

Masculinities and heteropatriarchy: reflections on the negativity of masculine identity

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Article



ABSTRACT

This article examines the links between male identities and how our current socio-political-cultural system is organized in the form of a heteropatriarchy that forces the oppression of other identities. In this sense, male identities are organized by negativity, that is, by the negation of other identities. The effect of such negativity is a kind of command to oppress minority populations, which requires men to renounce this power as a means of allowing other subjectivizing processes to take place. Jungian psychology provides a possibility for an aesthetic elaboration of these processes by analyzing images, highlighting imagination as a fundamental competence for considering other worlds in which identities can be overcome, so that the mandate of violence that structures masculinities can ultimately cease.

Keywords: masculinities, negativity, identity, aesthetics

When Pedro Lemebel claims to be a third-world queer person at one moment, or a transvestite at another, something is at stake in the heteropatriarchy. Through his only published work, “Poco hombre”, we find an opening through which, in all his originality, Lemebel denies what people have tried to impose on him all along: masculinity. His Manifesto starts with four negatives, which resonate with Didier Eribon (2008) when they, a French queer, tells us that gay identity is formed from offense, insult, and negativity. The dissidents of sexuality organize themselves first by what is taken away from them, more clearly their dignity as a subject, so that only at a later moment can these bodies know themselves for what they are. Lemebel’s work of art shares with us his reflection on masculinity:

My honor is to accept myself as different,

Being a coward is much worse

My ass is mine, buddy

And that’s my revenge

My honor waits patiently

The males grow old

[...]

So many kids are going to be born

With a broken wing

And I want them to fly, buddy

May your revolution

Give them a piece of red sky

So they can fly.

(LEMEBEL, 2023, pp. 47-48)

The images of culture have been the object of analysis in depth psychology from Freud, who did not shy away from exploring potential latent meanings in works of art such as Hamlet or Michelangelo's Moses, to Jung, who did not evade analyzing literary and mythical works when articulating his theories. For the early psychologists, culture proved to be a territory for legitimizing the analytical processes observed in individual listening. They worked on the hypothesis that, based on cultural production, the psychic processes underlying a certain collectivity that was experiencing a certain historical process could be intuited.

Jung (2013, OC, vol. XV) also proposed the idea that the productions of culture under an aesthetic analysis have something to reveal from the unconscious, based on an archetypal theory, where the author also points out how there is something else in art and the images presented aesthetically, something that concerns both the author's singularity and the fundamental images that precede it, which will be referred to as archetypal images. Psychoanalysis and analytical psychology converge in the view that "[...] what the artist gives us access to is the place of what cannot be seen – and it remains to be named" (LACAN, 2001, p. 192). There is something about aesthetic formalization that escapes our ability to make it immediately comprehensible. Lacan acknowledges that there is something else in the images of culture that can be heard from the unconscious beyond authorship.

Aesthetics is understood here as a system that arranges positions and places from which impressions and the sharing of the sensible are feasible, as proposed by Rancière (2009). For the French philosopher, there is an aesthetic unconscious that informs us of the encounter between thought and non-thought, the experience of the sensible, and the attempt to rationalize and frame this experience, which transcends the possibility of symbolization, as mentioned above.

The sharing between people who occupy different places ensures that we are, to a certain extent, always dealing with an aesthetic-politics, since aesthetics tells us about the decisions that people collectively make based on the places they occupy and the impressions that are captured from these positions.

On the Brazilian scene, masculinities were the subject of public debate based on a speech made by the president who served out his term between 2018 and 2022. A public statement that could be roughly translated as if the President were “unkillable, unbreakable, and uncatchable” was made into a medal and given to the then-president of Argentina in 2024 (FREITAS, 2024). The survival of the scene of the recitation of the he could never be “impotent” reveals the attempt to produce a certain aesthetic within the register of political ridicule, a concept coined by Tiburi (2020). For us, it is relevant to consider the reiteration of negativity in male identity established by the lexicon of negativity. The choice of three words that are conjured up from negation by the Latin prefix of negation, as it is in the Portuguese language, corresponding to the prefix “un” in English, highlights this grammar of what is formed by what is negated.

These recent stagings reinforce the hypothesis outlined in Pessoa (2021) that the images of masculine and feminine are suitable for analysis from a cultural perspective, crossed by a cultural complex, as opposed to considering gender to be an archetypal category. We argue that desire and sexuality certainly inform us of an archetypal order of human experience, although the terms “masculine” and “feminine” seem to fit better into the dynamics of a heteropatriarchal complex that is reflected in binarism as a way of constituting the subject. Rubin (2017) calls this operation a sex-gender system, and Butler (2003) calls it a heterosexual system before the experience of the Oedipus complex.

