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Who's Afraid of 'Toxic Masculinity'?

Abstract

Part autoethnography, part critique, this essay details the author's personal experience with the far-right media world and explores the universal opposition to "toxic masculinity" from the Left and the Right. The Left opposes the substance of toxic masculinity for the harms it creates in society. The Right fears toxic masculinity as a concept, because it is a threat to their identities and broader ideological acceptance of capitalism.

Keywords

Toxic Masculinity, Sexism

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Everyone. Everyone is “afraid” of toxic masculinity, whether they realize it or not. By afraid I don’t literally mean that everyone is fearful of it in an affective or emotional sense, but rather that everyone sees “toxic masculinity” as a threat to themselves or society more broadly. I mean this quite literally. Both the Left and the Right view toxic masculinity as a threat, whether it is the material and ideational realities that the concept refers to (this is what the Left opposes) or the concept itself (this is what the Right fears).

Before explaining more about this diverse but universal opposition to “toxic masculinity,” it is important that we understand what toxic masculinity refers to. While there is no universally agreed-upon definition of the concept¹, generally “toxic masculinity” is used to refer to a loosely interrelated collection of norms, beliefs, and behaviors associated with masculinity, which are harmful to women, men, children, and society more broadly. Putting aside the debate about the biological or socially-constructed character of these norms, beliefs, and behaviors, which is not an unimportant debate, the deployment of the first term “toxic” expresses the harmfulness of the practices and discourses that comprise this notion of masculinity. Norms, beliefs, and behaviors often associated with toxic masculinity include: hyper-competitiveness, individualistic self-sufficiency (often to the point of isolation nowadays, but still, and more commonly in the pre-Internet days, in a parochial patriarchal sense of the male role as breadwinner and autocrat of the family), tendency towards or glorification of violence (real or digital, directed at people or any living or non-living things), chauvinism (paternalism towards women), sexism (male superiority), misogyny (hatred of women), rigid conceptions of sexual/gender identity and roles, heteronormativity (belief in the naturalness and superiority of heterosexuality and cisgenderness), entitlement to (sexual) attention from women, (sexual) objectification of women, and the infantilization of women (treating women as immature and lacking awareness or agency and desiring meekness and “youthful” appearance). This list is not meant to be exhaustive, and

¹ One of the most prominent scholarly usages of the concept of toxic masculinity is in Terry A. Kuper’s *Journal of Clinical Psychology* article from 2005 entitled “Toxic Masculinity as a Barrier to Mental Health Treatment in Prison.” Here Kuper argues that toxic masculinity is the foremost psycho-social barrier to psychotherapy among incarcerated men, defining toxic masculinity as, “the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence” (714). An earlier 1996 *American Studies* article by Tracy Karner explores the behaviors of soldiers returning from Vietnam and described toxic masculinity in that context as the result of the male soldiers perceived and real inability to fulfill their socially-expected obligations “as men” manifesting itself in “compulsive fighting and violent competition with other men or male authority figures, dangerous thrill seeking, and reliving or reenacting combat behavior” (77). There is, however, an earlier usage of the concept from the doctoral dissertation of Shepherd Bliss, who also coined the term “mythopoetic” to describe the nascent late 80s and early 90s “men’s rights” movement that we can see rejuvenated in the alt-Right and those associated with it, that is discussed in detail in an April 1990 *New Republic* article “The Gender Rap: ‘Toxic Masculinity’ and Other Males Troubles” by Daniel Gross. For Bliss, and most subsequent usages of the term, up until fairly recently, toxic masculinity is used in distinction from more ostensibly anodyne conceptions of masculinity. Bliss himself seems to favor an alternative, more primitive, cooperative sense of masculinity. More radical feminists have argued that all or most concepts of masculinity, even those that may seem harmless, can be toxic. What I will show here is that there is evidence for this suggestion in the aggressiveness of the reactions by those men who wish to defend certain notions of masculinity. The defense of masculinity is itself connected to toxic masculinity. The assumption here is that to aggressively defend a concept of masculinity, in such a way that shows how such a debate over the normative value of a concept of masculinity is tied to the aggressive, competitive, homophobic, sexist, and misogynistic character of toxic masculinity. This will be shown later in this essay in relation to the attacks by conservatives on feminists and anyone who criticizes toxic masculinity.

not every instance of toxic masculinity would need to (or likely could) contain all of these elements, but when people talk about toxic masculinity, this is typically what they mean.

