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Men's Silences

Predicaments in Masculinity

Jonathan Rutherford

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First published in 1992, *Men's Silences* represents a personal and a political attempt to break out of the narrow parameters of men's sexual politics. It focusses on men's feelings to language. The early chapters provide a social context for exploring the practice and theorizing of men's sexual politics. The book continues by developing an alternative theoretical framework for addressing male subjectivity, using Wittgenstein's theory of language and the psychoanalytic theories of Winnicott, Bion and Klein. The author argues for the centrality of the pre-oedipal mother-son relationship in the making of male subjectivity, language and identity. This book will be of interest to students of sociology, gender studies, political science and cultural studies.

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In memory of my mother,
Brenda Rutherford

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PREFACE

During the middle years of the 1980s I worked as a freelance journalist writing on issues concerned with men and masculinity. Much of what I wrote owed itself to my previous involvement in Men Against Sexism. I was, however, increasingly frustrated with the theoretical framework I was using. It felt more and more constrictive, a repetition of certain descriptive terms applied to a singular masculinity. Terms such as 'vulnerable', 'fear of intimacy' and 'emotional inarticulacy' were increasingly used without any wider reference to which specific masculine identities they belonged. And even when they hit the right mark, this newly adopted language of masculinity seemed narrow and increasingly morally prescriptive. Similarly, my involvement in socialist politics and the Communist Party was undergoing a testing as the left, as an imagined cultural entity, fell apart. Around this time I became aware of cultural studies and enrolled at the Middlesex Polytechnic on an undergraduate course. It lasted one year and I continued on to do a Phd. Inevitably this book leans towards the theoretical, but this bias also reflects my desire to try and break out of the theoretical impasse within which men's sexual politics and my own writing had been floundering.

I have taken the classic issue in Men Against Sexism (MAS) of feelings and attempted to address it in a theoretical way. I use the term reflexivity, which means self-comprehension. This 'referring back to the subject one is' was the principal strength of the early men's sexual politics, although I would argue that it gave way to a more morally prescriptive personal politics. Another word I use is historicity, by which I mean a self-consciousness of one's own past. Both of these two processes of self-knowledge are not purely

intellectual and rational; they have little meaning without feeling. By feeling I mean the language of affect, the putting into words of instinctual life. The failure to achieve this marks a silence, a gap or absence within an individual subjectivity. Hence men's silences come to represent a partial failure of a reflexive understanding of masculine identities; a difficulty in knowing what one is and the processes that make one.

I have used the theories of psychoanalysis, trying to tread a path between the tangled intellectualism of Lacanian thinking and the tendencies towards functionalism which have beset the employment of object relations theory in social and cultural analysis. Psychoanalysis provides a descriptive framework for analysing the psyche; it cannot encompass or explain every facet of subjectivity. I concentrate on the subject's formative relationship with the figures of the parents and how the gendered ordering of mother–son and father–son relationships produce predicaments in masculine identities. By predicaments I mean a disjunction between instinctual life and the mental processes which constitute thought and language. In other words a subject may know of some element of his or her emotional life, without necessarily being able to either think it or speak of it.

My intention is not to come up with any definitive statement on the nature of masculine identities – I concentrate on my own specific class and ethnic constituency of MAS – but to try and open up ways of thinking about men and male identities. Inevitably I have been bound by the limitations of psychoanalysis itself and the lesson of this work for me is that the ability to think beyond contemporary masculine subjectivities involves developing and moving beyond the theoretical frameworks at our disposal. In such an inquiry there is no actual ending and this book has no neat and tied-up conclusion to it.

In the course of writing this book a number of people have helped me, in particular Peter Middleton. I would also like to thank Claire Pajekowska, Mike Dawney and Frances Angela and last of all, but not least, Keir Rutherford.

1

LEAVING HOME

Hello this is your mother.
Are you there?
Are you coming home?
Hello is anybody home?
Well, you don't know me, but I know you,
And I've got a message to give to you.[1]

'Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent', wrote the philosopher Wittgenstein in conclusion to his first work the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.[2] The paradox of his comment is in his own assertion that the matters he is silent about – values and religion, 'what is higher'[3] – are what his work is really about. His comment is a fitting description of men's response to their troubled relations with their heterosexuality, their masculine identities and with women. In another context, time and place, Gayaytri Chakravorty Spivak has addressed this issue of cultural silence. She writes: 'Part of our unlearning project is to articulate that ideological formation – by measuring silences, if necessary – into the objects of investigation.'[4] My purpose in this work is to explore what constitutes men's silences and how they play a significant part in the formation of masculine identities.

