Editorial: Men, myths, and masculinity politics

The contributions to this issue of NORMA all deal with issues of men and politics, and to some extent also to so-called masculinity politics, that is, politics where masculinity is at the centre (Connell 1995). As within other feminist research, politics have been explored within Critical Studies on Men, partly by studying different men’s movements. Raewyn Connell (1995), for instance, identifies four different men’s movements in the West: masculinity therapy, the gun lobby, gay liberation, and exit politics. We could also add the groups of men that organize themselves around child custody disputes (Autonen-Vaaraniemi 2010, Collier and Sheldon 2006) as well as different forms of Christian men’s groups (Gavanas 2004) to Connell’s examples of masculinity politics. Apart from the gun lobby, all these groupings have had more or less strong representations in the Nordic countries.

Masculinity therapy, or the mythopoeic movement as it is often referred to, has largely been inspired by the American poet Robert Bly, and mainly been occupied with finding of the inner ‘wild man’. For instance, during the 1990s, the therapist Åke Högborg (1992) led Swedish men into the woods to develop their masculinity by shouting, chanting, and dancing to beating drums around the fireplace. In her contribution to this issue, Maiju Woukko explores a somewhat different relation between myth and masculinity. In ‘Sport, body and power: Reassessing the myth of President Kekkonen’ she analyses how the former Finnish president Urho Kekkonen (1900–1986), who dominated Finland’s political scene for several decades, used sports in order to create himself as an ‘invincible Superman’. By using his ath-
letic body he was able to enact himself as a fatherly figure protecting the Finns during the Cold War.

The gay movement has, according to Connell (1995), been the main alternative to ‘hegemonic masculinity’ in the Western world. Also in the Nordic countries LGBT individuals have questioned heterosexual norms and nuclear family ideals. In stark opposition to this we find the ‘ex-gay’ movement that Helle Ingeborg Mellingen explores in “‘It’s all about me having a wound”: Narratives of sexual reorientation and resistance’. She analyses the stories of Norwegian conservative Christian men that define themselves as formerly gay; they see themselves as homosexuals but choose to live in either celibacy or heterosexual relations. Mellingen traces their narratives of so-called conversion therapy, where homosexuality is not seen as pathology but as a result of childhood trauma. Through gender-correction training individuals are supposed to retrieve gender and sex polarity. What is particularly interesting – and to some extent challenging to gender and sexuality scholars – is how social constructionism is used as a resource to define homosexuality as contingent, non-essential, and modifiable.

Jan-Kåre Breivik’s article ‘The Norwegian men’s movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s: Retrospection from men involved’ relates to what Connell (1995) identifies as ‘exit politics’. In his unique contribution, Breivik shows how the Norwegian men’s movement was born in cataclysmic times along a number of other counter cultures, such as the feminist movement. Initially, relations with the feminist movement were good but with time they became more strained. The Norwegian pro-feminist men’s movement was a relatively small short-lived group that disappeared in the early 1980s, partly due to disagreement about political focus.

Studies on masculinity politics, including the contributions to this issue of NORMA, raise a number of questions regarding the relationship between men and politics. For instance, it seems that when men assemble as men with a political agenda they often depart from a relatively reactionary framework, while pro-feminist groups tend to be short-lived. With this track record, is pro-feminist masculinity politics possible or even desirable? In the thought-provoking essay ‘Masculinities, power and change’ Jørgen Lorentzen nevertheless suggests actions for pro-feminist masculinity politics that aim at structural change as well as altering attitudes of individuals. Lorentzen points out a number of important lessons learned from masculinity research that should inform masculinity politics, such as the now widespread notion that masculinity is neither a fixed nor a singular category.
One effect of the plurality and contingency of gender is that it becomes somewhat problematic to talk about ‘the male role’ (‘mansrollen’) or about men’s common experience. Following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) we could understand such political position as ‘molar’, as politics based on an imagined community or identity. Molar identity politics could be effective, and have indeed been crucial for women’s emancipation, but with the critique from black and postcolonial feminism the shortcomings of gathering around a singular common subject have become obvious. Feminist scholars such as Rosi Braidotti (2002) have instead proposed ‘molecular’ feminist politics, politics based on plurality and becoming. Similarly to (white) feminist politics, the problem with pro-feminist masculinity politics is that it has often been based on essentialist notions of male experience that obscure differences between men. The need for molecular masculinity politics is apparent, but the question is whether it is even possible to create molecular masculinity keeping in mind that Man is the example par excellence of molar identity (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). The challenge for pro-feminist masculinity politics is thus not only to be able to understand men as upholding patriarchy, but also to create ‘lines of flight’, to create novel masculinities beyond the molar Man.

