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Society at the edges – Populism, polarisation, and paralysis

Hannah Piterman

Socioanalysis 22: 2021 (41-68)

This paper argues that women's exclusion from leadership is a symptom of a wider societal malaise that has its roots in cultural, ideological and economic forces that intersect to undermine women's authority, women's livelihood and women's lives and indeed the lives of everyone. It argues that the intersection of neoliberalism and social conservatism has escalated economic inequalities, and heightened systemic forces that generate, maintain, and replicate relations of domination that expose underlying misogynistic and racist predilections. The ensuing impasse sees culture and gender wars threaten the move towards generative thinking, for genuine engagement, and reparation.

Key words: gender, intersectionality, feminism, neoliberalism, race, politics,

Introduction

Christine Lagarde, former head of the international Monetary Fund, said of the Global Financial Crisis 'if it had been Lehman Sisters rather than Lehman Brothers, the world might well look a lot different today' (Khadem 2018).

Subsequent analysis and a great deal of soul searching revealed that a system of euphoric and delusional, testosterone-fuelled over confident risk-taking behaviour was the basis for the corporate collapses of the GFC (University of Queensland 2016, Adams 2011, Coates & Herbert 2008). The GFC was a wake-up call for the 'Strutting Roosters' 'Big Swinging Dicks' and 'Masters of the Universe' to move aside to make way for women into decision-making circles (Adams 2011).

At the time there was a sense of hope that the call for greater prudence would see more women at the leadership table. Aviva Wittenberg Cox and Alison Maitland had just written their book, *Why Women Mean Business* (Wittenberg Cox & Maitland 2008). 'Womonomics' was becoming a global phenomenon. The Economist said 'women's economic empowerment was arguably the biggest social change of our times' (*The Economist* 2009). And there was mounting evidence of a strong business case that aligns more vibrant, innovative and productive nations with those that best utilise female talent (Piterman 2015, Wittenberg Cox 2010, Barnett, Morley & Piterman 2010, Piterman 2010b, The Economist 2009, Wittenberg Cox & Maitland 2008). This did not happen. The market that was supposed to usher in merit and break down hierarchies of privilege

proved to be ephemeral. Women were the first to be furloughed and sacked when the economy went south post the crisis (Piterman 2010a, 2010b). Women continue to be excluded from leadership positions and their authority remains tentative. Australian women are grossly underrepresented as key decision makers in corporations, in government and in politics. Progress towards gender equality is slow. And inertia around the significant gender remuneration gap continues (Workplace Gender Equality Agency 2020). A report by *Chief Executive Women* shows just 10 of Australia's top 200 listed companies had a female chief executive in 2020, dropping from 12 in 2019, and from 14 in 2018 (Chief Executive Women CEW 2020). Relative to the rest of the world, Australia's gender status is progressively going backwards. It is ranked 44th in the 2020 World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap report dropping from a ranking of 15th in 2006 (World Economic Forum 2020).

Despite the near total collapse of the international banking system little had been learnt. 'Ignorance amongst the general public, reticence amongst complicit mainstream politicians and a deeply skewed sensationalist portrayal of finance in the mass media conspired to create the narrative that the crash was caused by greed or by some other character flaw in individual bankers' (Luyendijk 2015). Failure to address the systemic underpinnings of the GFC sees a business-as-usual culture of greed, poor governance, financial malfeasance and lack of ethics. The recidivist cycle of scandals, parliamentary inquiries, royal commissions, 'mea culpas' and assurances of better behaviour continue as the same cut of banker, executive and politician remain at the helm. Women remain conspicuously missing from leadership positions.

My purpose in writing this paper is to illuminate the complex dynamics that see the perpetuation of business models that exclude women through an exploration of neoliberalism's reach into the economic, political, and individual worlds. Through an intersectional lens, I identify a confluence of factors that while tangential to the women's cause impact on women's lives and women's authority. These forces speak to dynamics of power around class, politics, race and ideology and the intense emotions that these dynamics engender.

Gender, as a personal and cultural construct (Chodorow 1995 in Layton 2004) is central to an understanding of the inequities and iniquities in the social world and the ideologies that sustain them. Julia Gillard during her last speech as Australia's first female Prime Minister said, '(Gender) doesn't explain everything, it doesn't explain nothing, it explains some things' (Gillard 2013). Excluding half the population from decision-making tells us something about the workings of the society we live in, what we prioritise, what we privilege, what we value and what we want to become as a society.

