

Masculinity: Contested Territory

By Lee Cicuta

So frequent is the assertion in feminist discourse that masculinity is inseparable from patriarchy that many feminists use “masculinity” and “patriarchy” interchangeably in their theorizing, treating them as one in the same. When gender-nonconforming women (including trans and intersex women) and trans masculine people find ourselves in the position to offer a direct critique point out that this reduction erases our experiences as well as our unique relationships with counter-hegemonic masculinities, one of few things tend to happen in response: (1) our identities are added as a footnote to an otherwise unchanged theory (“masculinity is inherently patriarchal* *except for those queer and trans people we’ll otherwise ignore”); (2) we are told that we can only ever attain a false masculinity (“masculinity is inherently patriarchal, so those who do not benefit from patriarchy are not really masculine”) or, most ridiculous of all; (3) we are all lumped in with cis men (“masculinity is inherently patriarchal so if you are masculine that means you benefit from patriarchy.”)

All of these potential answers are deeply flawed in ways I would love to believe is obvious but, with the world as it is, I will refute them here before we continue. The first, the unchanged theory with a hasty addendum for inclusivity points, is the first to show us our general problem. If you make a sweeping claim about masculinity as a whole, assert that claim as inherently true in all cases, and then acknowledge that there are also entire social groups who are made *more vulnerable* to patriarchal violence because of their masculinity/perceived masculinity, it has come time to acknowledge that something about your theory is flawed and that there is something more complex happening than masculinity=patriarchal.

The second stance is frequently brought up in an attempt to resolve the tension of the first. To save the theory it is easiest to simply deny the reality of masculinities external to patriarchy. We’re not *really* masculine or we’re doing something that’s aesthetically masculine but not *truly* masculine. We’re playing pretend at something that cis men just inherently own. This is a point that transphobes and misogynists happily agree with! Because to argue this requires asserting that masculinity is derived from some inherent essence completely separate from how one presents themselves, what they wear, their mannerisms, how they understand themselves, their historical, cultural, subcultural, or counter-cultural context, etc. Additionally, this argument renders most colloquial uses of the term unintelligible! Patriarchy as a term is used to refer to a system of power, and while plenty of theorists do use patriarchy and masculinity interchangeably, there are many more people who also use masculinity to describe the vibe of a button-up shirt or a hairstyle, and very few people really believe that wearing a button-up shirt or cutting one’s hair magically imbues one with all the powers and privileges of patriarchy...

But some do. Unfortunately. The last position, when all else fails, is simply to group all masculine or perceived as masculine people in with cis men as the benefactors of patriarchy. Some gnc women are accused of trying to acquire patriarchal privilege and betray other women when they actively seek to be masculine or are perceived as masculine; other gnc women are accused of having inherent and inescapable patriarchal privilege that makes them dangerous to

other women due to their past masculinity/perceived masculinity, trans men's complex relationships with a kind of manhood that is suppressed by patriarchy are erased and denied, and nonbinary people have their identities utterly invalidated. It is even further complicated by the reality that which maGes (marginalized genders) are perceived as masculine is highly influenced by other structural vulnerabilities, especially by race. Black women are frequently perceived as more "aggressive" and "masculine" than white women are regardless of their identity or gender presentation because misogynoir and transmisogynoir function in part by degendering Black women as means of dehumanizing them. That the presence of masculinity or perceived masculinity can be and is used as a reason to dehumanize and disempower everyone but cis men reveals this particular theory for what it is: one that has so little interest in the material conditions of patriarchy that we need not waste any more time in considering it here.

"Masculinity and patriarchy are one in the same" is one of the ideological pillars of patriarchy. It frames masculinity as something that can only be affirmed via a dominance relation and renders all forms of counter-hegemonic masculinity invisible. Ceding that territory to patriarchy only serves to erase the butches, trans mascs, trans men, nonbinary people, etc. who explore and live out subversive forms of masculinity. We would be far better served by understanding masculinity as something that patriarchy attempts to *capture*, rather than something it inherently owns, therefore shifting our understanding of masculinity away from seeing it as a component of the enemy and towards understanding it as *continuously contested territory*.

Patriarchy attempts to enclose masculinity, rigidly define it, tie it to domination and control, and punishes all unsanctioned expressions of it. This capture is not inherent nor is it complete. Trans and gnc people have been undermining that project since it began! Many of the positions explored above take for granted that masculinity is a real and consistently definable phenomena: invented, made material, and defined by patriarchy alone. They assume that patriarchy's word on masculinity has been the only real word, cis men's understanding of it the only real understanding of it, its deployment in rigid gender roles its only possible manifestation. Cis men have been at the wheels of centralized power and thus have had more means to make their own voices drown out the rest of us, but subversive masculinities have always been here, have always been a threat to the patriarchal narrative.

Many also assume that when queer and trans people refer to masculinity we are always referring to a masculinity that at least gains its meaning from patriarchy. It is time to inform you that your imagination up until this point has been disastrously stifled. Certainly, popular conceptualizations of hegemonic masculinity are inherently patriarchal and gain their meaning from that system. However, it is too far to assume that trans people are always referring to the same framework of masculinity that cis men do. We create our own meaning even as we expand masculinity to the point of meaninglessness. I take testosterone and am seeking top surgery to affirm my womanhood. Glitter, dramatic eyeliner, platform boots, and extremely slutty deep-V shirts validate my sense of my masculinity as much as work boots and button-ups do. Some of us are simply not referring to patriarchal masculinity when we are doing masculinity and what we're doing is not new. Not only is masculinity not inherently patriarchal: masculinity is not inherently anything at all! Masculinity, femininity, and all gendered terms are vibes-based only and vibes are always changing with people and context! They are not real! Their utility is in play

and self-exploration and any insistence of inherent reality beyond that will itself necessarily refer to patriarchy.

The inclination to talk about “masculinity” as a replacement for naming patriarchy is an inclination, consciously or not, to move focus to a rather nebulous category of gender presentation rather than have to talk about the social location cis men *specifically* inhabit. “Masculine people” is not a coherent or empowered social group under patriarchy; cis men, however, are. Refraining from naming cis men specifically, trying to reframe them as equal victims of patriarchy, and denying the power granted to all of them via patriarchal systems (even when tempered or changed by other intersecting identities) is a patriarchal impulse. It is no surprise that self-proclaimed feminist cis men seem to value “the ways patriarchy hurts men” over much else of feminist theory. It’s a move to innocence and shifts the attention from the actual power relation between cis men and maGes and towards arbitrary and subjective interpretations of masculinity and gender presentation.

Masculinity is not a material reality, and its meaning is located in context. Many do use it to describe hegemonic masculinity, but many also use it to describe an aesthetic, a trans identity, a kind of smell, a haircut style, a color scheme, a way of being, etc. I might describe a shirt as feeling “masculine” to me and for another person that same shirt would feel feminine, and we would both be right. It is a nebulous, vibes-based, and continuously contested category. Patriarchy, however, is a material reality, and refers to a hierarchical power structure that organizes much of our social world in order to empower cis men over the gender marginalized. Challenging patriarchy demands undermining this power relation and to do this we must be able to accurately articulate the nature of the problem. Understanding masculinity not as something patriarchy inherently owns but something it seeks to capture and privatize can allow us to keep our focus on the material power relation *and* locate masculine maGes not as unfortunate (and confusingly incongruent) footnotes to patriarchy but as frontline insurgents in the political conflict to liberate masculinity and all forms of gender expression.

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