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Forks in the Road of Men's Gender Politics: Men's Rights vs Feminist Allies

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Abstract

How do men respond to feminist movements and to shifts in the gender order? In this paper, I introduce the concept of historical gender formation to show how shifting social conditions over the past forty years shaped a range of men's organized responses to feminism. Focusing on the US, I show how progressive men reacted to feminism in the 1970s by forming an internally contradictory 'men's liberation' movement that soon split into opposing anti-feminist and pro-feminist factions. Three large transformations of the 1980s and 1990s – the professional institutionalization of feminism, the rise of a postfeminist sensibility, and shifts in the political economy (especially deindustrialization and the rise of the neoliberal state) – generated new possibilities. I end by pointing to an emergent moderate men's rights discourse that appeals to a postfeminist sensibility, and to an increasingly diverse base for men's work to prevent violence against women.

Keywords

Gender violence; men's movements; feminist allies.

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Introduction

For more than a century, men have responded to feminist movements in the US and in other western jurisdictions in varying ways, ranging from outright hostility, to sarcastic ridicule, to indifference, to grudging sympathy, to enthusiastic support (Kimmel 1987; Messner 1997). In this article I argue that large-scale social changes – those shaped by social movements, changing cultural beliefs, and shifts in political economy – create moments of historical gender formation that in turn shape, constrain and enable certain forms of men's gender politics. In particular, I trace the two most politically engaged tails of a continuum of gender politics – anti-feminist men's rights groups and pro-feminist men allies – with an eye to understanding how moments of historical gender formation shape men's gender politics. First, I draw from an earlier study that outlined the context that gave rise to opposing US men's movements in the 1970s and 1980s (Messner 1997), reiterating parts of that analysis that are relevant to thinking about the concurrent and mutually antagonistic rise of men's anti-feminism and men's pro-feminism. Second, I draw from a recent study of men anti-rape and anti-domestic violence activists in the US, to illuminate men's current engagements with feminism and gender politics (Messner, Greenberg and Peretz 2015).

The 1970s and the present moment generated possibilities for men's gender politics: forks in the road, as it were. The image of historical forks in the road implies choices for men's responses to feminism, but not an unlimited range of 'free' choices. Rather, feminist challenges and shifts in the gender order confront men with a limited field of structured options: stop dead in your tracks, befuddled; attempt a U-turn and retreat toward an idealized past of male entitlement; turn right and join a backlash against feminism; or bend left and actively support feminism. Adapted from Omi and Winant's (1986) theory of racial formation, I introduce *historical gender formation*, a concept that provides a more nuanced view of the dynamics of gender politics than the dualistic image of a fork in the road. Central to the theory of racial formation is the idea that the grassroots racial justice movements of the 1950s through the 1970s wrested concessions from the state, altered the ways in which racial categories were defined, and created new foundations upon which subsequent racial tensions and politics arose. Similarly, the women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s wrested concessions from the state, challenged and partially transformed cultural values about sex and gender, and succeeded in bringing about substantial reforms in various social institutions. Thus, men's engagements with gender politics today take place in a very different context – one partly transformed by feminism – than they did in the 1970s. I will demonstrate that the 1970s and the present are two moments of gender formation that create different limits and possibilities for men's engagements, both for and against feminism.

1970s gender formation: The women's movement and men's liberation

By the early 1970's, following several years of organizing, the women's liberation movement had exploded on to the social scene. In the United States, the most visible feminist activism took place 'in the streets': small local consciousness-raising groups, grassroots groups linked by word-of-mouth and hand-printed newsletters, a sprouting of local rape-crisis centers and women's shelters run by volunteers in private homes or low-rent storefronts, all punctuated by mass public demonstrations for women's rights (Allen 1970; Stansell 2010). In other words, in relation to male-dominated institutions like the state, the economy, military, religion or medicine, feminism in the US was mostly on the outside looking in (with academia, where feminists gained an earlier foothold, a partial exception). The 1970s, then, was a time of deeply entrenched gender inequality across all institutions, against which a grassroots women's movement was organizing on many fronts, characteristically in alliance with gay rights and other social justice movements.