The Left fears toxic masculinity because, quite simply, it is toxic to all those who are involved in it. The men who practice it. The women who are victimized by it. The women who defend it. The men who are victimized by it, or ostracized for not complying with it or challenging it. The children who are pressured to adapt to it.

The Right (and the alt-Right in particular) fears² toxic masculinity because they are the representatives of toxically masculine values and practices. Toxic masculinity is what conservatism defends, and it is that which the alt-Right glorifies. The Right fears and mocks the concept of toxic masculinity because in its very name it labels what they want to defend—who they are in many cases—as harmful. I don't mean to be glib about this in any way. This is serious, and the reaction on the Right to discussions about toxic masculinity are inherently confrontational because they assail something tied to a self-perceived identity, one they were likely conditioned with from a very young age.³ What seems to be lost on the defenders of the values and practices of toxic masculinity (who necessarily oppose the coherence or existence of such a thing as “toxic masculinity”), is that it is precisely because of the peculiar nature of toxic masculinity (and its connections to the broader system of capitalism, which will be addressed here later) that they are in a situation where they feel compelled to act in defense of it. What is at stake is a way of life, an identity, and a worldview. Any threat to that is perceived as, quite literally, a death threat.

I know this because I was subjected to the heinous reactions of the Alt-Right for suggesting that, in a fashion quite commonplace in cultural studies and literary criticism, that through a comparison of two objects of popular culture we could gain a better understanding of broader socio-political phenomena. Without ever thinking for a moment that my work would find its way onto the screens of Alt-Right online media producers and consumers, I *dared* to write an essay for this very journal in August 2017, that used a comparative analysis of the two versions of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* as a heuristic to explore the contemporary relationship between toxic masculinity, capitalism, social responsibility, and transformational politics.⁴

² For the Alt-Right, this fear rooted in pervasive alienation and insecurity (not wholly unjustified given that these are by-products of the masculinist capitalist system that has conditioned them with certain expectations and desires, but which it cannot live up to or provide for), which are then manifested primarily in denigration and mockery of those who are viewed as deviations from toxic masculinity (also known by the Alt-Right as “cucks”). The relationship between this fear, alienation, insecurity, and mockery is expertly detailed in Angela Nagle's *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Zero Books, 2017), as well as in Matthew Lyons' *Ctrl-Alt-Delete: An Antifascist Report on the Alternative Right* (Kersplebedeb, 2017). For an excerpt of Lyons' report see: http://www.politicalresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Lyons_CtrlAltDelete_PRINT.pdf.

³ Though not for all. There are cases of young men who were not raised in particularly patriarchal households who were radicalized by the online “manosphere.” See Amelia Tait's article for the *New Statesman* “Spitting out the Red Pill: Former misogynists reveal how they were radicalized online” (February 2017), <https://www.newstatesman.com/science-tech/internet/2017/02/reddit-the-red-pill-interview-how-misogyny-spreads-online>.

⁴ See: Bryant W. Sculos, “We are the Beast: Toxic Masculinity and Social Responsibility in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*.” *Class, Race and Corporate Power*: Vol. 5, Iss. 2 (August 2017). Available at: <http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1101&context=classracecorporatepower>.

Lest it be lost on them, should they stumble across this essay, and for all those who are more sympathetic to such arguments and scholarship of that kind, I do very much understand why using what is generally regarded as a children's film to think about serious social, political, and economic themes might come off as a bit detached, ridiculous, or frivolous. While I, and many others doing similar kinds of work, see great value in scholarship that aims to engage with more accessible and well-known material, we need only look at the reaction that my work (and many others' before me) elicited to appreciate what is really at stake here.⁵ After an initial *Campus Reform* article appeared describing, nearly verbatim, my article, *Breitbart*, *The Daily Caller*, *The Washington Examiner*, the disgraced Milo Yiannopolous's new site, and literally dozens of other Right-wing blogs and media aggregator sites also republished these stories about my articles.⁶ This went so far as leading to a producer from the Fox News show *Watters' World* to request that I appear on the show for a one-on-one interview, which I declined.⁷ In the process, because the many articles linked to my personal information, I received a number of hateful, mocking emails that had surprisingly few spelling errors, and several voicemails that ranged from politely oppositional to verbose and incoherent.⁸ So, not much different than the articles written by these Alt-Right outlets about my essay.