The aesthetics of masculinity, illustrated by the former president’s speech, create images that speak to us repeatedly of negativity. Man is defined by what he is not: unkillable, unbreakable, and uncatchable. The need to use this type of language, which is not new in human history, shows us that even the identity of the category that enjoys the most privileges in our society, that is, man, still has to be symbolized to become intelligible. It is as if a question about this identity lingers within us: what is a man?

Kimmel’s (2016) research reveals a few common characteristics shared by the men he interviewed, as well as what he could draw from their responses. The author believes that men need to prove to others all the time what they are not; more specifically, men need to prove that they are not homosexual and that they are not women. This leads to three considerations: the need for constant proof, which points to the instability of male identity. Although instability is attributed

to all identities, according to Butler (2003), such a claim about men contradicts a certain idea of the strength and robustness of the male self-image and self-esteem. Secondly, we notice the presence of homophobia in the male discourse, which rejects the association with traits considered pertinent to homosexual identity. Thirdly, and no less importantly, at all costs, there is the need to disidentify as a woman. Here, the categories of the non-identical, i.e. women and homosexuals, are evidently taken as inferior and necessarily rejected.

However, it is worth noting two other outcomes of these attributes. Men's need to prove themselves begs the question: prove themselves to whom? This question is answered by Kimmel (2016), who shows us that there is a system of male competitiveness-solidarity where men must prove their masculinity to another man-subject. The status of subject, of course, is granted only to the identical, men; therefore, we can infer that men need to prove themselves to each other. I can only be unbreakable insofar as the unbreakable exist and thus, invoking the Freudian image of the father of the horde, we have a kind of superman with the authority to lead the herd. Such is the image within a masculine aesthetic based on negativity.

Connell's (2005) research suggests the idea of a superior man, leading to the concept of hegemonic masculinity. For the author, there is an ideal of masculinity that is pursued by most men and achieved by very few, if any. This idea of masculinity speaks of a male superpower, a Self capable of performing the greatest tasks and designs. The idea of hegemony is based on opposition to oppressed groups, which is why Connell (2005) also points out that one of the ideals of hegemonic masculinity is to distance itself from the traits shown by gay men. In our colonial, capitalist, racist, ableist system, however, it is reasonable to assume that men on the periphery of capitalism, in colonized territories, subject to racism and ableism of any kind, will also be subject to inferiority in terms of the ideal of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, other subaltern masculinities will be experienced by these men. For this reason, Connell (2016) strongly affirms the need to speak of masculinities, in the plural, whenever we refer to the term.

The second implication leads us to the issue of a particular negation in the aesthetics of the "unkillable, unbreakable, and uncatchable". Negativity summons up its opposition, telling us that some can die, some can be broken, and some can be caught. These, being non-identical, cannot be men. Who would they be? Would the deadly, the breakable, and the catchable have the same status as subjects? Here, masculinities face a contradiction. They need to establish themselves through an oppositional mechanism, through the formula of a given negation, but neither can they give the opposite its condition of symmetry. Women and homosexuals are breakable, catchable, and, more frighteningly, they are also those that can die.

Such a stark conclusion is not surprising for those who fall into these categories, although it highlights the fragility of the political position that these individuals occupy in our society.

In *The Elementary Structures of Violence*, Segato (2003) listens to accounts of men imprisoned for raping women. By carrying out an anthropological analysis of the discourse, the author concludes that violence structures male subjectivity itself. This means that the subjects are part of a dual system that we commonly call patriarchy or, as Preciado (2020) would have it, heteropatriarchy, which is based on the "[...] segmentation between soul and body, [which] reproduces, in the order of experience, the sexual binary epistemology. There are only two options, male and female" (Preciado, 2020, p. 23). The masculine, for Segato (2003), is based on a mandate of violence: the man is the unkillable who has the right over the mortal: women and LGBTI+ people. In this sense, male subjectivity is the internalization of a certain authority, and therefore the right to violence, over other bodies that do not become subjects under the male gaze. In the order of experience, the violence of masculinities is negativity made concrete, the negation that materializes as a flow between bodies-subjects that can exercise it as opposed to those bodies that can die, be broken, or be caught.

As Butler (2003) explains, the category of binary gender is elucidated by the concept she borrows from Nietzsche, the metaphysics of substance. This concept helps us to understand how some categories of a historical, cultural, social, and political nature, in other words, better understood from a Jungian perspective based on the theory of cultural complexes, for example, become the object of a reading of immanence and transcendence, which would lead us to a conceptualization based on the theory of archetypes. This process occurs deliberately with the category of gender. Butler (2003, p. 56) states that

Gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of floating attributes, as we have witnessed that its substantive effect is performatively produced and imposed by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. As such, gender proves to be performative within the discourse inherited from the metaphysics of substance, i.e. constituting the alleged identity.