By the early 1970s a few US men – many of them veterans of the new left, anti-war and student movements – responded to the re-emergence of feminism in the 1960s by organizing men's

consciousness-raising groups and networks, and asking a potentially subversive question: what does feminism have to do with us (Men's Consciousness-Raising Group 1971)? Some leaders promoted the idea of a 'men's liberation movement' that would work symmetrically with the women's liberation movement to bring about progressive personal and social change (Farrell 1974; Nichols 1975). They reasoned that a men's liberation program that emphasized potential gains *for men* might draw more interest than one that positioned men as oppressors whose only morally correct action was guilty self-flagellation. The language of sex roles, emerging at that time as the dominant discourse of liberal feminism – just one of multiple feminist positions that emerged in the wake of the 1960s rebirth of feminism – was an ideal means through which to package feminism for men in a way that lessened the guilt and maximized the potential gain that men might expect from 'liberation' (Messner 1998). The 'female sex role' had clearly oppressed women, men's liberationists argued, and 'the male sex role' also harmed men.

Leaders posited men's liberation as the logical flipside of women's liberation, but they walked a tightrope from the start. They acknowledged that sexism had oppressed women and privileged men; it was pretty hard to ignore that 59 per cent wage gap, the obvious lack of women in political and corporate leadership positions, or the ubiquitous violence against women. But they sought to attract men to feminism by stressing how the 'male sex role' was 'impoverished', 'unhealthy', even 'lethal' for men's health, emotional lives and relationships (Jourard 1974). Thus, from the outset, there was tension in men's liberation's attempt to focus simultaneously on men's institutional power over women *and* on the 'costs of masculinity' to men. Savvy men's liberation leaders sought to connect these seemingly contradictory positions by demonstrating that it was in fact men's attempts to secure access to the institutional privileges of masculinity that enforced boys' and men's emotional stoicism, lack of empathy for self and others, physical risk-taking, and unhealthy daily practices like smoking and drinking. Progressive men's liberationists drew from the works of psychologist Joseph Pleck (1977) who argued that while women were *oppressed* by the female sex role, men were *privileged and simultaneously dehumanized* by the male sex role. The social change corollary to this was the assertion that, when men committed themselves to bringing about full equality for women, this would create the conditions for the full humanization of men, including healthier and longer lives and more satisfying relationships with intimate partners, friends, and children.

It did not take long before serious slippage began to occur with men's liberationists' attempts to navigate the tension between emphasizing men's privileges and the costs of masculinity. Less politically progressive leaders began to assert a false symmetry, viewing men and women as differently but equally oppressed by sex roles (Farrell 1974; Goldberg 1976). This assertion generated critical distrust from politically radical women, and vigorous debate from more politically radical men in the movement. By the mid-to-late 1970's, men's liberation had split directly along this fissure. On the one hand, men's rights organizations stressed the costs of narrow conceptions of masculinity to men, and either downplayed or angrily disputed feminist claims that patriarchy benefited men at women's expense. On the other hand, a profeminist (sometimes called 'anti-sexist') men's movement emphasized the primary importance of joining with women to do away with men's institutionalized privileges. Patriarchy may *dehumanize* men, profeminists continued to insist, but the costs that men pay for adherence to narrow conceptions of masculinity are linked to the promise of patriarchal power and privilege.

In short, men's liberation had premised itself upon a liberal language of symmetrical sex roles, which contributed both to its promise as a movement and to its eventual demise. Following the fissuring of men's liberation, the men's rights movement continued to deploy a narrowly conservative language of sex roles. Now severed from its progressive roots, a more reactionary tendency within the men's rights movement unleashed overtly anti-feminist and sometimes outright misogynist discourse and actions (Baumli 1985). Meanwhile, the emergent profeminist men's movement largely rejected the language of sex roles, adopting instead a radical language

of gender relations that facilitated an activist focus on ending men's institutional privileges and men's violence against women (Messner 1997, 1998).

By the mid-1970s the women's movement had altered the political context in ways that made men's rights movement possible, if not inevitable. The men's rights movement was not simply a kneejerk backlash against feminism; it was a movement that co-opted the liberal feminist language of symmetrical sex roles and then turned this language back on itself. Men's liberationist-turned men's rights advocate Warren Farrell (1974), for instance, borrowed Betty Friedan's (1963) idea that a 'feminine mystique' oppressed women, arguing that men were trapped in a 'masculine mystique' that narrowly positioned them as breadwinners and protectors. In response to feminist criticisms of the effects on women of being constructed as 'sex objects', Farrell posited an equally negative effect on men in being constructed as 'success objects'. Herb Goldberg's 1976 book *The Hazards of Being Male* asserted that male privilege is a 'myth'. Men actually have it worse than women, Goldberg argued, due to the fact that the male role is far more rigid than the female role, and because women have created a movement through which they can now transcend the limits of culturally-imposed femininity. Men's rights organizations broke from the men's liberation movement's gender symmetry and began to articulate a distinct discourse of overt and angry anti-feminist backlash. By the late 1970's and early 1980's, men's rights advocates were claiming that men are the true victims of prostitution, pornography, dating rituals, sexist media conventions, divorce settlements, false rape accusations, sexual harassment, and domestic violence (Baumli 1985). And in subsequent decades, the beating heart of the men's rights movement has been organizations that focus – largely through the Internet – on fighting for fathers' rights, especially in legal cases involving divorce and child custody (Dragiewicz 2008; Menzies 2007).