I structure the paper as follows: first, I present the notion of ‘intersectionality’ as a lens through which to explore complex dynamics in divisive settings; second, I discuss the position of neoliberalism as a centre of gravity around which society revolves, permeating culture, politics and ethics and appropriating the idea of ‘feminism’; third, I explore the propensity for defensive dynamics and misogyny in Australian political and business settings in the context of neoliberalism and social conservatism ; and finally, I reflect on reckoning and reparation as an authentic enterprise for reclaiming hope and recovery in the face of unreason.

Intersectionality, politics and the economy

Pulitzer Prize winning American journalist Susan Faludi wrote over 20 years ago, ‘the gender battle was only a surface manifestation of other struggles’ (Faludi 1999, p.3002). The threads linking neoliberalism, market economies, corporate malfeasance, racism, misogyny and omnipotent grandiosity manifested in current examples such Trumpism are manifold and complex, not readily apparent and often unconscious (Gill 2017, Gentile 2018, Gentile 2017, Layton 2014). These interact to reveal the workings of power, privilege and the ideologies, which produce and sustain hierarchies of domination and exploitation.

Intersectionality provides a mechanism to make meaning of the way power operates to produce and reproduce inequality through ‘the interaction between various categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power’ (Davis, 2008, p.68).

The notion of intersectionality originated with the pioneering work of black feminist academics Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Collins who highlighted the workings of power and the oppression of black women by connecting structures of race, gender and economic inequality (Collins 2000, Crenshaw 1989). Contemporary configurations of global capital are mutually constituted and work together to produce and sustain social inequality and oppression (Collins & Bilge 2016, Collins 2015).

The intersectional approach goes beyond simple recognition of the multiplicity of the systems of oppression functioning out of these categories but postulates that their interplay forms what Collins refers to as a ‘matrix of domination’ (Ferber 1998, p.68) that reinforces social inequalities (Collins & Bilge 2016, Andersen & Collins 2012, Crenshaw 1989). These inequalities are present in any given setting representing different dimensions of the same social system, even if one appears more visible and salient than the others (Stoetzler 2016).

'Intersectionality operates as both the observance and analysis of power imbalances and the tool by which those power imbalances could be eliminated altogether' (Coaston 2019). Intersectional thinking provides a rationale to link, unpeel and expose in order to enable a whole story rather than a part of a whole. In doing so it acknowledges the interrelatedness of egregious oppressions, situates issues within broader contexts, and explodes myths and self-serving agendas to bring to the fore what has been conveniently separated, avoided, denied and concealed, that awful uncomfortable truth, that we are vaguely aware of but for the sake of convenience choose to ignore - 'turn a blind eye to' (Steiner 1985).

Unsurprisingly, in a polarised world the notion of intersectionality has been politicised as the 'really dangerous' (Coaston 2019) identitarian, politically correct and anti-oedipal ideology of academics, political provocateurs, cultural justice warriors and the outright fanatics of the progressive left. These influences seek 'the elevation of subjectivity rendering impossible any standard of value or commonality of experience across identities' (Kunzru 2020). 'The development of intersectionality has seen reasonable and humane concerns about oppression and marginalization mutate into an ideological virus spreading through scholarship and society' (Church 2020).

It seems it is a fear of disruption of the status quo (some of it performative to serve the interests of the media outrage industry) that is driving advocacy around anti-intersectionality and the 'conspiracy theory of victimization' (Coaston 2019) that it has come to represent. Anti-intersectional advocacy has become interchangeable with anti-political correctness, identity politics, 'cancel culture' and 'social justice scholarship' which represent new platforms for a 'terrifying inversion of the social order' (Kunzru 2020) that advocates for the corruption of merit to create a new 'hierarchy of victimhood with women on top' (Shapiro in Coaston 2019). 'Intersectionality' is the latest academic craze sweeping the American academy ... It is operating, in Orwell's words, as a 'smelly little orthodoxy,' that manifests itself almost as a religion' (Sullivan 2017). Anti-intersectionality comes on the heels of anti-political correctness a form of 'illiberal liberalism' that decries political correctness as an attack on free speech and free thinking, 'an authoritarian settlement, based on intolerance of others' (Western 2016, p70), 'the brave new world of ideological zealotry' (Weigel 2016), 'the new McCarthyism' (Baker Jones 1994, p384) and an 'anti-oedipal moral tyranny which destroys notions of reason and objectivity and hence a denial of reality' (Schwartz 2016, Schwartz 2002).

