From masculinity politics to a politics of intimacy and vulnerability?

Much of our scholarly efforts in masculinity studies, and gender studies in general, are directed towards thinking differently and in new ways of conceptualising gender binaries (Grosz 1999, Sandberg 2011, Shildrick 2009). In line with such an emancipatory agenda and knowledge pursuit, a new generation of masculinity studies scholars, and feminist scholars more generally, have, in the Nordic context, come to question the fundamentals of a gender equality politics that increasingly have been emptied of any radical potential for change. Gender equality politics has, according to its contemporary critics (see for instance, eds. Eduards et al. 2012), gradually changed from a transformative political tool for change to a status quo bureau- and techno-cratic instrument for the present day neoliberal politics in the Nordic countries. In masculinity studies we have in the last years seen a series of books and PhD dissertations (cf. Egeb erg Holmgren 2011, Sandberg 2011, Ericson 2011, Gottzén and Jonsson 2012), that similarly problematise the hetero- and ethnonormal gender equality paradigm, that has been so dominating in a Nordic welfare state context as well as proposing alternative routes to an emancipatory gender and sexuality politics. With a point of departure in these critiques, based in a Swedish context, and other sources of inspiration I would like to briefly point to some lines of thought in relation to a broader inclusive basis for masculinity politics, moving in the direction of a politics of intimacy and vulnerability, before introducing the articles in this issue of Norma.
To cut a long story short with regard to how the Swedish and Nordic gender equality politics have developed over the last ten to fifteen years, it seems that we now have reached the limits of the previous paradigm/s. Egeberg Holmgren (2011, 62, my translation) states that:

…the binary and normative points of departure of the gender equality project, risks, not only, to contribute to reproducing power regimes, but also to potentially de-radicalise feminism as it is being co-opted into the state bureaucracy, on the premises of the gender equality project.

Egeberg Holmgren is one of these researchers that lately has outlined the discursive frames of a hegemonic masculinity politics in the Swedish context as well as pointed to the respective inclusionary and exclusionary mechanisms of that project as it has been articulated and practised in the history of the Swedish welfare state. In a similar vein, Gottzén and Jonsson (2012) have directed attention to how the myth of the ‘good’ gender equal man, within the Swedish gender equality project, has produced processes of dichotomisation and ‘othering’ in relation to men (and women) of colour and non-hetero men. These critical voices have pointed to how heterosexuality, able-bodiedness and Nordic-ness have been the taken for granted conceptual basis for the Swedish gender equality project. It has also been the taken for granted theoretical premises of much masculinity studies in the Nordic context.

This is not surprising since the political and discursive frame of a politics of masculinity, as it has been articulated within the Swedish and Nordic context, has been 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 have been the so-called fatherhood research that focuses on men’s parenting and state legislated reforms that urge men to take a greater responsibility in family life. It is through men’s fatherhood that we find the key to how (heterosexual) men can improve as ‘gender’. The emancipation of men has been visualised, and still is, through an active and equal parenthood (see also Mellström 2009). As such, gender equality politics has, not surprisingly, mainly been a heterosexual, white, middle class project. Recent work in masculinity studies inspired by queer and postcolonial perspectives, among others, has now productively delineated the discursive limits of this project. As this brings us to a
sort of discursive end in terms of an emancipatory imaginary, it also opens up for thinking differently beyond what Egeberg Holmgren calls a hegemonic masculinity politics.

In Foucauldian terms, and in line with Andersen (2011), I would like to advocate and understand such a rethinking in the light of a general reconfiguration of intimacy and an increasing multiplicity of forms for desire, lust and passion. With a certain ironic twist we might (again), in masculinity studies, return to non-hetero forms and structures for desire in order to shed light on the dominant forms and regulations of sexuality and intimacy, and how these are intimately, in the double meaning of the word, connected to the heterosexual couple as the legitimate form for the sexuality order (Andersen 2011, 5). Thus, men desiring men seems to be a recurrent analytical entrance in the understanding of hetero men’s conventional intimacies and sexual politics, and also pointing to new ways of configuring emancipatory challenges in masculinity politics. Hence, it is an undercurrent of arguments that seem to recur with a certain periodicity. For instance, Lee, Carrigan and Connell, in their classical 1985 article Toward a new sociology of masculinity, write:

Gay Liberation politics have continued to call in question the conventional understanding of what it is to be a man[...] The gay movement has been centrally concerned with masculinity as part of its critique of the political structure of sexuality (1985, 551, 584).

In a recent work by Sandberg (2011, 253) on old age, sexuality and masculinity she writes: ‘My work suggests that intimacy was indeed central to the shaping of these men’s sexual subjectivities and that it may even be a part of shaping a desirable masculinity.’ Desire, sexuality and intimacy are, as queer and sexuality studies have taught us over and over again, crucial in production of gendered subjectivities and acceptable forms for lust. For conventional masculinity where acceptable forms for lust, often including close intimate friendship, has been confined to the heterosexual couple as the legitimate form, the fear of intimacy has been regulating masculine friendships through homophobia.

This is something that Sedgwick (1985, 1–2) also addressed in her important work on male homosexual desire more than twenty-five years ago:

Homosocial is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously
formed by analogy with homosexual, and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from homosexual. In fact, it is applied to such activities as male bonding, which may, as in our society, be characterised by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality. To draw the homosocial back into the orbit of desire, the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between the homosocial and homosexual – a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted.