Shifting gender formations

In the 1980s and into the 1990s the radical power of feminism fractured under a broadside of anti-feminist backlash (Faludi 1991), and fragmented internally from corrosive disputes among feminists around issues of race and class inequalities, and divisive schisms that centered on sex work and pornography (Echols 2002). Some key political efforts by US feminists such as the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) had failed, and feminism was less visible as a mass movement. However in 1989 sociologist Verta Taylor argued that the US feminist movement had not disappeared; rather, this was a time of 'movement abeyance', when activists in submerged networks continued to fight for equality, sustaining below-the-radar efforts that created the possibility for future political mobilizations. At the same time, in Canada, Australia and other jurisdictions where women's policy machineries were established, feminist networking and activism went 'mainstream', as did states' commitment to gender mainstreaming globally (see Bacchi and Eveline 2003; Franzway, Court and Connell 1989).

But there was something more happening in the 1980s and 1990s US gender politics than 'movement abeyance'. Feminist momentum from the 1970s and networks of feminist activists combined with three substantial and interrelated social changes: the institutionalization and professionalization of feminism; the emergence of a widespread postfeminist cultural sensibility; and shifts in the political economy, including deindustrialization and the rise of a neoliberal state that slashes taxes for corporations and the rich, cuts public welfare and education, and celebrates individualism and the primacy of the market. These three changes created the current moment of gender formation that makes possible a range of men's engagements with gender politics, including men's rights organizing and profeminist men's activism that take substantially different forms than they did in the 1970s.

Professionally institutionalized feminism

The mass feminist movement was in decline in the 1980s and 1990s United States, but this was also a time of successful and highly visible feminist institutional reform, including the building

of large feminist advocacy organizations like the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL), the institutionalization of women's and gender studies in universities, and the stabilization of myriad community and campus-based rape crisis and domestic violence centers (Martin 1990). Thus, as was occurring in Canada, Australia and elsewhere, feminists reformed police practices and legal responses to rape and domestic violence; workplaces incorporated sexual harassment trainings; and schools revised sexist curricula and expanded opportunities for girls' sports. These reforms were accompanied by the creation and expansion of professional sub-fields and occupational niches that focused on women's issues in social work, law and psychology.

The institutionalization of feminism created new challenges for feminists, not the least of which was what Markowitz and Tice (2002) called 'the paradoxes of professionalization'. On the one hand, professionalization created the conditions for sustaining feminist reform efforts on many fronts, including the creation of career paths for feminists in law, academia, medicine, social work and other professions (Staggenborg 1988). But on the other hand it led to a diversion of activist energies away from radical social change efforts toward finding sustainable funding sources for service provision, and also ushered in different organizational processes, with bureaucratic hierarchies displacing earlier feminist commitments to democratic decision-making processes.

US feminists also managed to wrest significant concessions from the state, including the 1974 passage of Title IX (federal law related to gender equity in schools), and the 1994 *Violence Against Women Act*, which altered the landscape for feminist work against gender-based violence. Even given the fact that state support for women's issues in the US remained minimal, Kristen Bumiller (2013) argues that such 'feminist collaboration with the state' threatens to water down, or even sever, the language and grassroots politics of feminism. Moreover, with the continuing decline of the welfare state and the concomitant expansion of neoliberalism, what Ruth Gilmore (2007) calls 'the non-profit industrial complex' emerged as a sort of 'shadow state' (Wolch 1990), funded by an exploding number of foundations, and advancing professionalized public health-oriented approaches to issues like violence against women.

The rise of professionally institutionalized feminism, in short, broadened and stabilized the field of feminist action, while simultaneously thinning its political depth, threatening even to make feminist language and analysis disappear altogether: university women's studies programs become 'gender studies programs'; 'violence against women' morphs to 'gender-based violence'; and feminist organizations created by and for women become mixed-gender organizations whose historical roots are easily forgotten in the crush of day-to-day struggles to measure and document the effectiveness of service provisions, needed to win continued funding from foundations or the state (Messner, Greenberg and Peretz 2015). Professionally institutionalized feminism was also accompanied by a widespread shift in cultural values about gender: namely, the emergence of a postfeminist sensibility.