It hasn't been too long since the hateful attention has subsided, but I am still surprised that a Politics of Culture review essay in a relatively obscure academic journal would garner so much attention from such widely read right-wing reporters and commentators. It wasn't about me or what I wrote. It was all about spin; how the Right could spin my writing and my personal politics into an oppositional narrative to feed to their audiences, which has the two-fold benefit of making these media outlets millions of dollars and riling up their audience politically. It is not just in my case, but in general, historically, the Right has had a very weird relationship with academia. Academic scholarship that is perceived in any way as being of the Left is treated (mocked) as irrelevant and worthless, but also contradictorily as a serious threat—in my case, a threat worth writing over a dozen articles and blogposts about.⁹

⁵ I am focusing on my experience, not because it is particularly special or unique. It isn't, and it is far far from the worst treatment that feminist scholars, many of whom are women and people of color, have faced at the hands (and keyboards) of the Alt-Right. I am focusing on my experience, because it is the one I know the best, and I believe it still illuminates the phenomena I am aiming to explicate here.

⁶ See (or don't...): Toni Airaksinen, "Prof bemoans 'toxic masculine capitalism' in Disney film." *Campus Reform* (Nov. 3, 2017); Tom Ciccotta, "Florida Professor Blasts the 'Toxic Masculine Capitalism' of 'Beauty and the Beast'." *Breitbart* (Nov. 6, 2017); Eric Owens, "Disney's 'Beauty And The Beast' Is Filled With 'Toxic Masculine Capitalism,' Rants Nutty Professor." *The Daily Caller* (Nov. 6, 2017); John Patrick, "Professor warns of toxic masculinity themes in Disney's 'Beauty and the Beast'." *The Washington Examiner* (Nov. 7, 2017).

⁷ In response to the request I wrote: "I have no interest in participating in Fox News's defense of misogyny and further attempts to take advantage of the very real struggles faced by working class people, many of whom are subject to harassment and abuse in their workplaces on a daily basis (including plenty of the women who work or have worked at Fox News)." That didn't stop the show from airing a woefully misinformed segment on my essay, in which the female guest argued, ostensibly against me, that Belle represented a strong role model for women (which is actually what I argued in the original essay), and Jesse Watters suggested that I wrote what I did was because I was "jealous of Gaston. Whoever that is." (*Watters' World*, Nov. 11, 2017).

⁸ One of the emails went so far as to suggest that precisely because I was a feminist and a communist (their words) that I was likely a rapist myself, followed by a smiley face. You know, because rape is a happy thing for this person I guess.

⁹ For further discussion of the discursive treatment of academics by conservatives, see Sean Noah Walsh's *Counterrevolution and Repression in the Politics of Education* (Lexington, 2014).

Why does my story matter though? In so much as it does, one of the aspects of each of the articles written about my essay and me was the drawing of a line between my feminism and my socialism. It was clear enough in the original essay, but these articles wanted to emphasize that I was a “communist” professor of politics, though some more insultingly referred to me as a “liberal” (I prefer “socialist” but weirdly *Breitbart* didn’t ask). My feminism, and feminism in general, is a threat because feminists are communists. Communists (who are, don’t forget, the same as liberals) are threats, because well, you know the reason! Communist feminist liberals want to neuter you and steal your property!

What the Right probably doesn’t realize, or maybe they do, is something that the center-left, the so-called liberals who the Right despises so much often don’t realize themselves, is that a truly emancipatory feminist politics, one that is opposed to the worst elements of toxic masculinity, must also be a socialist politics. The Right seems to appreciate the importance of intersectional resistance more than liberals—which is why the Right is so quick to mock and undermine it whenever and however they can.