Critical Studies on Men could play a crucial role in pro-feminist molecular masculinity politics in at least two particular ways. First, a deconstruction of men’s power has been, and always needs to be, central. As Jeff Hearn (2004) has pointed out, men need to be gendered and at the same time be deconstructed. Second, as Ulf Mellström (2009) has argued previously in this journal, we need an intersectional strategy where different positions and experiences of men are explored and analysed. In the Nordic countries, due to the dominance of the gender-equality project, a critical analysis of gender-equality discourse is central to masculinity studies. At least in Sweden, gender-equality and masculinity politics have been based on white, heterosexual, middle-class experience, which has excluded non-white men by labelling them as less equal than ‘us’ (Dahl 2005). This binary thinking has made gender-equality into something of a myth, depicting Nordic men as inherently gender equal (cf. Järvklo 2008). As Roland Barthes (1972) points out, myths obscure social processes by depicting problematic relations as ‘facts’ and making them into natural and eternal values. I would argue that the myth about the Nordic gender-equal man is sustained in a number of ways, including the following four mechanisms.²

First, pointing out other men as oppressive could sustain the myth of one’s own gender equality. One example is the ‘selective culturalization’ of sexuality and gender equality that Åse Røthing and Stine Svendsen (2011) identify in the Norwegian educational
system. In textbooks and daily school life, notions of what is typically Norwegian are connected to gender-equal and progressive notions of sexuality. Homophobia and gender inequality fall outside Norwegian values and are instead connected to other ethnic, cultural and religious groups. In this way tolerance is used to exclude and create a stereotypical other.

Second, myths could be sustained through what Barthes (1972) has called ‘inoculation’. This includes recognitions of unintended misdemeanours that obscure greater principal problems. Mechanisms of inoculation have been identified among whites that want to distance themselves from racism (Farough 2004, Sandoval 1997). Through pointing out individual prejudice it is possible to distance oneself from racism and obfuscate own discriminating practices. Inoculation is also at work in relation to gender and masculinity. Gender discrimination and misogyny in organizations could for instance be depicted as the acts of individual men. By isolating these acts problems are moved from organizational culture to deviant individuals. By depicting misogyny as something individual ‘bad eggs’ do, structural gender injustice is obscured.

Third, myths could also be created through ‘dehistorization’, that is, by placing oppression in previous historical times (Barthes 1972), for instance, by emphasizing women’s oppression as anachronistic to a contemporary order where gender equality is supposedly already achieved. Dehistorization could also include recognition of past injustice, as when governments declare their responsibility of previous mistreatment of indigenous groups. The dilemma with such declarations, Sara Ahmed (2004) argues, is that at the same moment as the oppression is admitted it is also placed in history and, consequently, beyond the speaker’s control. The paradox is that the acknowledgement releases the speaker from responsibility.

Finally, I would like to mention the importance of self-awareness in creating the gender-equal myth. Self-awareness regards being self-critical about one’s dominant position, but implicitly it is also a declaration of being gender equal. This is particularly important to discuss since many masculinity scholars are white, heterosexual, middle-class men, and thus a part of the norm that we put ourselves to examine (Edenheim 2009). As Ahmed (2004) points out, self-awareness positions ourselves as ‘good’ individuals able to place ourselves beyond norms and oppression, and by this Critical Studies of Men could contribute to the myths that we aim to deconstruct.

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The following argument is further developed in a forthcoming book with Rickard Jonsson.

References