Postfeminism

As movement feminism receded from public view in the 1990s, a new and controversial 'postfeminist' discourse emerged. Feminist scholars have explored and debated the claim that a whole generation of younger people express a postfeminist worldview. On the one side, drawing from public opinion data, sociologists Hall and Rodriguez (2003) found little support for claims of widespread adherence to postfeminism, which they defined as including anti-feminist beliefs. But on the other side most scholars have drawn a distinction between postfeminism and opposition to feminism. Postfeminist narratives normally include an appreciation for feminist accomplishments, coupled with a belief that the work of feminism is in the past, and thus that feminist collective action is no longer necessary (Butler 2013). Sociologist Jo Reger (2012) argues that younger women and men for the most part agree with feminist positions on equal

opportunities for women and men, but tend to experience feminism as both 'everywhere and nowhere'. The 'everywhere' refers both to feminism's professional institutionalization and to the ways that liberal feminist values have permeated popular culture in much the same way that fluoride invisibly permeates public drinking water (in fact, Reger (2012) refers to today's youth as 'generation fluoride'). However, feminism today is also experienced as 'nowhere': young people do not see an in-the-streets mass feminist movement, nor do they see any reason for one. The continuing work of professional feminism is, to most young people, as invisible as the cavity-prevention work of fluoride in our public waters.

As with any widely shared generational sensibility, postfeminism contains its own contradictions and limits. Most of the younger women in the supposedly 'postfeminist' generation studied by Aronson (2003) appreciated the accomplishments of the feminist movement and many recognized the existence of continued gender inequalities. However, Aronson described roughly half of them as 'fence-sitters', passive supporters of feminist goals, thus leaving open the question of how, or under what conditions, postfeminist consciousness might convert to feminist identification and political action. Pomerantz and her colleagues (2013) show that postfeminist discourse makes it hard for school girls to name sexism when it happens, yet they argue that postfeminist narratives have a built-in instability, especially when they run up against the lived reality of continuing sexist constraints on girls. For instance, girls and young women (often supported by their fathers and mothers) can become instant gender-equity activists when they discover that they are not being given equal athletic opportunities in schools or colleges, or when college women survivors of sexual assault learn that their own institutions are neither supporting them nor holding perpetrators accountable. In other words, when groups of girls and women bump up against sexist institutional constraints, it is possible for an individualist postfeminist sensibility to convert to collective feminist actions. And when it does, such feminist action is often given form and facilitated by existing institutionalized professional feminism – for instance, campus rape crisis centers or women's law centers.

This feminist optimism, however, faces an uphill struggle against the regressive tendencies built into a postfeminist sensibility that is coterminous with a larger political shift to neoliberal celebrations of individual market consumption choices as drivers for progress. And postfeminism is perfectly consistent with – indeed is shaped by and helps to naturalize – the eclipse of feminist language and politics within the professionalized non-profit industrial complex. Postfeminism also works in tandem with shifts in the political economy, including the nearly four-decade-long trend of deindustrialization that accompanied the ascendance of neoliberalism and that has disproportionately rendered poor and blue-collar young men redundant, a shift eventually referred to by some as 'the decline of men'.

Deindustrialization and 'the decline of men'

The early 1980s recession accelerated a continuing deindustrialization of the American labor force that resulted in the elimination of millions of unionized jobs, rising levels of structural unemployment, and the growth of low-paid non-unionized service sector jobs (Wilson 1989). As in the UK under Margaret Thatcher, in Australia under John Howard, and in Canada under Stephen Harper, the policies of Reaganomics facilitated this economic restructuring by tugging the nation away from a New Deal/Great Society welfare state toward a state based on neoliberal ideas that celebrated individualism and the primacy of the market, while slashing taxes on rich individuals and corporations and cutting support for welfare and education. These shifts continued in subsequent decades, resulting in the dramatic growth of a super-rich class of people, a shrinking middle class and a growing proportion of working poor in the population. The economic restructuring that accelerated from the 1980s and 1990s had multiple and devastating effects; however, for my purposes here, I want to focus on how the neoliberalization of the economy was especially devastating for families headed by blue collar male wage earners. As women flowed into the labor market by the millions – as much out of necessity as for reasons

sparked by ideals of feminist empowerment – the more educated ones poured into a growing field of professional occupations, while the greater mass of women filled an expanding array of low-paid pink collar and service sector jobs (Charles and Grusky 2004). While professional class men continued to fare reasonably well in this economic restructuring, blue collar and poor men – disproportionately men of color – faced an increasingly bleak field of economic opportunity (Wilson 1996).