What the understanding of the metaphysics of substance presents us with is the need to repeat acts, in other words, to perform continuously what is supposedly a natural truth, to convince the public of the natural substance of what is being performed. Thus, to assert and prove their masculine identity, men will need to repeat the acts that affirm their masculinities. The problem is that, since masculinities are largely structured by negativity, men are forced to reject what women and homosexuals are and, ultimately, to use

violence to demonstrate their value as subjects. Such is the heteropatriarchal system.

What could an analysis achieve in the face of a system that orchestrates collectivities and internalizes in the subject such possibilities of understanding oneself as human? At this point, it is clear that the heteropatriarchal system, which in turn structures a heteropatriarchal complex, also imposes a significant degree of social and institutional violence on men. The dismantling of the heteropatriarchal system will inevitably depend on the elaboration of its complexes, which makes psychological analysis a post-identitarian tool to support the dismantling of this system. As Butler (2003) points out, the appearance of substance given to identities, especially male identity, leads the subject to a kind of dead end: if I give up what I have been convinced I am, I will be nothing. At this point, we should argue for an inversion in the power of negativity: an interesting effect that can be provoked in the analysis is the understanding that, in fact, we are nothing. A kind of excess of meaning rests on identity, a source of meanings that makes us remain attached to what, in truth, fosters a system of violence and exclusion that, strictly speaking, should be of no interest to anyone.

The key archetypal factor here is humanity itself, which brings with it the possibility of giving diverse and normative bodies the status of a subject who, enjoying their freedom, can undertake the search for their uniqueness. In other words: what is prevented in the oppressive dynamics of the heteropatriarchal complex is individuation itself, as proposed by Jung. There is no way to explore unique paths that refer to oneself in a system strangled by identities that call on us to perform repetitive acts that confirm what the system itself would like us to be, yet, in the very impossibility of such permanence, forces us to repeat ourselves until we convince ourselves that we are one and the same thing.

There is, however, a consequence of the intertwining privileges of male identity that poses a challenge for a post-identity journey. One of the consequences of male identity enjoying its negativity is that, to a certain extent, men as subjects are already made to feel that they can be what they are. Minority identities, i.e. women, racialized people, people with disabilities, and the LGBTI+ population, due to their historical lack of equal rights and opportunities, are continually marked by the need to affirm their identity as the cause of their oppression. It is in the face of the historical and deliberate erasure and blindness of a hetero-patriarchal system that dissident identities, which are not guaranteed subject status, need to affirm their oppressions and reassert the groups to which they belong. Such an act is not particularly a choice or a desire, but rather a necessity to avoid dying.

The universal male, represented by the image of the white man, enjoys the power to hide his own identity. There is no need for the white man to claim his place as a subject, nor to point out the social, political, and cultural prejudices to which he is subjected for being socially and psychologically structured as a white man. The introduction of the white man begins with his name, his life story, the subjective elaboration of his path, and even his ancestry, of which he is clearly aware. The white man knows who he is and where he came from because he can figure it all out. The white man is allowed to see himself as such, to the extent that it is impossible for a woman not to understand herself as a woman, for a black person to understand themselves as a black person, and the process repeats itself with every dissent from the white heterosexual norm in which we live. This is because populations that do not enjoy the power and status of white men are victims of violence and other oppressions caused precisely because they belong to these identity categories.

In this regard, the analysis of a male subject will start from a more clearly established subjectivity, provided by a discourse with a certain clarity of possibilities and limitations. As a rule, the white man on the couch knows where he came from and where he wants to go. The mystery that affects him refers to his paralysis in the search for the ideal, the hole produced in the heteropatriarchal imagination that promised him all the rights guaranteed. In other words, it is in the gap produced by a question that hides itself all the time: am I not, then, unbreakable, unkillable, uncatchable? The self that is structured in masculinities will need, in analysis, to surrender to the negation of the negation, rejecting the performativity of its negativities and renouncing the power conferred by its own emptiness if it wishes to dismantle its mandate of violence. It is only by associating himself in some way with his images of failure that a man can give rise to the creation of non-violent alternatives for himself.

By pointing out the tear in male illusions, Connell (2016) makes it clear that very few men see themselves as living up to the ideal of the subject envisioned by the hetero-patriarchal system. Based on this, the author concludes that there are many masculinities, with hegemonic masculinity, full of power, being the one that is less performative and restricted to an especially select group of white men. What do all the others do with their failures and limitations?

