Surviving Our Paradoxes?
Masculinity, Modernity, and the Body

Christopher E. Forth
University of Kansas

This article contends that, as a complex experience with definite implications for the body, modern civilization exercises a double logic that promotes and supports the interests of elite males while at the same time threatening to undermine those interests by eroding the corporeal foundations of male privilege. This argument is developed by examining: 1) those places in the West where localized concerns about the declining power and fitness of male bodies have reflected transnational engagements with modern civilization; 2) the ways in which tensions between masculinity and civilization are played out in time and space; and 3) how these anxieties about bodies in the modern world have contributed to fantasies of “new men” since the eighteenth century.

Keywords: masculinity, civilization, modernity, crisis

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All correspondence regarding to article should be addressed to Christopher E. Forth, Humanities & Western Civilization, 308 Bailey Hall, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045. Email: cforth@ku.edu

Men hear of the secret
they pass in upholstered silence
they only exist in crisis
they only exist in silence
past territorial piss-posts
past whispers in the closets
past screaming from the rooftops
we live to survive our paradoxes
we’ll live to survive our paradoxes


“Crisis” is perhaps the most common term used to describe the state of masculinity in the West today, with journalists, novelists, sociologists, psychologists and other scholars in
numerous countries offering various accounts of the disquiet which many men have registered in recent years. As one might expect, the causes of this presumed diminishment of male status and confidence vary according to context. In certain countries, economic disruptions and financial insecurity are sometimes offered as reasons for male malaise; in others, observers point to the challenges posed by the moderate advances made by women, homosexuals and people of color since the liberationist movements of the 1960s and ’70s (Faludi, 2000; Hearn & Pringle, 2006; Robinson, 2000; Savran, 1998). Yet as most scholars concur, problems relating to masculinity are not adequately resolved by using terms like “crisis.” After all, if there is no stable or non-critical period to be found prior to the disturbance in question (and historians have not found one), then the very idea of a crisis makes little sense (Connell, 1995, p. 84).

Nevertheless the discourse of gender crisis is a durable one. Some have approached alleged gender disruptions in a linguistic way, arguing that the rhetoric of crisis functions as a performative strategy seeking to bring about the very upheaval being described, whether as a reactionary attempt to shore up male privileges during periods when male authority is challenged (Robinson, 2000) or as an exercise in misandry by those who “want such a crisis to exist because they wish to redefine the male role and masculinity itself out of existence” (Phillips, 1999, p. xiii). This attention to language has the benefit of demonstrating the power of discourses to shape our views of the world; yet its usefulness for understanding how crisis rhetoric functions in different countries and periods is not entirely clear. In the United States, for instance, claims that manhood is in trouble have been mounting in recent decades, no doubt as a partial reaction to the modest gains made by women, homosexuals and people of color since the 1960s (Robinson, 2000; Savran, 1998).

Yet if crisis alerts are only reactions against the social and economic challenges posed by marginalized groups, how do we account for references to gender disturbance during periods when elite white men seemed to enjoy social, economic and political power with little or no serious challenges from women and men of other groups? For instance, in eighteenth-century Britain, debates about boxing crystallized ongoing disagreements about whether men should be polite and refined or aggressive and robust. While these differences reflected class-based views of the ideal body, each camp believed that the good of the nation depended on the quality of its men (Carter, 2001; Downing, forthcoming; Kuchta, 2003). In such cases, crisis-talk is not reducible to challenges mounted against “patriarchy,” but reflects tensions among different kinds of men competing to represent the authoritative version of masculinity.

Others engaging with gender crisis employ poststructuralist theories of subjectivity to argue that, given the constructed nature of the self, instability is endemic to any attempt to form a coherent and unified identity (Butler, 1990). There is much to be gained from viewing identity formation itself as being always unstable, incomplete, and perpetually open to challenges and disturbances. However (partly due to their reliance on psychoanalytic models), such analyses often risk seeming ahistorical and thus not especially useful for those concerned with changing historical contexts. We still need to sketch the historical conditions of possibility that have made the discourse of gender crisis (whether or not this precise term is used) such a recurring component of modern life.