In this first chapter I want to provide a historical location and cultural context for this project. My search for a beginning has led me back to the sexual politics of the 1970s and the emergence of Men Against Sexism. This small and often erratic movement was a response to the growing strength of feminism within revolutionary libertarian socialism and within the left more generally. The sexual politics of masculinity was an attempt by groups of mainly heterosexual men to articulate their personal confusions and the

social and political dilemmas they found themselves in. I am not looking simply for an empirical account of this emergent discourse and practice. I am interested in grasping a specific concern that was a central feature of MAS's attempt to theorise and think through a reflexive and self-comprehending analysis of their masculine identities and male heterosexuality. This was the nature of men's affective relations; the relationship of men's feelings to the language in which men expressed themselves. In other words what often could not be understood and talked about.

It is the cultural critic Walter Benjamin who provides a clue to unveiling these places of silence when he wrote: 'To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at the moment of danger.'[5] Such silences are not the quiet of nature, they are a negative which are culturally and socially determined and hold the potential for meaning and living social relations. They are known and as such have a determining effect upon masculine identities. They contain those 'flashes of danger'; dilemmas, contradictions, difficulties in the relation of the subject to others, which precede linguistic expression and therefore do not find their way into verbal exchange. These silences are the consequences of predicaments. The purpose of this work is to explore what these predicaments are and define what they mean. Men Against Sexism, from its first group in 1971, expressed, and attempted to give voice to, such predicaments. It was a project beset with internal argument about the priorities of men's sexual politics, a conflict that polarised around the two themes of 'men's liberation' and 'anti-sexist, pro-feminism', inevitably creating uncertainty, doubt and ambivalence amongst men, about each other's intentions.

MEN AGAINST SEXISM

The constituency of Men Against Sexism was composed, in the main, of white middle-class and educated men who formed part of a radical urban intelligentsia. Aged from 18 and into their forties they were a minority within a generation and a half who had experienced the major transformations of family structures and capital accumulation as children growing up in the post-war years. The narratives of masculinity which had belonged to their fathers' generation no longer seemed tenable in the years after 1968.

Feminism, gay affirmation and a growing cultural diversity dislocated the cultural and inter-personal authority of masculinity and heterosexuality. MAS was an effort to recover a sense of identity and historicity amongst a specific class fraction of men. It was a struggle to make sense out of the disparity between past lives lived within conventional bourgeois and working-class families and a new milieu of sexual politics and political radicalism. The emergence of a sexual politics of masculinity was a reaction to the partial loss of a male cultural monopoly. Feminism didn't so much remove men's powers and privileges as strip them of their legitimating stories.

It is arguable whether this challenge to masculine authority was a part of or precipitated a wider critique of the values and systems of knowledge that underpinned West European culture. In 1979 Jean François Lyotard had defined the post-modern condition as 'incredulity towards metanarratives'.[6] The Enlightenment vision of history as a progressive linear movement towards justice and emancipation no longer seemed a reliable teleological basis for human society. Reason as the source of truth, and rationality as the legitimator of its claims were being eroded. An unquestioned belief in the universal validity of a civilising ideal had lost much of its appeal with the growth of new oppositional voices. In its place was emerging difference, contingency and polyvalence.

Lyotard's critique and the project of French-structuralism and more recently the debates around post-modernity should not be confused with the disruptive impact of feminism.[7] Lyotard himself makes no reference to gender. Nevertheless the two are coincidental. Rosa Braidotti has argued that historical crises in the West's systems of knowledge have occurred when women have played a more prominent role in periods of change.[8] And certainly the constituency of men who inaugurated MAS were subject to both a cultural and gendered dislocation. Through the expansion of higher education and the changing demands of a service and increasingly information-oriented economy they constituted a class fraction whose social power was derived from the acquisition of knowledge and information; resources that the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has defined as cultural capital.[9] In class terms they represented the kernel of a modified middle class, what has been termed the professional and managerial class (PMS).[10] Much of the status and cultural authority of the radical intelligentsia who formed part of the PMS was located within the arts and

humanities of higher education. But it was just these institutions and sites of intellectual endeavour that were being challenged by the 1970s.

The legacy of the Enlightenment had placed the ideal of a universal civilising progress as central to European culture. It had ensured the class status and cultural authority of intellectuals. But the proliferation and fragmentation of information and knowledge, coupled with the rise of political oppositional voices, undermined its pretensions. MAS were part of a class fraction removed from the centre of the 'establishment'. They held only the vestiges of a historically redundant cultural authority. The contemporary intellectual was increasingly assuming the role of interpreter and translator of information, confined to a narrow and specialised field whose language held no common, let alone universal currency. His or her status had been stripped to his or her value as a holder of information, a commodity in the market place. The constituency of MAS while belonging to the dominant class formation was, in effect, a dominated fraction within it. It was this displacement and the lack of any perceived meaning in their future economic roles that contributed to political disaffection and militancy.

