

Freedom, Post-Modernism and Caribbean Masculine 'Re-descriptions'

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In many Caribbean territories, there are celebrations of Emancipation or 'Freedom Days' commemorating the end of the evils of the enslavement of Africans and their descendants. This year it is indeed fitting to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the ending of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade by an academic exploration centering around "Aspects of freedom". In focusing on 'aspects of freedom' it is obvious that 'Emancipation' be seen as incorporating liberation issues concerning Caribbean Afro-populations that suffered much indignity and injustice over the centuries.

The concept of emancipation, however, understood as an ongoing quest for the furtherance of human dignity in the Caribbean in various spheres of life is very much unfinished business. One area for an emancipatory focus is that of male gender identity and its particular configuration in the construction of Caribbean masculinity.

This paper targets the problem of masculine identity construction in its present configuration among selected English speaking Caribbean cultures. A short consideration of themes from Post-Modern thought and in particular insights from Feminist research are included for background and clarificatory import on masculinity as a socially constructed entity. With the help of this preamble Caribbean masculinity is 'deconstructed' with some important and insightful implications for emancipation critically delineated. Finally, some conclusions and recommendations are drawn with respect to a way forward toward a 're-description' of Caribbean masculinity with promise of greater freedom for all.

Post Modernism liberation and 'redescriptions'.

Like other thinkers before him (existentialists), and in company with many post-moderns, Richard Rorty claims that human beings have no essential nature to be true to. What is unique is our linguistic capacity enabling us to engage in 're-descriptions' (Linn, 1996: 2). This ability to constantly engage in re-descriptions, could be harnessed in problem solving and holds the key to human progress. We should thus not worry so much about finding some illusive eternal truth, since we cannot step outside of our symbolic constructs to access reality in itself but instead adjust our descriptions of reality according to pragmatic demands.

Since we are all flies trapped in a fly bottle (Wittgenstein) the problems stem from the nature of our fly bottles- from the descriptions of the world that we think in and live under. We need not worry whether the descriptions are true but rather what the descriptions are like, how they influence our thought and behaviour, and how they could be changed to solve our problems (the pragmatic and creative side of postmodernism (Linn, 1996: 27).

According to this approach, rather than lamenting as experiencing as 'loss' the absence of essences or of the existence of an objective truth and blue-print as to what the human being is, human beings can be free to 'create worlds' and to fashion pragmatically what is more conducive to human growth, development and peace. Having no objective position of a 'truth that sets us free' that lies outside of human experience and language (symbolic construct) holds the key to a re-description of

human reality that makes for liberation and could serve us better than what we have settled for in the past:

The post modern idea that there is no truth might at first seem demoralizing ...but it is also liberating. Not only are we liberated from the burden of searching for what cannot be found, we are also liberated from an oppressive urge to shove others and ourselves in top our preconceived cages. This postmodern liberation is important because it redirects our energy toward what human beings are good at- creating ourselves and the worlds we live in. It is important because it opens up the possibility of creating new kinds of identities and social relationships which, unlike those of the past, are not brought into existence against the Other. (Linn, 1996:145).

While recognizing the strengths of this approach that links knowledge, reality and liberation, one possible criticism is that there is still not yet consensus on the nature / nurture controversy or the determination / freedom debates to come down so heavily and conclusively on the side of culture and language. In the pages that follow as well, some of the findings of the literature could seem to indicate that there are some human essences after all that stubbornly resist attempts at 'cultural reductionism'. Even with these reservations that stand in the way of a wholesale embrace of the Post Modern view, it is nonetheless useful to explore the direction in which it points. An approach in keeping with this view, then, seeks not to discover some self-evident and unquestionable essence of what it means to be male, but rather to investigate and interrogate the precise configuration in which conceptions of maleness are constructed.

The problematization of masculinity

Masculinity was not always deemed as an area of research and problematization. Undoubtedly this is a major factor in the maintenance of the myth of masculinity as something self evidently natural that ontologically just is. One sure result of the rise of feminist theory was to question this static notion of male gender identity as if (*all*) elements that seemed to comprise its essence were quite sacrosanct and untouchable.

