue we present five different articles moving in various directions but that are connected in what possibly might be labelled as different forms of ‘hardcore’ masculinities. These are forms of masculinity that have resisted gendered change and reform, and cling onto traditional patriarchal core values in social communities that exclude women.

Jennie Olofsson’s article ‘Cut out to handle a ladder? Age, experience and acts of commemoration’ deals with probably the most archetypical masculine profession there is, fire fighters. There are few, if any, occupations that carry the same particular symbolic weight of classic masculine heroism. It seems that firemen bring out many interconnecting qualities of ideal manhood such as chivalry and heroism. In Olofsson’s article we come to see how these qualities are celebrated in collective remembering prac-
theses among retired fire fighters. A related form of masculinity in terms of its classical working-class connotations with embodied occupational skills, practical dexterity, and male exclusivity is presented in Jake Alimahomed-Wilson’s article ‘Men along the shore: Working-class masculinities in crisis’. Alimahomed-Wilson’s contribution takes us to the American west coast and the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach where the historically male-dominated occupation of longshoremen now is being challenged in different ways. Alimahomed-Wilson’s portrays a collective crisis of dominant longshoremen’s masculinity, precipitated by technological and gendered workplace changes. In his intriguing article, Alimahomed-Wilson understands masculinity as an invisible social force shaping the collective identity of the longshoremen. This is an identity formed around deeply embodied experiences; the shaping of individual bodies is directly related to labour practices and work. Josefin Eman also addresses the importance of the body as means for ‘successful’ performance of masculine standards in her article ‘Constructing successful old-age masculinities amongst athletes’. In her contribution we come to see how aging bodies can be more or less successful. Rooted in life stories of competitiveness and a good management of individual bodies, Eman skilfully shows how self-images in old age are closely connected to adaptive strategies of a successful aging. In Bo Nilsson’s article ‘Audiophiles: Gender reproduction in a technological “nerd” culture’ we come across another form of masculinity that usually is not portrayed as successful but often turns to be so anyway. Bo Nilsson introduces the reader to the social space of audiophiles, well known to some but totally foreign to others like me. It is a sort of marginal ‘geekish’ masculinity that is portrayed but still rests heavily on the symbolic relation between men, masculinity and technology. Nilsson’s account is also an interesting theoretical contribution in the capacity of using a logics approach to masculinity studies. Finally, Mona Lilja’s contribution to this first issue of the sixth volume of NORMA, ‘Theorizing practice: Understanding resistance against gender-based violence in Cambodia’ presents a political terrain and geographical location less known to many of NORMA’s readers. Lilja analyses programs against gender-based violence (GBV) of four local NGOs in Cambodia. In her fascinating depiction of the encounter between a soft global (western) form of masculinity and a local ‘proper’ version of masculine standards, she also discloses the complexity of a normative ‘changing men’ agenda, not very different from the discursive constructions of masculinity politics in the Swedish welfare stateism. Lilja’s article is thus taking us back to the
problematic tension between reformism and the inherent normative expectations of such efforts, but in a refreshingly novel empirical context. Full circle.

Enjoy!

Ulf Mellström

References