But revolutionary politics was the relatively easy part. It was neither economic deprivation, nor political or social subordination that prompted MAS and its subsequent theoretical endeavours to make sense of masculinity. In the face of women's new assertiveness and collective anger and in the context of domestic recrimination and broken relationships men were faced with a threat to their psychological order. This problem was not an academic one:

> I recognise that something is terribly wrong but I don't really know what to do about it. I'm shaken by the fury and the bitterness. I find it hard to accept that things can be that bad, though I know that at some level they are. Part of me just wants to flee or withdraw. It is as if all long-term heterosexual relationships in our time are doomed.[11]

The problem was not only to find out what was going wrong, but to figure out what to do about it. If their fathers had managed to sustain some degree of masculine status and psychological order through the subordination of their wives and a commitment to a

career and paternal duty, this specific generation had erred from that path and weren't sure where to turn.

This transitory state encouraged a reflexive concern with identity. But if the old stories of masculinity seemed defunct, the disjunction between these apparently redundant vocabularies and men's lived experience, broke the continuity of men's historical sense of themselves. In their place were enigmas, gaps, absences and uncertainties. What was lost and what was struggled for was not simply a gender identity or a reformed set of masculine practices but a sense of self and somewhere to belong. Despite its avowed political intent as a pro-feminist movement, the significant dimension of MAS lay in the realm of inter-personal and subjective life and experience. In consequence its cultural practices were shaped in a significant way by inter-generational conflict and contextualised within the nexus of family and parental relationships. Whatever the grand claims of marxism and revolutionary socialist practice may have been, a significant reason for involvement was men's revolt against their own pasts and a search for reflexivity.

These relations shaped the moods, sensibilities and cultural and political identifications of men's sexual politics. These were not necessarily acknowledged and nor did they always find their way into the everyday parlance of 'making sense'. Zygmunt Bauman has argued that the historical memory of a group does not always surface to the level of verbal communication. Nor is it 'necessarily recognised by a group as a particular concept of the past'.[12] Rather it 'finds its expression in the group's proclivities to some rather than other behavioural responses'.[13] While Bauman was discussing the historical memories of class, his argument applies to those experiences of familial structures and their psychodynamics which produce collective logics of gender identity and subject formation in specific class groups. It is these, I would argue, that hold the key to understanding the processes of change and resistance in masculine identities through a period of historical transition. But, from the beginning of MAS, attempts at self-comprehension which did not directly address the power men wielded in patriarchal relations, were met with suspicion and accusations of self-indulgence.

In the early writings of MAS, as heterosexual men attempted to make sense of women's liberation and gay affirmation, there was a sense of their profound unpreparedness for this new cultural

and historic moment. The first response was to disown the masculine sensibilities and languages inherited from their fathers' generation. Writing in *Brothers Against Sexism* (1974), one men's group identified the missing element of emotion from their lives.

> As men in the 'Men's Movement' we recognise that we have to retrace our steps and rediscover in ourselves those traits that we have called 'feminine' . . . passivity, warmth, intuition, love, EMOTION. We have to discover in ourselves that which has lain dormant for hundreds of years, that society has obscured and hidden until we act as robots – stiffly, automatically, coldly.[14]

Such concerns were anathema to other men involved in MAS, reflecting the arguments and disagreements over the value of such self-analysis. The next issue of the magazine was subtitled 'The Pig's Last Grunt'. Produced by a men's group in North London it reported on the November 1974 London Conference of MAS which had witnessed a clash between heterosexual men and gay men. 'The conference was too much about men's lib', they wrote, 'the workshop had little to do with confronting sexism as it oppresses women, nothing to do with how we men oppress women.'[15] The consequence of this internal argument about the purpose and priorities of MAS ensured that discussion and debate tended to polarise around a 'men's liberation' position, concerned with 'men's issues' and a pro-feminist politics that eschewed discussions and activities solely addressing masculine identities and sensibilities.