The aesthetic-political project of a certain segment of the population is the persistence and repetition of the “unbreakable”. This illusion is part of what Tiburi (2024) called PRCC: patrirracialcapitalism. The satirical reference to both a political party and a narco-criminal mafia is no accident. This amalgam of privileges that structures a system and is claimed without any embarrassment by some men is part of the project to maintain a hegemonic masculinity that regulates all bodies using a convincing resource: political ridicule (TIBURI,

2020), the creation and dissemination of images within a certain discourse, images that co-opt affections trapped in what I call here the heteropatriarchal complex.

It is in this gap that analytical psychology has the chance to play a crucial role. Few twentieth-century authors have dedicated themselves to an analysis of images from a psychological point of view like C.G. Jung. For a long time now, analytical psychology has been advocating an exploration of images that brings out both the symbolic-cultural character that needs to be dismantled on the one hand, but on the other, from the archetypal theory, we say that there is something more to images. For so long now, we have been guided by the Jungian intuition that there is something in images that is not visible at first, as Lacan himself admitted. Jung (2002, OC, vol. IX) brought to our attention that the images we can hear from the unconscious bring potential forms that survive time, a certain aesthetic principle that provides order to our humanity. This elementary aesthetic form, the archetype, seems to have nothing to do with all the cultural conditioning factors that drive a certain project of power. Thus, it seems problematic to say that gender is archetypal since gender is a category that sustains a project of colonial and hetero-patriarchal society. If sexuality and performativity can be seen as archetypal phenomena, gender is a derivative of these conditions that is shaped by certain locations (Europe, especially), at a certain historical moment (the emergence of the ancestral figure of the pater familias, as seen in Pessoa [2021]), which sustain a social order that has become more sophisticated and has proved especially terrifying for the bodies of women and LGBTI+ people.

Masculine identities reside in our world as a kind of body animated by the hetero-patriarchal complex in its negativity, reinforced by an aesthetic-political project that intentionally spreads images to co-opt people through the affections that these images arouse and move in us. It is our deepest feelings and emotions that are at stake, as we are co-opted by the manipulation of our traumas and everyday suffering. As asserted by Safatle (2016), fear is the most often mobilized affection in our time, which paralyzes us in identities based on unease and suffering. Thus, we could say that there is not only a fear of the feminine, as analytical psychology has explored at length. There is also a fear of the masculine, much less metaphorical since it is at the hands of the masculine that we are dominated, raped, beaten, and killed.

Analytical psychology understands, though, that the game of affections mobilized by a complex, despite its enormous potential for generating suffering and symptoms, also points to paths for elaboration and alternative ways out. An image is a form that is potentially unlimited in its capacity to provide us with insights and, therefore, generate transformations that move us out of the complex itself. It requires

continuous listening to the image and a silent persistence on the part of the analyst in identifying the gaps and holes that can allow us to exercise a certain amount of agency that we have left. Therein lies the possibility of a certain freedom of action, of a return to the act. To do so, we must overcome our own fear and terror of the threats of the “unkillable” because although Kronos was not killed, he could be isolated and exiled, as another image teaches us.

We also need to overcome the image as the bearer of transcendental truth, that is, the somewhat religious understanding that the images of the unconscious contain ready-made solutions that have been sent by some higher authority. Affections are repeated and reproduced based on a historical process which, if properly observed, tells us how we ordered ourselves and how the complex reached the strength with which we can see it today. We need to pay attention to history, philosophy, and art, which tell us about other aesthetic-political projects that are more inclusive, liberating, and emancipatory. We cannot shy away from dialoguing with these fields in an era of post-identity, nor can analytical psychology shy away from studying its sister fields. We cannot just stick with the image, we need to understand it in a broader context that can better inform us about what this unconscious is saying that we find difficult to hear.

Male identities, like all others, are yet another misfit performativity in this PRCC system that we support desperately and that we maintain as if it were our only alternative. We should point out, though, that it is in their constitution through violence that male identities are inserted into the system as the primary holders of privileges and possibilities that have led us to a critical aggravation of the system itself, which is threatening to collapse at every moment. A review of the masculine position and its permeability to criticism is urgent. Such a transformation can only take place by shifting the negativity through which the masculine is structured; instead of a resolute denial of dissident sexualities, privilege must be refuted through simple denials: man is not king, man is not elite, nor is man phallic. How could we conceive of a man who does not enjoy the power and seduction of the phallus?

It is through aesthetics, more precisely aesthetic politics, that we can imagine whole new possible worlds and encourage new forms of intuition and imagination. Finally, it is worth recalling that imagination is a faculty that has always been fostered by a certain Carl Jung, who sought to express himself through his images, and by encouraging others to produce their own, analytical resources that survive to this day and help many in their processes of elaborating their complexes. For those of us dedicated to analytical psychology today, the task remains to let go of the mythologies of the past, identify the affections that remain, and, from their paints, produce new images that better portray the worlds we desire.

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