*The 'construction of gender' identities is interpreted not along the lines of the manifestation of inner essences but seen as **socially constructed** as well as historically shifting' (Kimmel, 1996, cited by Parry, 2000:19).*

This is in keeping with the approach of much of Continental philosophy, feminist thought seeks to critique the praxis of masculinity toward another concept with makes for greater freedom and human dignity for all.

...much philosophy in the Continental tradition is concerned with giving a philosophical critique of the social practices of the modern world that aspires towards a notion of individual or societal emancipation. (Critchley, 2001:54).

One might say that the touchstone of philosophy in the Continental tradition is the question of praxis: that is to say, our historically and culturally embedded life as finite selves in a world that is of our own making. It is this touchstone of praxis that leads philosophy towards a critique of present conditions, as conditions not amenable to freedom, and towards the

emancipatory demand that things be otherwise, the demand for a transformative practice of philosophy, art, thinking, or politics. (Critchley, 2001: 73).

Far from being unproblematic, conceptions of masculinity and femininity are thus acknowledged as constructions that emerge from society and are inherently contingent. These operate as ideologies in the Marxist sense that express and consolidate the operation of power and privilege of some persons and groups of persons at the expense of others with the consequent diminishing of human potential.

the phenomena of masculine gender constructions is recognized as an ideology that exerts a profound influence on the structure of society. Masculinity has emerged as a critical area of enquiry in the field of gender and cultural studies and is embedded in sexism, modernism, capitalism and imperialism. (Nurse, 2004: 3, 4).

A problem with the construction of masculinity in the West has been undoubtedly that of **crime**. This is particularly so with respect to masculine constructs that place pressures upon young men to measure up. Many act out of these social pressures through the anti-social exercise of power.

In Western industrialized societies, the two most significant and tenacious features associated with crime are gender and age (Messerschmidt, 1994: 81). *Crime is not only almost always committed by men, both across countries and across time* (Newburn & Stanko, 1994:1) *but disproportionately by young men* (Messerschmidt, 1994: 81).

While such a consideration could easily lead to thought of 'essences' once again (perhaps of a biological/ hormonal nature) this is not to take away from the importance of the cultural ramifications of social constructionism as the collective generation and transmission of meaning (Crotty, 2003:58).

In addition there is also the aspect of a 'will to power' that plays itself out in the human community. Of the constructs of masculinity, some tend to become dominant or hegemonic. True to their ideological nature they exist in opposition to and at the expense of other configurations of manhood with racial and sexist overtones. These often perpetuate the 'us-them' binary that fosters disintegration and disconnect among human beings

The subjectification of the "other" through "difference" (stigmatization, stereotyping and so forth) has proved to be fundamental to the constitution of hegemonic masculinity (Nurse, 2004: 7). *Power flows through a network of disciplinary codes (for example white supremacy, racial stereotyping, homophobia) and governing institutions and determine social relations and create subject positions* (Nurse, 2004: 42).

While perhaps there may be a will to dominate that could be part of an 'essence of masculinity' it is surely the tendency to excess that is of paramount concern. This brings us again to the important post-modern theme: concern for the 'Other'. In the face of historic and contemporary atrocities meted out to those considered as somewhat different, the problem of the 'Other' is that which is concerned with human cruelty and oppression.

While the reasons for human cruelty and exclusion are many and varied, post-modern thought does point us to new possibilities for envisaging the human condition and of creating worlds committed to diversity, the reduction of cruelty and to a state of affairs where the concept of freedom is an all inclusive one and not simply focused on one dimension of human emancipation. This concept of diversity and inclusivity, is an important prerequisite for building contemporary society along emancipatory lines. It is perhaps in this area more than ever that much concern and thought about emancipation in the Caribbean appears sadly shortsighted.

The experience of indigenous persons, the rights of the unborn, the handicapped and 'gay and lesbian' populations are but examples of arenas where issues of freedom continue to demand serious attention. The concept of respect for the dignity of the human person lies at the heart of a commitment to diversity that encompasses all. To compromise this would spell eventual bloodshed and a recipe for freedoms that may prove deficient in the short run and unsustainable in the long run.

In the case of the first category of persons mentioned (the indigenous people of the Caribbean) atrocities of extermination or near decimation of a people in the wake of the colonial onslaught is deserving of national attention and commemoration across the region on a scale much larger than it is at the moment.