The reflexive concern with men's sexuality and emotional life remained a central tenet of 1970s men's sexual politics, but it was profoundly shaped by this context of argument over its relationship to feminism and men's 'proper' response to it. Ten years later in *The Sexuality of Men*, the book which came out of the 1970s MAS, Andy Metcalf captures this reflexive preoccupation when he wrote:

> If the majority of men are emotionally illiterate then the social construction of gender, of masculinity, creates an absence, a loss, a silence at the heart of men's social relations. Much of this book is concerned with exploring the consequences of modern man's lack of emotional knowledge and language.[16]

Men were caught between the old masculinities of a previous generation and a new cultural, political and sexual context which their inherited vocabularies of masculinity could not fully make sense of. It was a dilemma which determined the central form of MAS activity; the men's group. Modelled on women's consciousness-raising groups, it enabled small numbers of men collectively to explore areas of their lives previously considered taboo subjects in male company. Sexual relations, homophobia, homosexuality, friendship between men, childcare as well as wider political questions relating to sexuality and feminism were common topics. These were subjects reflecting the preoccupation with psychological well-being and inter-personal relationships. Issues of class and ethnicity and their impact upon masculinity were not significant themes in this practice. The primary concern was a search for an interior realm of feeling in male subjectivity and a language with which to represent it.[17] A concern which itself was determined by the ethnicity and class nature of the MAS constituency.

In the summer of 1978 *Achilles Heel*, 'a magazine of men's politics', made its appearance. Its collective defined themselves as a group of socialist men who had been involved in men's groups and men's politics 'for some time'. The first issue had articles on men's health and sexuality and a long essay on masculinity and fascism. It was the first forum in MAS to provide for theoretical discussion and as such managed to rise above the polarised division between men's liberation and anti-sexism that had succeeded in establishing a climate of moralism and antagonism. Despite only running to six issues (the last was a double issue 6/7), its themes, the subjects it covered and its priorities drew a disparity of MAS positions and practices into a coherent, if brief, collective identity. Despite opposition to it and claims that it was not representative of anti-sexist politics, it did signify the 'moment' of MAS in the 1970s.

I can recall the appearance of this first issue, when I was 21. It was a moment of excitement and an acknowledgement of many of my own pressing questions about my sexuality and masculine identity. At the time I was involved in running a free school and had a commitment to anarchist politics. But I was very careful to keep separate my own sexual and emotional confusions. I kept these hidden behind a sophisticated political intellect and much deft social manoeuvring. But even these could not ensure the sustaining of my sense of self in an environment where a lot of the

rules were being changed or discarded. A time of great excitement was also a time of intense anxiety. In the task of making new cultural forms I was struggling with an identity I sought to erase. While sexual politics was releasing people from old inhibitions, oppressions and denials, it was often heterosexual men who were perceived as the cause of them. There always existed for me an attendant fear of an impending catastrophe of shame and humiliation. It was a time, in retrospect, unequalled in its creative and political activity and unequalled in personal isolation.

Like a sizeable minority of other men who came into contact with it, the women's liberation movement held a great appeal. It had begun to speak a language of private life, making links between our affective relations and the public world of institutions and power. In some indefinable sense it offered us a key to understanding ourselves. It spoke for something that I wanted, too, not in an imperialistic sense, although that of course existed, but a new sense of identity. In a time of radical questioning and the discarding of inherited attitudes and conventions, women's liberation was constituting new identities and a sense of belonging. For many men involved in revolutionary politics during this period, the meteoric and passionate rise of feminism and the heartfelt pleasures women found in its solidarities only served to reinforce feelings of personal isolation. In discarding our own pasts men seemed unable to create new places of belonging. So often it was women who were used, to provide and construct these emotional homes. Women's growing sense of autonomy only reinforced men's feelings of lack and insecurity. To make matters more difficult, its challenge to the conventional practices and definitions of political activity undermined men's one escape route, highlighting our own uneasiness with the version of class politics we espoused. Feminism produced this unenviable ambivalence in its male supporters. What we wanted and supported was what was continually threatening to undermine us. It lent itself to something of a religious moralism tainted by masochism.

While we argued that our socialist political activity and the forms of organisation we undertook should pre-figure the utopian society we wanted, men and masculinity always seemed to be exempt from the process of change. It was always with someone else or somewhere else that the problem or issue was located. This sense of disconnection between men's personal lives and the public world became the central issue in the emergent reflexive politics

of masculinity. As one man, involved in the Red Therapy group, commented, 'I became aware that in some way I was missing something . . . that I had lost something. Something emotional. A woman I really depended on left me – saying at one point that she felt that, "there was nothing there".'[18] And Vic Seidler, writing in *Achilles Heel* attempted to conceptualise this idea of emptiness: 'As men we are often brought up to be strangers to ourselves. We experience little connection with our feelings and emotions.'[19] The public world of politics acted as a form of flight from a private life that seemed awkward and uncontrollable. But after the rushing about and the business was over, it was a world experienced as empty and homeless.