As the 1990s came to a close, Connell (1995) documented how the crumbling structural foundation for the male breadwinner role had escalated the gender insecurities of young working class men. Deteriorating public schools, declining hope for decent jobs in inner cities, and the expansion of prisons combined to create – especially for younger generations of black and brown boys and young men – contexts conducive to skyrocketing school dropout rates, neighborhood gang activity, illegal commerce in the informal economy, and high levels of domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women (DeKeseredy, Shahid and Schwartz 2003; Flores and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013; Rios 2011). And right at the time, when the broader culture is trumpeting the arrival of 'involved fatherhood', the constraints on young poor and working class men make the achievement of the middle class ideal of an involved breadwinning father increasingly unreachable.

Men and gender politics today

The three trends I have outlined – professionally institutionalized feminism, the emergent culture of postfeminism, and a post-industrial political economy characterized by deindustrialization and neoliberal state policies – together help to constitute the present moment of gender formation. Next, I will sketch how these three trends together make possible particular forms of men's antifeminist and profeminist actions.

Possibilities for antifeminist men's rights activism

By the 2000s, shifts in the political economy, combined with the increased visibility of women in higher education, popular culture and politics, and the growing public awareness of the institutionalization of women's rights, sparked journalistic and political hand-wringing about a supposed 'war against boys' in public schools and a widespread 'decline of males' in the public sphere (Sommers 2001; Tiger 2000). These escalating public concerns about boys and men created fertile ground for a resurgent men's rights movement.

But it is unlikely that we will see a widely popular or even marginally successful frontal attack on feminism from men's rights groups. This is in part because the same postfeminist sensibility that views feminism as a movement of the past is likely also to view aggressively anti-feminist men's rights activism as atavistically misogynistic. As values favoring public equality for women are increasingly institutionalized and defined not in a language of politicized feminism but more in a common sense language of equity and fairness, this shift also contracts the possibilities for anti-feminism. In a sense, I am suggesting that the institutional deck is stacked against overt anti-feminist backlash, be it frontal attacks on Title IX in schools, or men's rights groups' challenges to the state's (still minimal) support for women's shelters. While this outcome can and should be seen as feminist success, I am not arguing that it is time for a celebratory feminist victory lap. History, to be sure, has not ended. Dragiewicz's (2008, 2011) research on US men's rights groups' attempts to stop state funding of women's shelters shows how this moment of gender formation still includes openings for anti-feminist backlash, as does Girard's (2009) and Mann's (2012) research on similar efforts in Canada. However the story at the heart of this research also illustrates the legal limits of such backlash; after all, professional feminist legal activists defeated the anti-feminist actions analyzed by Dragiewicz, Girard and Mann. Today, contingent on the specifics of national political developments, institutionalized feminism continues to influence legal and other decision making, albeit in a context that is often marked

by deep controversy (Brodie 2008). Arguably, institutionalized feminism in the US now occupies a legal high ground, notwithstanding one that is still sometimes contested.

Rather than overt anti-feminist backlash, I argue that what is more likely to gain traction today in the US is a 'kinder, gentler' form of men's rights discourse and organizing, such as that now characterized by Warren Farrell, often considered the 'godfather' of the men's rights movement. Farrell's analysis in the 1980s and early 1990s drifted from the liberal feminist symmetry of men's liberation to asserting in his book *The Myth of Male Power* (1993) that there are many ways in which men are victimized by women's less visible forms of power. For instance, in response to women's attempts to stop sexual harassment in workplaces, Farrell claimed that in fact it was male employers who were disempowered and victimized by their secretaries' 'miniskirt power, cleavage power, and flirtation power'. In his more recent public speeches, however, Farrell appears to have returned to a less combative language of gender symmetry, reminiscent of his mid-1970s perspective (Farrell 2014). While it may seem on the surface that men are privileged with higher status and higher paying jobs, Farrell asserts, men pay a huge price for accepting the increased responsibilities that come with these jobs. Women just don't choose to enter higher paying careers, he claims, and they are smart to reject the stress; their lives are better for it. Farrell's insistence that gender divisions of labor result not from institutional discrimination against women, but rather from the accumulated individual 'choices' of women and men is consistent with current neoliberal cheerleading for individual women to 'lean in' to compete with men as professionals or corporate leaders. But Farrell's twist is that women's refusals to lean in and compete are actually healthy and smart choices; men are the chumps for working so hard for public success.