In addition, a construct of masculine excess, or hyper-masculinity continues to provide a lead to understand the widespread disrespect and destruction of the environment on a global scale. This could be construed by way of Chinese philosophical categories as the playing out of an imbalance of the Yang over the Yin (Capra, 1982: 27-34)

In the Caribbean, male gender identity affects the areas of crime, male educational underachievement and the spread and persistence of the epidemiology of HIV.

Caribbean (hegemonic) masculine construct.

In the Caribbean much of hegemonic hyper-masculine images seem to emanate from Jamaica

Respondents clearly identified Jamaica as the 'home' or 'leader' of the 'macho West Indian male' image. Respondents from both Barbados and St Vincent talked about how adolescent males were increasingly influenced by the music and dancehall scene emanating from Jamaica. (Parry 2000: 53).

The notion of hegemonic masculinity was coined by Connell (Connell: 1995) who himself adapted the notion of hegemony as consolidation of power that figured in the thought of Antonio Gramsci. The idea is that a particular construct of what it means to be a real man emerges and lodges itself as the dominant paradigm toward which all others must aspire (Nurse, 2004: 7).

Violence and crime

As seen in the wider world scene, masculinity and crime as linked, figure strongly in hegemonic masculine constructs of the Caribbean.

The proliferation of guns is not simply a function of the drug trade but the ultimate representation of what it means to be a man. (Chevannes 1999: 30).

The greatest sin among young males today is to 'dis', that is to show disrespect, the gun is the ultimate guarantor of respect. (Chevannes 1999: 30).

The so-called inner-city don is a role model not only because of his ability to command and dispense largesse, but also because he is a living source of power the power over life and death, the ultimate man. Among the youth, a common word for penis was rifle (Chevannes 1999: 29).

Male educational underachievement and masculinity

Research carried out in various territories in the Caribbean reveals that present constructs of masculinity stand in the way of progress of many Caribbean males.

Caribbean masculine identity is in conflict with the educational interests of Caribbean boys. (Bailey, Branche & Henry-Lee, 2002: 9).

The main finding of the study is that the current construction of male sex gender identity in the Caribbean has implications for educational underachievement of Caribbean males. (Parry 2000: 56).

In health gender roles can be seen as driving the epidemic of HIV :

Research shows that masculine constructs have their own pull and do exert considerable social pressure over the Caribbean male, with homophobic and misogynistic implications.

Someone who did not have as many women as they did was sick", "suspected as a buller" or not "the average young black male". (Crichlow 2004: 206).

Manhood is demonstrated by sexual prowess... it is usually measured... by the number of female sexual partners (Brown & Chevannes 1998: 23).

These findings take on even more grave import when considering that the Caribbean figures just second in the world as far as the incidence of HIV is concerned.

The implications this data has for HIV prevention are significant. It is at the level of gender roles that sexual risks become deeply embedded in our cultures and safety can be steadfastly resisted as a result - despite wide awareness of HIV and the commonsense ways of avoiding it (Plummer, 2007).

Conclusion

In the light of the above, it is imperative that issues of masculinity in the Caribbean be carefully attended to. We cannot talk of emancipation when a construct of our own making or acquiescence continued unabated to oppress us and to delimit life chances. In this respect emancipation is not freedom from the physical chains that accompany enslavement, but more subtly is a call for breaking the hold of cultural chains that hold Caribbean peoples in bondage. As socially constructed, present hegemonic masculinity in the Caribbean is a major cultural shackle that prevents true emancipation in the region.

Emancipation as unfinished business, brings with it an acknowledgement of responsibility to do something with regard to an existing state of affairs.

In a way we are all responsible. We [Society] provide the building blocks, the young people design and construct their own edifice. (Chevannes 1999: 31).

The way to more liberating re-descriptions of what it means to be male in the Caribbean would indeed involve some to dismantling and rebuilding, some / to breaking down and building up. In contrast to some culturally discordant understandings of self and others offered by the constitution of 'hegemonic masculinity' that have emerged in Caribbean culture, the time is ripe for engaging language and (symbolic) culture liberating 're-descriptions' of masculinity for the contemporary Caribbean.

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