

# WHY A MEN'S MOVEMENT?

In circles even smaller than those normally inhabited by the revolutionary left, the developing Men's Movement is causing a bit of a stir. There are even signs — such as Jill Tweedie's heart-fluttering review of the men's magazine *Achilles Heel* in the *Guardian* — that the movement is coming out of its closet, and may have some important things to offer the socialist movement.

This article looks sympathetically at the men's movement, and examines the criticism of it made by socialist feminists and the orthodox left. It is written from the point of view of one who wants revolutionary organisations to adopt these new insights into sexuality. Our aim, writes Paul Holt, should be to destroy capitalism without destroying ourselves in the process.

The seriousness of the men's movement is probably best demonstrated by the two issues of *Achilles Heel* — 'a magazine of men's politics' — published by a collective in London. The magazine covers a wide range of issues, from fairly theoretical topics like 'masculinity and fascism', 'sexism and male sexuality', and 'the problem with patriarchy', through to more personal notes on 'men's health', 'the diary of a male househusband', and a discussion of experiences in men's groups. It also includes cartoons, poems, and photos, and the whole thing has a lively and creative feel to it, thanks partly to the original and bizarre design of the magazine. It has sold like hot cakes — yet hardly anyone seems to know what the men's movement is about, and most of those that do are either enthusiastic members of men's groups or are in varying degrees critical of the movement.

## WHY A MEN'S MOVEMENT?

It is far too early to try and give a definitive set of reasons why men started, in 1973, and then again a year or two ago, to meet in groups all over the country. We would probably all agree that we felt various pressing needs: to learn how to express our emotions and make real relationships with men, to understand and try and change our sexist and exploitative attitudes towards women, to try and deal with our sexual repressions...to name but a few. For a lot of us, a major stimulus forcing us to try and deal with these problems was, and is, the influence of the women's liberation movement in general, and our personal and political relationships with feminist women in particular.

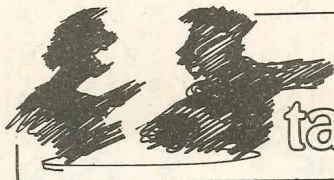
But my impression from the people I met at the Manchester Men's Conference is that plenty of men have identified with the men's movement without this political kick in the pants from feminists. They've come from a general awareness of the limited nature of their emotional lives, and, in some cases, from an extension of the insights they've gained in therapy or from contact with eastern religions.

Some men have a history of work in the socialist movement, and have come to reject the movement as irretrievably sexist and/or because they feel that the only realistic thing one can do is to change oneself. Some still regard themselves as socialists, but are fundamentally critical of orthodox socialist activity.

Yet another set of men in the movement, surprisingly well represented at the Manchester conference, are those of us who identify with the socialist movement, are active in trade unions, political groups, and united fronts, but who believe that socialism has to be filtered out by the practical and theoretical insights of sexual politics.

## SOME OF THE ISSUES

Because there are so many strands of thought in the men's movement, some of the criticisms made of it are bound to hit home



worth  
talking about

outright hostility which comes from the most orthodox of the left — best put to me as 'I don't need men's groups, I've been in men's groups ever since I was in a gang. I haven't got any problems, it's Margaret Thatcher and Jim Callaghan who've got all the problems'. Such people neglect the major insight of the sexual politics movement — that we are all fucked up living under the yoke of capitalism, and that we are going to have a hard time creating a better world unless we begin now to deal with the sexism, racism, and authoritarianism which is deeply ingrained in everyone's personality.

Another line of attack is to be found in a remark by David Widgery: 'Quite a lot of people who couldn't see what [the left] was all about anyway pushed off to have kids, lick their wounds or do their horoscopes' (*Time Out*, 9-15 March 1979). True, there are plenty of men in the movement who have rejected the left, and they've made the classic liberal individualist step of assuming that they can get their personal lives into a healthy state without any revolutionary change in society. Where the hippies believe in LSD, they believe in men's groups for personal therapy.

But the blanket criticism misses the mark. The fact is that many, if not all of us on the left are 'wounded'. Some of the wounds are inflicted by an oppressive social system, in which men comply with those massive influences making us pretend to be tough, resourceful, rational, and unemotional. But some are self-inflicted in the left-wing movement itself. This movement too is dominated by tough, rational, unemotional men, and they insist on structures and activities which require just those qualities and a lot of us are being burned out, finding ourselves unable to sustain relationships with women and children, becoming depressed and ill, because we blindly follow the dictates of orthodox Leninism.

Men's groups can be a place where we examine these hierarchical structures and masculine methods, and where we try and find ways of making revolution without making ourselves into human computers.

## ARE MEN OPPRESSED?

The most important criticism of the men's movement comes from socialist feminists. It is important because it comes from people who have a deep understanding of sexual politics, and aren't blinded by the myths of the traditional male left that sexual movements are divisive and that only capitalists have personal problems.