Farrell's strategy is to raise sympathies for men, not to engage in anti-feminist polemics. In a postfeminist context, this more moderate men's rights discourse is likely to ring true as reasonable, as common sense. In this worldview, the women's movement succeeded in improving women's lives, and the logical flip-side is this: in the absence of a symmetrical men's movement to improve men's lives, men suffer harm. While anti-feminist vitriol continues to mark men's rights discourse on the Internet (Dragiewicz 2008, 2011), the emergent 'moderate' voice of the men's rights movement does not directly attack feminism or disparage women. Rather, it maneuvers in the postfeminist interstices between the 'everywhere' and the 'nowhere' of feminism. The means to improve men's lives are articulated to the general public in a depoliticized and individualized 'equality language' (Behre 2015) that resonates in a postfeminist and neoliberal context where present-day feminism seems to be 'nowhere'. Meanwhile, leaders such as Farrell (2014) are apparently coming to realize that they need not rant to a men's rights audience that feminism is 'everywhere', privileging women and holding men down. This is what these men already know; it is the fluoride in their ideological waters.

As a result, men's rights rhetoric that contains an *implicit anti-feminism* is likely to resonate with men who feel insecure or embattled. And I would speculate that moderate men's rights leaders' focus on individual choice and their implicit antifeminism resonates best with educated middle class white men who do not want to appear to be backwards misogynists. A central aspect of privileged men's gender strategies in recent years, after all, is to present one's self as an educated modern man who is supportive of gender equality. And this is achieved partly by projecting atavistic sexism on to less educated men, poor men, immigrant men and men of color (DeKeseredy, Shahid and Schwartz 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner 1994).

In this context, is there a potential for less educated poor and working class men to constitute a sort of lumpen anti-feminist army for men's rights? After all, declining economic opportunities for working class men to achieve a traditional conception of the male breadwinner role, combined with the perception that the law favors mothers over fathers in divorce and custody settlements might seem to create a perfect storm for the creation of an army of angry working class fathers ready to join men's rights organizations (Kimmel 2013). Thus far, this has hardly

been the case. Most leaders of the men's rights movement are not poor and working class men; rather, they are men with the educational and financial resources needed to form organizations, create websites or hire attorneys. But just as the multi-billionaire Koch brothers' well-financed right wing anti-statism appeals to many lower-middle class whites, the men's rights movement's anti-feminist backlash rhetoric could possibly appeal to men with less education and less resources, men who may have a powerful father hunger but feel that their 'rights' have been denied them by controlling mothers, and especially by the state.

Indeed, in their study of poor working class fathers in Philadelphia and Camden, sociologists Edin and Nelson (2014) found that the men they studied frequently express 'a profound, abiding mistrust of women'; they think 'the system' that enforces child support automatically and unfairly favors mothers, who themselves are gatekeepers who keep the men away from their own children. These men feel as though they have few rights, while both mothers and 'the system' treat them as though they are 'just a paycheck' (when many of these fathers have no regular paycheck). In fact, this discourse is precisely what is commonly disseminated on men's rights Internet sites (Dragiewicz 2008, 2011; Mann 2005; Menzies 2007). The common feminist retort to fathers' rights claims have in the past been something like this: 'When you share fully in the *responsibilities* of birth control, and then also share equally the *responsibilities* of child support and childcare *before* divorce, *then* you can share parental rights afterwards'. But the stories of poor fathers reported by Edin and Nelson (2014) illustrate the inadequacy of this rejoinder. These are men who desire deeply to be foundational and present in their children's lives, but who face seemingly insurmountable institutional barriers to achieving and sustaining this parental ideal. To date, there is very little evidence that masses of poor fathers are joining as foot soldiers in anti-feminist collective action. But if current industrial nations continue to lack the will to address the many ways in which a huge strata of young men are being treated as dispensable by the economy and the criminal justice system, it is possible that some of these men will find resonance with Internet-based anti-feminist men's rights discourse that blames women and the liberal state for men's woes.

Possibilities for men's profeminist activism

The recent institutionalization and professionalization of feminism has included a modest expansion of opportunities for men professionals to work on gender issues in social work, academia, law and other fields. This expanding base of men's professional action in gender fields carries both promise and risk. Especially given the recent explosions of public awareness of sexual assault and domestic violence in academia, the military and men's sports, this moment of opportunity and risk is nowhere more apparent than within the array of professional fields that confront violence against women. In 2014, even the President of the United States – not usually a platform for feminist calls for action – called on men to take an active role in ending violence against women.