In their recently published book titled *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender and Identity*, Pluckrose & Lindsay (2020) argue that 'Social Justice' ideologies (as opposed to 'social justice') are 'illiberal ideological movements' (p.48) that in institutional settings 'completely displace reliable and rigorous

scholarship into issues of social justice (p.1568) such that ‘the lived experiences, emotions and cultural traditions of minority groups must be recognised as ‘knowledges’ that are privileged over reason and evidence-based knowledge’ (p.1347). They make the general comment that ‘it is perhaps not surprising that large corporations have caved in so easily to ‘Social Justice’ pressure. Their overriding goal is, after all, to make money, not to uphold liberal values’ (p.1597).

Observations of greed through an intersectional lens

An intersectional lens underscores the tension between ‘social justice’ and profit making. The litany of corporate misdemeanours, egregious in their nature and pervasive across key sectors of the Australian economy, would suggest that Australian business rather than being captured by social justice agendas is pursuing the ‘overriding goal of making money’, reneging on its social justice responsibilities and vandalising the implied reciprocity to society inherent in a ‘social licence to operate’.

Tales of greed, neglect, fraud, bribery and impunity to the rule of law and ethical standards, that have been presented before royal commissions and inquiries, underscore a blatant disregard for the very social justice standards that are displayed in boardrooms and highlighted in annual reports. Inquiry after inquiry reveal cultures of industry wide systemic wage theft, substandard work practices, exploitation of labour, scandals in the financial planning, life insurance and banking sectors, sexual harassment, abject neglect of residents in the aged care sector, and the destruction of heritage sites that have special meaning to indigenous communities (Ferguson 2020, Royal Commission into Aged Care 2019, Hayne 2019, Report of the Fair Work Ombudman’s Inquiry into 7-Eleven 2016).

I provide two cases to exemplify the labyrinthine manner in which a manic, one-sided, blind pursuit of profit, greed and lax regulation intersect to degrade humanity, pervert organisational purpose and destroy the common good.

Case one: Sexual harassment at AMP

In 2020 AMP (Australian Mutual Provident Society) promoted Bo Pahari to the position of chief executive of AMP Capital. In 2018 AMP settled a case of sexual harassment against Pahari. Julia Szlakowski, the plaintiff, left AMP.

Amongst the allegations against Pahari was his insistence that Szlakowski, a junior, fly to London at company expense for a meeting, then accompany Pahari to a nightclub. When she declined his offer to use his credit card to buy her clothes so that he could take her out to dinner he said that her rejection was tantamount to making his ‘dick limp’

(Roddan 2020b). AMP misled investors by downplaying the gravity of the harassment charges referring to them as 'lower level breaches' (Roddan 2020b) of the company's code of conduct. More allegations of sexual harassment followed with the resignation of the chief executive of AMP Australia, Alex Wade, in the wake of allegations of inappropriate conduct including sending lewd photos to a female employee.

The Chair David Murray was forced to resign after institutional investors threatened to withdraw funds. Murray is on record with his views that a board's prime responsibility is to shareholder value measured in bottom line financials. He fought against the push for social licence to operate agendas, including gender diversity guidelines and environmental responsibility, viewing these as distractions.

In 2019 AMP was called before the Hayne Royal Commission into Misconduct in the Banking, Superannuation and Financial Services Industry for extracting fees from clients that involved no service and for charging life insurance premiums to thousands of dead clients (Piterman 2020, Roddan 2020a, Roddan 2020b, Wilkins 2020, Hayne 2019).

Case two: Neglect in the aged care sector

Aged care workers, mainly women from ethnic communities, became vectors for the spread of the Covid 19 virus in aged care settings and thereafter into the wider community. The mortality rate per capita of aged care residents during the pandemic has been one of the highest in the world. Racism has been ignited as sections of the media target mainly Chinese and Muslim ethnic communities for spreading the virus (Ducket 2020, Annapureddy, Abeysekera & Shao 2020, Yu Zong 2020).

