Educate for reflective masculinity: comment on Alberto Pellai’s article

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‘Male education’ is one of the most urgent, radical contemporary challenges if we recognize that many of the problems of the world we live in – from gender violence, to crime, to war, to the devastation of nature, to the birth crisis – are somehow connected to an encumbered hegemony of pathological, (self-)destructive models of virility and the slow, laborious formulation, in people’s conciousness and in social practice, of alternative, more ecological and non-violent models of masculinity. The paradigm of strength and virility that exerts its influence over men, women, and children, over adversaries, and economic competitors, over enemies, opponents and adverse forces, which projects its shadow over society, over nature and even over planetary space represents a deep-rooted, stereotyped consciousness which, although prone to cracks, aches, pains, and injury, continues to shackle our culture and our psyche.

The text by Alberto Pellai ‘Vero uomo o Uomo vero?’ (Pellai, 2024) addresses some particularly urgent issues not only concerning forms of individual and interpersonal unease, but also with regard to the social, economic and ecological unease of our time. The individual psyche is not my forte, and my attention is focused on a different level. However, I recommend re-reading Pellai’s reflections from a more sociocultural perspective, broadening the angle of vision to include historical and collective contexts and processes.

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Contextualizing men’s emotional pain

Pellai focuses on the theme of ‘emotional unease’ and men’s ‘emotional pain’: a form of suffering which, it seems to me, is bound by the weight of cultural models of masculinity that act at different, albeit integrated, levels. On one level, these models impose a normative expectation and the requirement to conform to a predefined code of virility which demands a display of power, of proving oneself strong, active, imperturbable, in effect, producing a sort of ‘false self’. On another level, weaning men away from exercising and exploring other emotional and expressive registers, condemns them to a form of emotional illiteracy, an inability to identify and name – even before expressing them – their own experiences and needs. To complete the picture, the process condemns them to reckon with an incommunicable pain with no space, nor even authorization, to translate it into a request for help, because this, in turn, would be interpreted as a symptom of weakness or a sign of poor virility: ‘The suffering and emotional pain of men is often invisible, unenunciable, and unshareable within interpersonal relationships, and the failure to seek specialist and professional help when suffering and emotional pain appear in a man’s life represents one of the most obvious risk factors for the development of problems in the psychopathological and psychiatric area’ (Pellai, 2024). In this context, violence and male destructiveness can be interpreted, among other things, as the projective and destructive manifestation of a denied, repressed malaise.

I largely agree with this reflection and interpretation, even though having discussed the issue of masculinity with men over the decades, I would add that the description overlooks the material incentives – in terms of recognition, power, rights, opportunities, security – which men have long enjoyed for submitting, more or less voluntarily, to a certain socio-cultural regime that we can define as patriarchal, or, at least, sexist. What I mean to say is that if the advantages – real or presumed – of a certain consolidated structure are not taken into account, we may fail to understand the difficulties and resistance involved in abandoning or at least moving away from a given model, which reveals itself to be, increasingly, a trap for men, too. In order for a critical assessment to be made, we must honestly admit not only to the losses but also to the gains, otherwise we risk giving rise to a certain male victimhood which is taking root both in public narratives and in the political arena, and which produces grotesque ideological results.¹

¹ To give an example, some associations of separated fathers have reinterpreted the phenomenon of family crimes (femicides, filicides and killings of other family members) under the interpretative framework of the increasing male tendency towards suicide and as ‘an expression of the psycho-emotional instability resulting from separation’, inviting us to consider
From this point of view, the relationship between internal disposition and external structure is also significant, and is not simply a question of past mental or psychological experience. The position, role, rights, duties, prerogatives and experiences of the father, husband, partner, or son, have never been private affairs. The role of the father or male child in a relational and family structure within patriarchal societies, corresponded, in effect, to a social mandate reflected and supported in cultural, religious, symbolic, political, and legal structures centered on male authority and seniority. Therefore, even if pain, suffering, fatigue, and fragility have always been subjectively present in male psychic and social development, the symbolic, material and social structure – preferential access to the world of work and the professions, income and financial control, family law, religious and cultural codes, exemption from care and service duties, control over female sexuality, not to mention positions linked to political, social, military functions – was defined to reaffirm and support certain male roles and male authority.