Feminist women toiled for the past half-century to transform public awareness about violence against women, and to create and sustain rape crisis centers and domestic violence shelters. For the most part, feminist women welcome male allies who step up to prevent future acts of sexual and domestic violence. But some feminists in the anti-rape and anti-domestic violence community are also cautious about the ways in which male allies still benefit from male privilege that works to the detriment of women professional colleagues (Messner, Greenberg and Peretz 2015). And in a context of postfeminism, long-time feminist activists fear that, just as the field of gender-based violence prevention has expanded to include more men, the politics underlying anti-violence actions have thinned, severing action from feminist historical and political roots (Greenberg and Messner 2014).

In short, I suggest that while feminists continue to strategize vigilantly against eruptions of misogynist anti-feminist backlash, a less obvious but perhaps greater challenge springs from the

ways in which the very conditions of historical gender formation that facilitate men's movement into professionalized 'gender work' also threaten to eclipse feminism altogether. In particular, widespread ideologies of postfeminism, coupled with depoliticized and marketized anti-violence initiatives, threaten to further erase feminist women's organizational leadership as well as the feminist analysis that underlies anti-violence work. Today's anti-violence workers commonly refer to 'the movement' not as an eruption of mass activism, but as a network of like-minded anti-violence professionals, and they talk of 'politics' not in terms of activism aimed to bring about structural transformations, but as strategies designed to keep their organizations funded (Messner, Greenberg and Peretz 2015). Much of the violence prevention curricula deployed in schools and communities today has jettisoned the feminist idea that violence against women springs from men's over-conformity with dominant conceptions of masculinity, instead deploying a pragmatic (and more individualistic) strategy of teaching boys and men to make 'healthy choices' – a discourse that, not incidentally, is shaped so that it can be subjected to 'metrics' that document program effectiveness in support of continuing requests for state or foundation funds.

What are the forces that potentially counter the depoliticization of anti-rape and anti-domestic violence work? One – though this is likely to be temporary – is the continued presence of older feminist women in the field, who mentor younger cohorts of professional women and men in ways that keep feminist analysis and goals at the center of the work. A second source of change, potentially more transformative, lies in the recent growth of diversity among men in the anti-violence field. As the field has expanded in the US, the opportunities for men to work in internships and paid jobs in rape and domestic violence prevention, state and foundation funders have increasingly targeted violence prevention efforts to communities of boys and men considered to be 'at risk' due to poverty, crumbling schools, and high rates of gang violence and drug use. There is a widely held perception in the field today that boys of color from poor communities will be more open to learning from young men from their own communities, who look and talk more like they do. This in turn has created a demand for a more racially diverse influx of young men into violence prevention work.

The growing number of young African American and Latino men entering anti-violence work is infusing a much-needed intersectional perspective into professional anti-violence work. Intersectionality – the perspective that takes the simultaneity of gender, race, class and other forms of 'intersecting' inequalities as its conceptual core – has long been central in academic feminism (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1991). Indeed, it could be argued that, within academic feminism, intersectionality has for some years been a paradigmatic theoretical perspective and research approach (McCall 2005). But the radical insights of feminist intersectionality risk being diluted or even lost in professionally institutionalized violence prevention efforts.

Men of color's movement into professionalized anti-violence work brings to the field not so much a background in academic intersectionality but, rather, an experience-based *organic intersectionality*, different in two ways from the experiences of most white middle-class men in the field. First, young men of color frequently begin with a commitment to addressing boys' vulnerabilities to various forms of violence – in the home, in the street, and from police. These young men often began working with boys around gang and substance abuse issues, in college internships and then paid jobs in non-profit organizations. In that work, they discovered the links between young men's vulnerabilities to multiple forms of violence with their experiences with rape and domestic violence. In short, it was through doing 'race and class' work with young men that many of these anti-violence workers 'discovered' gender. This in turn created the possibility for an analysis of violence that does not always start with gender as necessarily being foundational (as it so often does with white middle class men who enter the anti-violence field), instead developing into an intersectional understanding of violence, grounded organically in the everyday experiences of race, class, and gender as interlocking processes (Messner, Greenberg and Peretz 2015).

