Every Woman for Him-self: A Male Feminist Reconsiders: The Death of Eco-feminism?

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I am a man and I am a feminist, not only in my own beliefs in equality and empowerment of women but also as a career. As a legal anthropologist, I work on international ‘human rights’ projects with the UN system, governments, NGOs and international donors that increasingly fund women and girls’ rights projects. My history as a feminist is a long one dating back nearly half a century. In the 1960s, as a boy, I was already a feminist. I was motivated by the ideal of eco-feminism; of challenging the patriarchy and its institutions of violence, over-consumption and aggression that not only promoted violence against women but by men against men, by large societies against smaller cultures, by the State against individual creativity, and by human beings against the planet. Feminists now say they have achieved many of their goals in Western societies and they are going global and seeking more male support. But to me, something has run amok.

Most of the problems that the eco-feminists were addressing in the 1960s and that I thought women were ready to solve are still here. In fact they seem to have gotten worse. Overall, the feminist agenda that I signed up to support seems to have disappeared as women have risen to power with greater percentages in the labour force. Indeed, there now seems to be little shortage of women commanding the very same machinery of State power, militarism, environmental destruction, hierarchy, and violence that they said women were going to help fix.

I am unhappy with what I see in the women’s movement in its current phase, though I admit that I still find it difficult as a man to just have a good cry about this or anything else. The ideals that attracted me to feminism seem to have been co-opted by women who are no different from the men they criticized. It is as if their rise has been purchased with an agreement to join the very systems of violence they claimed to be ready to overturn. I see little progress towards more humane, open, progressive, loving, caring, tolerant, diverse societies that I thought the women’s movement would bring. Organizations that define themselves as promoting equal rights for men and women, that claim to promote the idea of equality through ‘mainstreaming,’ and who claim that the goal of this is happier healthier societies, no longer do what they say. They are largely promoting the same international agendas of the patriarchy they previously criticized; actually exploiting women’s labour, destroying the family and cultural diversity, increasing global consumption and urbanizing rural peoples in what is a sham appeal to ‘human rights’ that distorts both the rights and gender agendas. What I see in the current phase of feminism as it goes global into the communities of the ‘Second’, ‘Third’ and ‘Fourth World’ is ‘every woman for himself’. As a man, could it be that I am actually one of the few ‘real’ feminists left?

In this short piece, taken from a longer essay that is placed in full without editing in the ‘topical debates’ section of the Anthropology in Action/Apply website at www.theasa.org/
networks/apply, I point to some of the social changes that I have seen directly among colleagues in anthropology and other disciplines both in academia and in practice, over the past several decades.

**Feminism and the University, in Anthropology and Elsewhere**

As an anthropology graduate student in the U.S., among a large number of women entering the discipline, I believed the attention to hiring of women would promote merit systems and advance of the discipline while also promoting humanistic values that were said to be those of women. It was these supposedly underrepresented female approaches that my female classmates and students claimed would improve personal relationships, family life, international relations and our institutions. We were all going to rise together to make the university and the world a better place.

The struggle of the women's movement for jobs was described as one between young women and older men who had filled the majority of positions and excluded women. I was invited to join women in my age group against the authority these older men wielded through the ‘Old Boys’ Network’. I saw the society those older males had created – one of global violence, hierarchy, overconsumption, praise for legal principles but duplicity in the lack of following rule of law, and alienation from nature. In my view, those men were strangling the universities and society at large, in a system of hierarchies and controls that was inflexible, anti-intellectual, unlawful, inhumane and stagnant. I also disliked the ritual competitions that they created with young men like me whom they seemed to fear. Though the treatment of younger men by older men did not have the same discriminatory results as it did against women, there was also a system of control and of dominance between the older men and the young that had little to do with scholarship or rights. It was largely about male egos and pack behaviours and power and control. Women and minority colleagues convinced me that they could do better and that they would also be inclusive as soon as they had the chance. They noted their traditional roles of nurturing and listening as examples of how they would improve communications and fairness.

Ultimately, though, it was not the older men who were asked to sacrifice their positions or to relinquish any of their real authority. These old men changed the retirement age so that they could work longer. Their systems remained in place. What occurred was a new alliance between these established academics who continued in their positions and who brought women and minorities into the same system, restricting their competition from younger men and reformers who had to seek jobs elsewhere.

What happened in anthropology was not unique. Young women have selectively entered certain departments to teach a certain range of subjects in mostly the same way that the men had taught, maintaining the university as a religious order of lectures and subjective testing and grading to assure compliance with the doctrine. From my experience in the U.S. there is little in the way of actual laboratory field social science, little empowerment of students in their education and democratization of the teaching process, little in objective evaluation of skills, little in direct community interaction and oversight. The university seems more insulated than before. Professors seem more protective of their power, prerogative and discretion. The change has simply been the introduction of some new doctrines alongside the previous orthodoxies, and often they are outside of the mainstream departments. Rather than humanize the previously male disciplines of economics or political science and hold them up to principles of community, equity, social science objectivity or democracy, they have become even more removed as doctrine and mathematics. What appears to have happened
is that universities have actually now become
gendered in a violation of their very prin-
ципes, with anthropology faculties and agendas
largely turning into ‘gender studies’ and a ‘hu-
nanities’ (what was already a gendered part of
the universities).