The residential aged care sector is a \$25 billion-a-year for profit industry underpinned by a business model that legitimises the commodification of the elderly as a for profit enterprise. The sector is staffed by lowly-paid, poorly-trained workers with precarious job security who during the pandemic have had little access to resources such as personal protective equipment or instruction in infectious disease control. Evidence before the Royal Commission into Aged Care indicates that huge profits are made on the back of cost cutting measures that see residents in many facilities receiving less than standard care from untrained staff. 'This makes aged-care homes highly vulnerable to any external disaster' (Ibrahim 2020).

An audit conducted for the Royal Commission found opaque corporate structures and limited reporting requirements (Lunn 2019). The Commonwealth Aged Care Act does not mandate a minimum level of staffing or skills or a requirement that facility owners account for how government funding is allocated (Aged Care Crisis 2020, Aged Care Act 1997). The Royal Commission described Australia's aged care system as 'a shocking tale

of neglect' in its interim report (The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety 2019, p.1).

The pandemic has shown the failure to recognise 'that there are goods that must be there for all of us if these goods are to be there for any of us' (Ducket 2020, p.13).

These examples are not isolated cases of corporate defilement in the financial and aged care sectors that have occurred in a vacuum. They reflect of a culture that privileges the expansion of capitalism above any moral constraints. They reflect the perversity of 'for profit' business models that ignore accountability standards and ethics, treat sexual harassment as a cost of doing business, treat victims as collateral damage and patient lives with contempt. They highlight the hubris inherent in denial of societal interconnectedness, made stark in the face of an invisible, fatal, and rapidly spreading virus. These business cultures have assaulted humanity, savaged community trust and undermined democracy. Trust in institutions is at a low level with Australia's leading institutions, government, business, NGOs, and media among the least trusted in the world (Edelman 2020).

These corporate cultures have thrived because a toxic variant of capitalism has insinuated itself into everyone's lives. Underpinned by largely unquestioned ideas about choice, entrepreneurialism, competition and meritocracy, neoliberal economics has removed the social dimensions from economic decision-making enabling exploitation of labour, price gouging, and inequality at the hands of profit-making agendas and complicit governments (Skidelsky 2020, Bock & Somers 2014, Farrell 2014). Indeed, government collusion with the forces of capitalism sees competition policy, regulatory requirements, and laws that are designed to benefit wealth and capital rather than benefiting the public. Nothing has changed since political philosopher Karl Polanyi wrote seventy years ago 'the private rule of global finance puts public policy in a straitjacket' (Kuttner 2014, Bock & Somers 2014). As political scientist John Keane points out social democracy has become the 'discredited defender of 'too big to fail' corporate interests, austerity' and a self-serving political class that has turned a blind eye to the excesses of corporate Australia (Huntley 2019, p.55). Richard Dennis, author of *Dead Right*, says in Australia oligopolies, such as big banks 'set their own rules.... commission their own 'independent reports' into their own misconduct, edit those reports, and ultimately make the highest profits' (Dennis 2018, p.190). The subversion by stealth of the fourth estate sees a diminished propensity to hold democracy and big business to account as the media too has succumbed to business models that see it become an outlet for distraction, polarisation, disinformation and fake news.

This bludgeoning happens because the culture is there to receive it as some form of common sense (Aly 2017).’ For a system of inequality to be stable over the long run, those who have more must convince those who have less that the distribution of who gets what is fair, just, proper, or the natural order of things’ (Miller & McNamee, 2013, p.3 in Eisold 2020, pp.73-74). The neoliberal re-conceptualisation of the individual, as autonomous, responsible to self, and accountable to self only produces a radical split between those who make it in the system and those who do not (Layton 2014). Societal internalisation of the ‘meritocratic fantasy’ (Piketty 2014) of neoliberal justice has allowed the decades long process of shredding the nation’s social safety net and reframed the denial of the basic human right to earn a fair wage (Iber 2018, Metcalf 2017, Phillips 2015).

It has seen Australia’s distinctively democratic value of a ‘fair go’ lost or perverted, reduced to a simple binary that aligns with a neoliberal sensibility finessed to serve political agendas. Prime Minister Morrison has variously called for a selective notion of a ‘fair go’, ‘a fair go for the deserving, ‘those who have a go’ (Brett 2019, p.379), a variation on Joe Hockey’s punitive division of society into ‘leaners and lifters’ (Brett 2019, p.379).