That is part of the task of socialists, to make the case to liberals that their liberalism is poisoning whatever semblance of emancipatory politics they think they are supporting. We need to be persuasive. My initial essay on *Beauty and the Beast* was meant to be one very small part of a contribution to that conversation about the relationship between feminist politics and socialism, between and analysis of toxic masculinity and a critique of capitalism. Whether I succeeded or not is a different issue, and one that, given the reaction by the Right and the ease with which they were able to distort my purpose, I will need to continually self-reflect on as a writer and activist. What is much more important is re-emphasizing the connection between a critique of toxic masculinity and a critique of capitalism, to which I would also add a thorough critique of racism—as they relate to one another. The Alt-Right is instructive here. They understand that a defense of white, male, heteronormative supremacy is intimately connected to a defense of capitalism.¹⁰

We live in a world where over 90% of CEOs are men (32% of the Fortune 500), and the other 10% have had to adapt themselves to the mostly masculine norms of the corporate world in various ways. Roughly 50% more women than men are in poverty in the US, and many of these women experience this poverty with their children (of which one in four is in poverty in the US). At most, women make 80% of what a man makes for similar work in the US, and that number is at least 10% lower globally, depending on one’s source of statistics. Men are incredible risks to women, especially young women. One in six women will be the victim of a rape or attempted

¹⁰ There is often a kind of economic nationalism and critique of global free trade among the Alt-Right. While this is certainly different from the more liberal versions of conservatism defended by the likes of Paul Ryan and Ted Cruz, it is not itself a critique of capitalism. Only among the most virulent neo-Nazis and neo-fascists do you get any semblance of a critique of capitalism, albeit one that bears almost no resemblance to a genuinely socialist critique of capitalism. One of the most common neo-Nazi critiques of capitalism is based on the mythology that the global economy is controlled by a cabal of Jews. I also want to be clear here that although I think it would be unfair to describe *all* of the Alt-Right as neo-Nazis, the two chief ideologues of the Alt-Right, Richard Spencer and Jared Taylor, are most definitely neo-Nazis of a certain kind—despite their vain protestations to the contrary. See: <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/richard-bertrand-spencer-0> and <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/jared-taylor>. Taylor is an especially interesting figure in that he is formally opposed to anti-Jewish anti-Semitism, he is still very much in league with many neo-Nazis through his various conferences and his publication *American Renaissance*.

rape in their lifetime, the vast majority of which the assailant is male. One in ten of all rapes in the US are committed against a male, again, the vast majority of which the assailant is also male. Men do not just victimize women and children, but they also victimize one another.¹¹

It was in an effort to take this reality extremely seriously that I attempted to explore the relationships between toxic masculinity and capitalism through popular films, because if it helped people see more clearly how the values and practices of capitalism reproduce sexism and misogyny in all its various forms, it would have been worth receiving a hundred more pieces of hate mail (though in fairness, I really didn't expect to receive any!). There are plenty of socialists out there who are attuned to the structural dimensions of capitalism that exacerbate or reproduce gender inequality in the economy, but we need to continually keep in mind that there are values, transmitted through a variety of social psychological conditioning mechanisms like the mass media, internet culture, and yes, even children's movies occasionally,¹² that aid in the reproduction of a toxically masculine capitalist society. To oppose capitalism, we must also simultaneously oppose white supremacy and toxic masculinity, which aid in the reproduction of the exploitative and undemocratic political economic system that dominates us.

The critique of toxic masculinity is not about policing language. It is not about political correctness (though in a certain sense it is about finding and deploying the "correct" politics). While our words certainly carry the power to justify, normalize, reproduce, and exacerbate certain structures of oppression and exploitation, it is those structures against which the critique of toxic masculinity and toxic masculine capitalism is directed.

¹¹ See: <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/victims-sexual-violence>.

¹² Despite what the Alt-Right media would have you believe, I think *Beauty and the Beast* is a film that is more subversive with regard to toxic masculinity than it is a source of exacerbation. After all, I argued that Gaston was the pinnacle of toxic masculinity, possessing a necrophilic existence that one of my right-wing detractors seemed especially obsessed with and befuddled by—and fair enough (Gaston does not copulate with dead bodies, at least from what we see on screen). This label refers to the usage of "necrophilia" by famed social theorist and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, who argued that capitalism is necrophilic in that it reproduces an obsession with the non-living, the valuing of things over lived experiences with others. Both the original animated version and the more recent live-action iteration of *Beauty and the Beast* show Gaston's violent, possession-obsessed existence, and negative judgment of it, quite well.