Feminism and Development
Anthropology

With opportunities for long-term work in aca-
demia closed to me as a young man, my only
alternative was to take those positions that
were in fact still gender typed. These were the
overseas riskier teaching positions that single
men could be enticed to take, the short-term
teaching positions to fill in for the sabbatical
years of the men who were still teaching in
their 70s that paid one tenth of their salaries,
or risky overseas short term and longer term
positions in ‘development’.

Part of the irony here is that the long-term
positions in those agencies that were filled
with men when I chose this second career are
now open to young and middle-aged women
as Western-type services have been transferred
and the risks (along with the actual involve-
ment with concerns of local communities) have
llessened. In the same way that women entered
the universities and replicated the patriarchy
there, women have quickly risen in positions
outside the university, overseas and in the in-
dustrial world. Previously, many of these were
also the very types of roles they criticized as
representing the worst of male ideology. Yet, in
following recent women role models (Margaret
Thatcher, Condoleezza Rice, Hillary Clinton)
women entering these positions have been no
less militaristic and no more protective of ‘the
other’ than males.

I challenged (or opted out of) the positions
in the post-colonial patriarchal structures of
the global banks, police and legal orders, and
industry, to enter, ironically, the parts of in-
ternational government projects that are also
gender segregated; working with Ministries
of Social Services or Labour or Child Protec-
tion. The international ‘development’ agencies
mop up the damage they have caused with lip
service to ‘social’ concerns. It is almost always
in these ‘social’ sectors where women are con-
centrated, and where they are underfunded
and disempowered; usually muffled if they
try to speak out for real protections, rights and
opportunities and to do anything more than
bring women and minorities into the global
labour force, whether it is in Asia or Eastern
Europe.

I began to work with ‘Women’s Unions’ on
their small credit projects and handicrafts,
on ending trafficking of women and girls, on
schooling for girls, on helping to implement
anti-discrimination laws and international
treaties. What I have found in most of these
‘rights’ projects is that they actually promote
only one type of ‘right’ for women and girls:
the right to work in international sweat shops
or as child labour producing export handi-
crafts or products in their homes, or as secre-
taries and administrators in foreign businesses
and embassies (much like the labour force of
minority women in Washington, DC). There
is rarely concern for international law in the
protection of minority communities, resources
and diversity, but there is some concern for
regulating the poor and educating children
to support the machinery of urbanization and
consumption. These roles are gendered.

If the women’s movement were a success,
the emerging resources of women would re-
duce male violence, and would lead to longer
and happier lives for both. It would make cul-
tures sustainable and assure roles for men and
women that fit their traditions and interests.
In fact, little of this beyond the urbanization
and domestication of the Third World even
appears to be on the agenda.

‘Rights’ campaigns do little to force country
elites or males to provide more support for
poor women or change their own exploitative
behaviours, because they do not seek to make
aid recipient countries sustainable or to improve relations and conditions of males and females. What they do instead is actually stigmatize women and the poor to maintain the hierarchies. The projects put girls into sweat-shop employment and fuel population growth, with ‘rights’ campaigns to stigmatize poor mothers for employing the labour of their daughters instead of sending their daughters to the State schools that elites underfund and control. Similarly, at the same time that overpopulation, resource destruction and overuse leads to the prostitution and sale of girls to foreign men, international organizations make sure that the finger is pointed not at foreign countries or at male elites but at the poor families (and women) who traffic their daughters. By design, no attention is paid to the sale of the resources and the destruction of the population balances. Nothing is said about the huge demographic imbalances of men and women in some parts of the world or the large standing armies or the male ‘exported’ labour forces working for the global economy or any of these other imbalances that are fuelling prostitution, trafficking, and exploitation of girls and women. These ‘women’s’ projects are all silent on the causes as if they are co-dependent on them.

The reason is simple. Women who work supply the labour for foreign companies. Rights have become individual rights for a corporatist agenda.

Who Is to Blame and How Can it Get Better?

Perhaps few of the changes occurring in our society are really a result of the women’s movement and changes in gender relations. The causality may be in reverse. Industries sought cheaper and more malleable labour and had an interest in bringing women into the labour force. The changes in gender relations seem to be one of the effects of industrialization and the demands that it places, in its current form, for atomizing and commoditizing people, rather than one of the causes.

Eco-feminists rightly blamed the patriarchy for its fascination with missiles and towers, with raping of the environment, with gang behaviour and erasure of diversity and for the dead end of civilization for which we seem to be running at a faster pace as we enjoy this ‘gender equality’. Yet, women in power seem no less fascinated by these phallic symbols and explosions of violence and are supporters of that system today. Women saw an opportunity for individual benefit. They allied with the male power structure and took an approach that challenged it the least.

There are more women scientists, more women engineers, more women in high political positions. But we have yet to apply the wisdom of the pioneers of women’s rights and gender humanism to build a world with fewer weapons, fewer wars, fewer prisons, more social services, more parks and museums. I have little hope that my future daughters will grow up in a world in which they are freer from violence and they will partly have the women of my generation to blame.

I blame the elder men who had power before and the younger women who sold out for their own advancement, for leading us faster to the increasing miseries of resource wars, environmental obliteration, overpopulation, anomie and anarchy that awaits us. But the blame ends up everywhere and putting blame does not change anything. What both men and women have chosen for short-term pleasure is leading us all to long-term disaster.

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