In today’s society, the reality has changed significantly. Many of the pillars of male security have disappeared or have been significantly weakened compared to the rapid transformation which has seen the position of women strengthened. Precariousness, globalization, the feminization of work, sexual liberation, the transformation of family law and civil rights, rules against violence, etc., mean that today men are increasingly deprived of external means and support leaving their individuality bare and exposed.

Therefore, the emergence of male unease, precariousness and fragility is not simply due to the anthropological transformation of the contemporary male but to a significant weakening of the ingrained, deep-rooted means of control and power that guaranteed acquired roles and predominant positions in relationships between the sexes: at work, in affective relationships, in the family, in sexuality.

So, while we are beginning to come to terms with male suffering, vulnerability and hardship, we also need to help men come to terms with a new context that offers models of equality in relationships at home, in the family, in the workplace, in study, as well as in politics. In other words, it is not a matter of simply recognising, welcoming, treating, and consoling male suffering, we also need to educate men to come to terms with the novelty of equality in relationships and the mixed work contexts, with the rethinking of social expectations and, hence, men’s duties and aspirations in society.

From this point of view, more than a problem of ‘emotional self-regula-

men as the real ‘weak subject’ in cases of separation and custody of children (Fe.N.bi, 2008). In other words ‘the causes of the dramatic gesture’ or the killing of the ex-partners and the children themselves ‘have always been sought in jealousy and the lack of resignation at the end of the relationship [...] should in truth be sought in the ‘despair generated by the loss of the children’.
tion’, it seems to me to be a problem of ‘social self-regulation’. We must learn to live in a changed context, with new expectations, resources and abilities different from those that were once considered appropriate and functional.

Who do ‘our’ emotions belong to?

A discussion about male emotional unease or pain, as Alberto Pellai underlines, is certainly appropriate and even urgent. In my opinion, it is important not to stop and look solely at individual experience and narrative, but to define and understand the forms and mechanisms of the unease and the suffering, focusing on the structural and profound dimension at the root of subjective experience. One should bear in mind that emotions are not only individual but also transpersonal, social and cultural.

For example, our emotional experiences have a history and exist in a family and intergenerational context. Each of us will recall the emotional forms and structures typical of our own family context which are passed down from generation to generation. From birth, if not from gestation, we absorb and host the emotions and emotional states of our family environment. In this sense, our emotions belong to our mind and, at the same time, to our past and that of our family. This means that in order to work on our emotions and emotional self-efficacy, we inevitably need to deal with our own experiences as a child, a boy or girl, an adolescent. We must be aware that, when we discuss a situation with a partner or with our children, we are inevitably also dealing with our own experiences as children and with the emotions we experienced with our own mother or father (or other primary carers). As we work on our present, we are simultaneously re-reading, re-structuring and, hopefully, also re-ordering our past and our growing subjectivity.

Pellai states: ‘However, in our male culture, gender stereotypes are consolidated to such an extent that it is impossible or extremely difficult to manage emotions in a way that is functional to one’s psychic well-being. Being a ‘good man’ often involves renouncing the idea of being a ‘real man’’ (Pellai, 2024). Social expectations regarding gender roles and, specifically, an ideal of masculinity devoted to power and imperturbability, produce, on an emotional level, profound unease, with repercussions on both an intrapersonal and interpersonal level. Pellai explicitly highlights that a certain type of conflict and intrapsychic tension depends primarily on the pressures and conditioning exerted in a specific cultural context.

By the 1930s, the anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1936), studying a ritual of sexual transvestism in New Guinea, had already underlined the fact that ‘culture standardizes the emotional reactions of individuals and modifies the organization of their feelings. […] a human being comes into the world with potentiality and tendencies that can develop in various
directions and it is likely that different individuals have different potentialities. The culture into which the individual is born emphasizes some potentialities and suppresses others. It acts selectively, favoring individuals who are more endowed with the potentialities appreciated by the culture, and discriminating against those who have different tendencies. In this way, culture standardizes the organization of individuals’ emotions’ (Bateson, 1936, pp. 110-111).

Whether positive or negative, emotions do not belong exclusively to individuals. Change does not affect only the male psyche or culture. It is about socio-cultural change, a change in social expectations, relationship models, and cultural paradigms.