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Put differently, the recurrence of “crisis” as a means of describing masculinity at various historical moments is to some extent made possible by the paradoxes that lurk at the heart of modernity’s relationship with a variety of ideals, including those pertaining to masculinity and the male body. After all, modernity is continually troubled by what Ulrich Beck (1997) describes as “counter-modernity,” a discourse that “absorbs, demonizes and dismisses the questions raised and repeated by modernity” by positing “constructed certitudes” in the face of the liquefying tendencies of modernization. Arising with and in reaction to modernity, counter-modern impulses seek to renaturalize many of the things that modernity sends into motion, often by imagining a new modernity purged of its unhealthy or “feminizing” components (Griffin, 2007). As Beck suggests, a more complex view of modernity would discover “the simultaneity of contradictions and dependencies of reflexively modern and counter-modern elements and structures in the image of ‘modern’ society” (pp. 63, 67). Insistence upon an elemental, embodied and recuperable masculinity lurking beneath the veneer of civilization is one of the most durable examples of a counter-modernity that asserts itself within and against modernity.

If masculinity is approached as a contingent norm “constituted by ever-present possibilities of abnormal deviation” (Surkis, 2006, p. 12), then the shifting contours of modern life provide some of the corporeal conditions of such deviation. This article contends that, as a complex experience with definite implications for the body, modern civilization exercises a double logic that promotes and supports the interests of elite males while at the same time threatening to undermine those interests by eroding the corporeal foundations of male privilege. This argument is developed by examining: 1) those places in the West where localized concerns about the declining power and fitness of male bodies have reflected transnational engagements with modern civilization; 2) the ways in which tensions between masculinity and civilization are played out in time and space; and 3) how these anxieties about bodies in the modern world have contributed to fantasies of “new men” since the eighteenth century. While space considerations permit no more than a very general overview of these issues, my hope is that, by considering the relationship between male bodies and modernity, we might be in a better position to contextualize the seemingly endless recurrence of gender crisis in the modern world.

Civilization and the Male Body

In most Western countries, bravery, strength, endurance and sexual potency have figured prominently in most lists of ideal male bodily attributes, as have grace, beauty and harmony of form. Yet this body has also been expected to perform more subtle functions. Historically speaking, the bodily and emotional boundaries of men and women have been often considered to be different, with the male body typically imagined as being more capable of resisting external influences, whether physical or moral. Saddled with the expectation of being capable of enduring discomfort, whether due to a harsh landscape, inclement weather, physical ailments, enemy armies or just irritating people, the male body is conceptualized as an ideally bounded entity, equipped with psychological and physical resources that maintain a sharp distinction between self and other while containing (or at least channeling) dimensions of emotional life, which in the case of men often include the feelings of fear, sorrow, love and aggression. This emphasis on the ideally enclosed state of the body has increased since the early modern era, as Norbert Elias (2000) demonstrates. Under the best circumstances, the body functions as both the material
foundation of moral qualities as well as a kind of armor for males in their dealings with the world. If the bounded male ego can be likened to a fortified “castle” or “tower of self,” then the body constitutes its psychosomatic stones and mortar (Easthope, 1990, pp. 35-44).

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Notes

1. Judith Butler (1993) captures the internal contradictions of disembodied masculinity:

   This is a figure of disembodiment, but which is nevertheless a figure of a body, a bodying forth of a masculinized rationality, the figure of a male body which is not a body, a figure in crisis, a figure that enacts a crisis it cannot fully control. This figuration of masculine reason as disembodied body is one whose imaginary morphology is crafted through the exclusion of other possible bodies. (pp. 48-49)

2. There is a massive body of literature in Western culture associating “true” masculinity with the supposedly superior virtues of non-urban experiences in a range of “natural” locales (Forth, 2008).

3. As Sarah Watts (2003, p. 16) reminds us, “Fear of women is not fear of women as such, but a metaphorical reduction of many other fears that signal the loss of singularity and independence (p. 16).

4. Of course not all that is called “new” has been welcomed. Not only was the New Woman of the early twentieth century condemned as a symptom of a degenerate culture, and thus something to be “corrected” by a return to female “nature” in a properly rejuvenated world (Roberts, 1994), but her pleasure-seeking and narcissistic male consort could be similarly disparaged as a sign of modernity’s corruption of the world. The same applies to various forms of manhood disparagingly described as “new” by those who see them as deviations from what men “should” be like.

5. Thus if one views bodily ideals and projections of masculinity as being inextricably bound up with any attempt at “anthropological revolution,” one cannot categorically assert, as Alain Badiou (2007) does, that Marxist models of the “new man” are “envisioned in opposition to all enveloping forms as well as to all predicates” (p. 66).

References


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