The homoerotic space regulating intimacy between hetero-men is accordingly something that has changed radically in different periods of western history. Nardi (1992) has for instance shown how passionate and romantic friendship between young men was practised in the early 1800’s U.S. Through letter exchanges, Nardi portrays how young men express lust and desire towards each other in ways unthinkable hundred years later following, among other things, the pathologisation of homosexuality.

In an interesting co-reading of family and queer studies Anderson (2011) outlines how the configuration of intimacy has also affected men’s friendship relations with regard to the family and the heterosexual couple. Andersen argues along the lines of queering intimacy forms by drawing the homoerotic ‘back into the orbit’, opening up for multiplicities of lust and friendship communions. In such a gradual ‘democratisation’ of intimacy forms as we have seen the last decades, with for instance partnership laws throughout many European countries, we have not only witnessed how minorities have been given rights, but we have also seen a gradually extended space with regard to which intimacies are given legitimacy. In this process, the regulated emotional space of intimacy that many conventional hetero men have had within the marriage is and has been challenged. Accordingly, to have close relationships outside the marriage or the family is given higher and higher priority and status among contemporary men in western countries (Allan 2001, Holter et al 2007, Plummer 2003). As Andersen (2011, 8–10) argues, in the 1960s men would fear to be stigmatised as gay if they would say they had close friends. Today, many hetero men express that they miss close friends and they highly value the friends they have. The previous marked difference between men and women with regard to close friendships is now less accentuated although men still express that they miss close friends to a larger extent than women (Holter et al 2007).

Jamieson (1998) discusses two forms of intimacy: the intimacy of the self and the intimacy of the body. As previously argued, these two forms have for many men been encap-
ulated within the marriage, but we are now moving in the direction of a wider array of intimacies for hetero men possibly including homoerotic desires as well, or at least opening up possibilities for such emotionally charged aspects of men’s relationships. To follow Andersen (2011, 13) here, to draw the homoerotic ‘back into the orbit’ not only recognises homoerotic desire but also contributes to liberating sexuality from its monocausal connection to couple relations as well as localising friendship relations within the imaginary and possible logics of structures of desire. As intimacies of the self and the body are conflated in various ways also opens up for a politics of intimacy where different forms of lust, passion and desire open up possibilities of lust communions that go beyond conventional desire and penetrative sex for heterosexual men. In other words, to extend the symbolic space for acceptable forms of intimacy also creates emancipatory openings for hegemonic and dominant forms of sexuality, lust, desire and passion. As Sandberg (2011, 250) has it: ‘Intimacy and touch hold the potential for destabilizing the boundaries between the sexual and non-sexual and reconfiguring male sexual morphologies.’ In her work Sandberg also opens up for what I believe is a sensual and conceptual key to alternative routes to masculine gendered subjectivities: vulnerability. This is not least so in a political climate where hegemonic ideals are revolving around the competent, strong and successful. As Sandberg (Ibid., Ch. 7) elegantly has shown in her work, vulnerability also connotes and produces a range of conceptual and embodied dyads and triads; empowered-disempowered; embodied-disembodied-ablebodied; homosocial-homoerotic-homosexual; potent-impotent; human-nonhuman; old-young, to mention a few. As such, vulnerability is also a promising onto-epistemological vantage point that hopefully and possibly could work its way around classical binaries and do the job as a form of emancipatory compass.

The articles in this open issue of Norma are not directly related to the discussion of an emancipatory compass. None of the articles discusses vulnerability, but could in different ways be said to contribute to a more general discussion opening up for alternative routes in the politics of masculinity. In Joseph Gelfer’s article, ‘Will the real Joseph Gelfer please stand up: Multiple masculinities and the self’ we are given a truly fascinating discussion around how Joseph Gelfer, the scholar, the activist, the young person, etcetera balances in between positions of style, sexuality, and academic position (among others) that comprises anything that we might talk about as a true dialogical self. Gelfer’s text is not least opening up for the complexity of masculine identity formation as well as productively criticizing the singularity of different positions within studies of men and masculinities.
Tetyana Bureychaks article ‘In search of heroes: Vikings and Cossacks in present Sweden and Ukraine’ on two historical models of heroic and military masculinity, could in many ways be read as an antidote to anything resembling a vulnerability paradigm. Bureychak’s text is a sharp and well needed analysis of the symbolic inventories used among right-wing masculine movements in the present and worrying times of growing fascist sentiments in many parts of Europe. Emmy Dahl, Malin Henriksson, and Lena Levin’s article on men and transport patterns ‘Constructions of masculinities in conversations about public transport’, is reflecting a growing and interesting concern in the intersection of masculinity and environmental studies. Through their analysis we come to see how different generations of men are positioned within a larger sustainability discourse directly related to masculinity. Finally, Trygve B. Broch’s article ‘Masculine men playing a women’s sport Norwegian media representations of male handballers’ challenges traditional gender binaries in sports in an intriguing discussion of male handballers in Norway. By discussing how gender tensions are resolved in journalistic practice Broch manages to show how gender stereotypes are challenged and stabilized in parallel.

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Notes

1 Original Egeberg Holmgren ‘Jag menar att jämställdhetsprojektets binära och normerande utgångspunkter inte bara riskerar bidra till att producera maktordningar utan också att feminism potentiellt avradikaliseras när dessa idéer ’sugs upp’ i statsapparaten på jämställdhetspolitikens premisser’.

References