This leads us to underline the fact that the issue is twofold. On the one hand, we need to counteract and reduce pressure on men to conform to male cultural norms that our social expectations produce. On the other hand, we need to work on counteracting the cultural gender models rooted in tradition which continue to have a negative influence on generations of men. As Tiffany Watt Smith wrote, ‘The meanings we attribute to a human emotion change the experience we have of it’ (Watt Smith, 2015, p. 26). Rather than being a question of masking, repressing and controlling our emotions, we need to recognise, and listen to them, traverse them, and even discuss, criticize, and attack them. Together we can identify new, still sketchy emotions, cultivate and water them, make them grow, give them a name, and, once they are near maturity, present them to our village.

The challenge, therefore, is not to alleviate contemporary male anxieties, but to help us understand the meaning (subjective and social) of those emotions, to redefine them, and shape them into something meaningful that can orient us in the difficult choices offered to us by this historical and existential transition. This leads me to reflect on the fact that, today, there is a need – from a cultural and artistic point of view – for literature, cinema, television, video games, and painting, to present different, and authoritative models or representations of masculinity; models or representations which depict a mild, sensitive, reflective, vulnerable, nurturing, respectful, non-violent masculinity not associated with weakness or marginality, but with existential and social valorization and effectiveness.

The contexts of change

Pellai underlines the need to overcome the approach based on ‘secondary prevention interventions, i.e., aimed at reducing risk, and the early recognition of a potentially unhealthy relationship’ (implying that the ‘masculine’ should be considered from the perspective of potential attacker) and move instead to a form of primary prevention consisting of ‘gender educa-
tion strategies aimed at male subjects to encourage their adherence to a new model of masculinity and a new gender role’ (Pellai, 2024).

The issue of gender education must necessarily be placed within a specific context. Pellai suggests that we focus on two critical, or priority areas. In the first instance, he points to fathering – i.e., the father-child/children relationship – as a preferential area for possible change. Under this approach, the promotion of measures to support fathering are desirable so that a generation of new fathers may become both witness and promoter of a radical change capable of ‘contaminating’ the idea of masculinity both in the adult community and in the caregiving and educational relationships formed with children of developmental age. Certainly, the caring father experience represents a most promising terrain: the activation of relational resources involving the body, the psyche, the emotions and material needs, means that a different masculinity can emerge. The experience of care could, therefore, be an incubator for the birth not only of new fathers but of new men.

The second field of intervention, according to Pellai, should be in schools where courses aimed at building emotional and affective competence should be promoted. Certainly, the school context is crucial for the amount of time spent there, and for the complexity and range of the interactions that take place between peers and adult educators. However, we should draw your attention to at least three potential problems which require serious consideration.

The first concerns the risk of transforming affective, emotional and sexual education into a ‘discipline’ with its dogmas, its notions, its norms, and its grades, with the risk of anesthetizing and freezing what is actually a vital area of experience for human maturity.

The second risk is that we may assume that technical and professional competence is enough to educate children about emotions, affectivity, and respectful relational models. In fact, gender culture with its stereotypes and prejudices involves the whole of society, including adults and educators who cannot be considered immune from these problems. Therefore, it is more honest to consider it as an ‘active, and, at the same time, reflective education’ or at least, a general commitment involving children, young people, and adults together, and their interactions.

The third and last element that deserves attention concerns the risk of considering children as mere passive recipients of an educational effort, and not as subjects capable of developing, questioning and judging these very adults and their relational models; capable of assessing whether the ‘inten-

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2 In relation to the promotion of committed and caring fathering, see the 4e-Parent project (https://4e-parentproject.eu) and, in particular, the map of ‘Paternity support resources’ that I curated within the project (https://4e-parentproject.eu/risorse/).
tion’ and ‘disposition’ of adults is coherent and credible or whether, as usual, they might try to shift the problem onto the young ones, as if it were possible to start from scratch. The real challenge is to consider emotional and affective education as an area of experimentation using different educational models which are less based on the idea of transmission of knowledge and more based on a more complex and integrated idea of education, where the research process, and rational and emotional knowledge are integrated and interconnected. A relationship model in which the adults are the ones who, first and foremost, put themselves on the line with their own affectivity, emotionality, ambivalences and sincerity. In short, with their emotional intelligence.

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