In the second issue of *Achilles Heel* Vic Seidler argues, 'As men we oppress women, but this doesn't

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within capitalist society'. He then goes on to describe this oppression in terms of men having 'to turn our bodies into machines which we can control' in order to live up to the 'competitive, ambitious, strong man' we are supposed to be. The first issue of *Achilles Heel* strongly implies that, because men are oppressed, they have the right to organise autonomously in the same way as women do.

This is where the socialist feminists begin their criticism, and many of us in the men's movement agree with them. They argue that men are not oppressed in the same way as women are, since, by and large, men are the agents of the oppres-

ion of women. They agree that men have real problems in playing the violent game of pretending to be a man, but they say men should be described as 'deformed' (or some such word) rather than as 'oppressed'. And they are hostile to the idea of men developing an autonomous movement, since this would be, in practice if not by intention, another institution guarding and extending the power of men over women.

There isn't space here to say why I agree with the socialist feminists. It isn't however, because I am guilt ridden and trying to make a good impression with the socialist feminists.

They quite rightly point to the

danger of men in the men's movement simply drawing support from other men and even becoming complacent and smug about our personal 'anti-sexist' development.

The most important thing we can do, it seems to me, is to 'come out' with our sexual politics in all our dealings with people. This involves countering the superman images, the anti-women and anti-gay attitudes we meet everyday. It also means creating structures and activities which will carry forwards the movement against sexual oppression, not separate from, but part and parcel of the general political work we do. Not least, we have to work out ways of creating a revolutionary organisation which is informed by the insights of sexual politics, so that it can help destroy capitalism without destroying its members.

Information about Men's Groups, and all the publications mentioned in the article, can be obtained from:

*Men's Free Press*  
7 St. Mark's Rise  
London E8 2NJ

## MEN AGAINST SEXISM CONFERENCE 'Relating our personal and our political selves'

Last month 300 men converged on Manchester for a 'Men Against Sexism' (MAS) conference. It was a resounding success. A warm, affectionate and trusting atmosphere was generated, free from the competitive and often haranguing postures men are familiar with when we come together to talk politics and make decisions.

I went to the conference expecting conflict, confusion, mistrust, and disappointment. If these were present, they were not apparent, and credit must be given to the Manchester Men's Group's success in creating a conference structure which enabled the maximum possible interaction in the short space of time available.

Different interests and 'tendencies' were given space to develop alongside each other. Perhaps the predominant common factors were that most men there had had experience of belonging to men's groups had had their sexism challenged in friendships and sexual relationships with women, and had found difficulty in relating their personal lives to their political and work selves.

## FILMS

The conference included a creche, a disco, and two films, and was structured by two sets of groupings: home groups and workshops. Everyone was allocated randomly to the former and left to get on with whatever arose. The latter arose spontaneously from individual and collective suggestions.

A man who had worked with

in Santa Cruz emphasised the need for a personal understanding prior to action against rape. Discussion went on to the relationship between male sexuality and power. Two of the group had experiences of being raped by men and were able to talk from this about the devastating effect the violence inflicted on their sexuality and their emotions.

This moved us to consider the ways in which rape is a ritual expression of establishing domination over men in institutional settings such as schools, prisons, and the forces, as well as over women in a patriarchal society.

## LEFT GROUPS AND MEN AGAINST SEXISM

Although I describe myself as non-aligned, I have been close to Big Flame in Liverpool for about six months and was therefore attracted to the workshops concerning the Left and sexual politics. A feature of these workshops was their openness and tolerance of experience which in other contexts would provide ammunition for criticisms by left organisations. Questions were posed more than answers given. How can anti-sexist men relate their consciousness to left politics?

A huge gap was recognised between anti-sexist socialist men, often highly educated with professional or 'sub-culture' life styles that enable them to have personal time sufficient to develop a consciousness to support women struggling against patriarchy, and working

oppression that prevent such a consciousness from developing. It was suggested that demands for a shorter working week plus a decent living wage would provide one condition — personal time — necessary for such a consciousness.

## CRITICISM

The conference ended with a plenary which supported the idea of a permanent Men Against Sexism newsletter organised in rotation by different local men's groups and open to contributions from both men and women. A criticism from gay men that the conference structure had not encouraged them to meet separately early on was accepted. A further conference was proposed in the autumn in Bristol.

## What is the future for MAS?

My own view is that any claims for MAS as an autonomous movement akin to the women's or gay movements, should be viewed with the utmost suspicion: men do not experience the material oppression of these groups, just the opposite.

However, men's emotional make-up and sexuality are repressed and distorted by capitalism and the patriarchal nuclear family, and we have much to gain personally from the struggles of women.

The possibility of collective action by MAS seems to be still far off, if a possibility at all, without prior initiatives from the women's movement to involve men's groups in action on behalf of their demands. It is time, therefore, for an analysis and critique of MAS from the women's movement to help nurture — or kill off — the