The language of affective relations: expressions of comfort, pleasure, pain and vulnerability found little room in our brave new worlds. Instead they were confined to conventional childhoods and suppressed by the moralistic imperative of building a socialist society. If we were in revolt against our parents' generation and the social order they were part of, if we condemned them for their deceitful and hypocritical lives, then the child they had produced had to be destroyed as well. The boys we had been, their pleasures and fantasies as well as their fears and anxieties were suppressed. This form of intra-subjective attack structured the psychodynamic life of masculinity, continually undermining its capacity to change and sustain men emotionally. It was an internal war of attrition that lent a strenuous intensity to men's politics. Feminism undermined this flight from internal reality. It didn't just tug the radical carpet from beneath men – suddenly the struggle had moved elsewhere and we weren't invited – it forced men into some degree of self-reflection. What men discovered was the lack of any vocabulary for making sense of this new reflexive concern with our sexuality and masculine identities. And despite our prominence in the public world, there was a lack of any inter-personal relationships which could have sustained such a project.

This disparity between men's lived relations and their inherited languages of masculinity is described by Andrew Tolson in his account of a men's group:

> We began to discover that we had no language of feeling. We were trapped in public, specialised languages of work, learned in universities or factories, which acted as a shield

> against deeper emotional solidarities. When we talked about ourselves and our experiences these would be presented through the public languages in abstract formal ways. The factory manager actually talked about himself as if he functioned like a machine. The student–philosopher spoke about his 'bad faith' and his struggle to be 'authentic'. And the man on the dole, in this context kept silent – and was perceived to be incoherent, swept along by a fluid introspective experience.[20]

While women were struggling to escape the private world of domesticity, childcare and the management of relationships, men were struggling to come to terms with them. This crossing of the threshold betwen inner and outer was addressed by Paul Atkinson, an original member of the *Achilles Heel* collective:

> for women feminism has been about recognising the way women have been invisible in, and excluded from, the male order . . . for men there is a complementary problem of how we develop a new relationship with all sides of life which tend to be invisible and unspoken of, to do with the emotional, hidden inner sides of life.[21]

The logic of men's support for feminism took them into the unfamiliar cultural terrain of the private. The primacy of the picket line and the duplicator gave way to looking after children, dealing with personal relationships and confronting men's emotional dependency upon women. It was a transition that undermined the public roles and languages that propped up men's masculine identities. The further men moved into this sphere the greater became their sense of insecurity. And with it, the realisation of just how tenuous men's sense of self was.

While the counter-culture of personal politics and its validation of anti-sexism acted as a safety net, outside its narrow confines, the limited emotional and inter-personal resources of a masculinity without its external structures of support threw many individual men into a crisis. What comes through in MAS writing on role reversal and accounts of men's changing masculine identities is a sense of unease and disturbance which is never quite articulated.[22] 'I am an enraged house husband' wrote one man, 'caught in what is a woman's web of dilemma having to do housework and hating it. My rage is born from frustration and beats angrily in my breast

bursting to get out in a scream.'[23] This passionate fury, far from being 'a woman's web of dilemma' is that of a man coming crashing up against himself and without the means to make sense of the impact.

STRUCTURES OF FEELING

It was the late Raymond Williams who provided a framework for the cultural analysis of this disjunction between lived experience and available vocabularies. In his essay 'Structures of Feeling', Williams addressed the emergence of new social groups and cultural identities and their expression through oppositional artistic practice. Williams insisted that the alternative to the hegemonic cultural discourses and language that suppressed them was not a silence of the oppressed and marginalised but, 'a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it becomes fully articulate and defined exchange'.[24] Such a structure of feeling exists at 'the very edge of semantic availability'.[25] Williams is describing a pre-formation: 'what is not fully articulated, all that comes through as disturbance, tension, blockage, emotional trouble',[26] which precedes actual cultural practice and identity. Such an analysis can be applied to MAS and the emergence of new masculine identities and sensibilities that had not yet found the means to articulate their lived relations.

This threshold between public and private, the rational and the emotional is historically and culturally determined. Men's 'emotional inarticulacy' represents a specific time and place where changing social relations redefine this threshold and the determining conditions of masculine identities. Men Against Sexism represented the particularly acute experience of a class fraction struggling with its changing economic role and cultural identity. Many men were confronted with their inability to live out these new material, sexual and personal relations. Men's use of language in effect externalised masculine identity; self-descriptions were based on public roles and rational criteria which denied the means for self-comprehension. It was this difficulty that characterised the MAS structure of feeling, creating specific social moods and forms of cultural receptivity that underlay its forms of political and cultural identification. This difficulty in processing men's affective relations became prominent in men's lives because of the new