This organically intersectional analysis underlies a second difference between young men of color and white middle class men in the anti-violence field. Young men of color tend to view the now-standard curricula deployed in school- and community-based violence prevention efforts as flat, one-dimensional and thus inadequate. Instead, these young men are innovating and even departing from the standard curricula, developing approaches that draw, for instance, from 'theatre of the oppressed', radical community education pedagogies that plumb the everyday life experiences of boys in order to 'make it real'. Men of color's emergent organically intersectional pedagogies frequently also circle back to academic feminist intersectionality, discovering there a ready resource for understanding connections between violence against women with other forms of 'gender based violence' – like sexual abuse and homophobic bullying of boys and transgender youth – as well as with forms of violence that may not be so obviously (or at least primarily) *about* gender – such as gang violence or police violence.

The progressive potential of the rise of organic intersectionality in the anti-violence field is twofold. First, it has direct appeal to young boys in poor communities because they can see their stake in working for change in their schools and communities. Second, it can re-infuse a powerful dose of radical social justice-oriented politics back into a professionalized anti-violence field that in recent years has seen a severe thinning of its politics, and a near-evaporation of its ability to address connections between gender-based violence with broader social justice issues like poverty, warfare, and cuts in public support for schools and families.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that large-scale changes created by social movements and shifts in political economy generate moments of *historical gender formation* that in turn shape, constrain and enable certain forms of men's gender politics. The gender formation of the 1970s, constituted by a mass feminist movement operating for the most part outside of male-dominated institutions, created a context for the rise of an internally-contradictory men's liberation movement that soon split into an anti-feminist men's rights movement, and supportive pro-feminist men's organizations.

For feminism, and for men's activism around gender issues, the current moment of gender formation is constituted in part by three large shifts that accelerated in the 1980s and 1990s: the professional institutionalization of feminism; the rise of postfeminism; and neoliberal transformations in the political economy. In the US and across western jurisdictions, the radical possibilities of feminism were largely eclipsed behind the rise of non-profit and state-driven initiatives that confront issues like gender-based violence through a professionalized and marketized public health model. While this context has not closed off the possibilities for men's anti-feminist backlash – including vitriolic Internet-based misogyny and efforts to oppose state funding for 'women's issues' – I have pointed to two formations that might prove to be of greater concern than overt antifeminism. First, postfeminism and neoliberalism create a context conducive to a 'kinder-gentler' moderate men's rights strategy that skirts analysis of structural inequalities in favor of a common-sense celebration of individual choice for women and men. This approach, if successful, will further erode feminist gains in public life, while affording already-privileged men a language through which they can position themselves not as atavistic backslashers, but as modern 'new' men who are supportive of equal choices for women and men, unfettered by state policies.

Second, I have argued that the current moment of gender formation has expanded the possibilities for men's participation as allies with women in anti-violence work. While this is a welcome development for most feminists, on the one hand, the current professionalization of gender work in a context of postfeminism risks eclipsing the language and progressive possibilities of feminism, right at a time when men are moving into the field. On the other hand, the linkages of institutionalized anti-violence work with a growing public concern with 'at-risk'

boys and young men in poor schools and communities has drawn more young men of color into the field. In other words, the very social forces – neoliberalization of the economy, criminalization of poor young men of color – that some fear might form the basis for an army of angry anti-feminist men's rights activists, have also created the conditions for a movement of young men of color into the gender-based violence prevention field.

This influx of men of color into the anti-violence field has introduced a perhaps unexpected progressive counterforce against the ways in which professionalized anti-violence efforts under neoliberalism approach sexual assault or domestic violence as discrete, public health issues. Men of color's organically intersectional understandings of violence, coupled with resources from feminist social justice research, have led to the development of innovative strategies in the field that offer a progressive challenge to the depoliticizing drift of conventional professionalized and marketized anti-violence work. For the most part, this challenge emerges not in the language of a narrowly professionalized liberal feminism, but packaged instead in a broadened 'social justice' framework within which feminist ideas about men's violence against women are a central thread in a broad intersectional framework that also addresses the institutionalized violences of racism, poverty, unemployment, declining schools, and the criminal justice system.

Does feminism risk being lost in the social justice configuration now emerging in the professionalized anti-violence field? Do women's concerns with sexual assault and domestic violence risk being subordinated once again to men's concerns about class and race issues? Yes. But the intersectional social justice framework also holds the promise of broadening feminism beyond the limits of the individualistic white professional class feminism so often criticized by feminist women of color. And here is where the continued importance and power of feminist professionals and institutions come into play: veteran feminists can keep alive the flame of a feminism that burns brightly precisely because its politics remain ignited by deep and multi-level commitments to justice efforts.

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