The ‘pedagogy of defect’ (Bordo 1997, p.37) that this binary framing promotes casts a shadow of imperfection as a constant reminder, a societal Achilles heel, of the risk of falling short, falling over and falling off the edge. Fear of one’s inherent vulnerability heightens the propensity for capture by a misremembered Australia of the past redolent with nostalgic connotations of purity and harmony, of able-bodied resilience and of ‘manning up’. Implicit in this ‘un-metabolised mourning’ (Myers 2019) is the 1950s ideal of masculinity and paternalism delivered through a symbolic good father (Western 2016), the fantasy of simplicity, safety and certainty that existed before the intrusion of narratives of late modernity that include multiculturalism, diversity, cultural and sexual equality, and intellectualism (Foroughi, Fotaki & Gabriel 2019).

While heightened polarity is a feature of most political dynamics and, as Freud points out, is a feature of groups, (Levine 2015), ‘polarization cuts much deeper than political disagreements’ undermining the social and political arrangements on which the legitimacy of democracy rests (Amitai Etzioni in Ryan 2020, p.57). It has enabled a feral brand of populist politics that has been weaponised to serve ideological agendas. Preying on women’s vulnerability by casting refugees entering Australia as potential ‘rapists’ and ‘paedophiles’ (as did Prime Minister Morrison, Higgins 2019) or the quip by Education Minister, Dan Tehan that making childcare more accessible and affordable is a ‘fast track to a socialist, if not, communist economy’ (Price 2019) speaks to the robust symbiosis between politics, misogyny and racism (Ferber 2007). Unsurprising, the divisive intent has animated a propensity for primitive dynamics that sees the externalisation of unwanted parts of self, the weak and unworthy, onto others, manifested in rising classism, sexism,

and racism. These behaviours have become increasingly normalised as mainstream organisations, media and government, open their doors to racist and misogynistic elements in the name of protecting the tenets of Western civilisation and free speech (Soutphommasane 2019, Faruqi 2019, Hamad 2019a, 2019b, Margen 2017).

Neoliberalism's intrusion into feminism

Neoliberalism has extended its reach into feminism and the lives of women by offering women an identity while at the same time plundering their fears. Its sinister underbelly of 'women as deficit' captured by the 'lifter/ leaner' dichotomy sees women across all demographics on an individualistic self-improvement treadmill. 'Neoliberalism has warped the feminist quest for self-determination into a self-centred quest for self-improvement' (Ehrenreich 2018).

It has created the space for 'power feminism' (Wolf 1993), 'a bright, brassy and ultimately fake' (Gupta 2012) celebration of personal responsibility and individualism that appropriates a feminist agenda while cutting women off from one another and from a political context. Unmoored from social ideals like equality, rights and justice (Rottenberg 2018, Gill 2017) women no longer have to mobilise, unite, campaign, organise, oppose, testify, rally, march, negotiate and fight in order to self-actualise. Consumption has become their source of identity and a vehicle for their liberation.

Whole industries are successfully capitalised on 'fixing' women, offering them transformative solutions as 'the perfect emerges as a horizon of expectation through which women must seek self-definition' (McRobbie 2015, p.3) if they are to survive and thrive (McRobbie 2015, Winch 2015). Shame is deeply rooted in the 'feminine mystique' of 'effortless perfection', that sees women juggle and manage their many roles while airbrushing painful collisions that the fantasy of unlimited possibility and choice offers (Manne 2014). While 'choice feminism' (Hirshman 2006, p21) frames choosing as 'an inherently feminist act' (Poulos 2017) choices made escape scrutiny and legitimate inequality (Chambers 2007, Hirshman 2006), rendering women as fodder to a capitalist machine that profits from their desire, their ambition, their misery and their shame.

Opportunities for commodification and exploitation under the illusion of feminist progress are manifold as women's deficit is variously capitalised. Women engage in degrading rituals of 'performative shamelessness' (Dobson 2014) to expose their moral failings - too fat, too dumb or too ugly, as reality television capitalises on the raw material of women as deficit. The market's commodification of 'retro sexism' (Segal 2006) sees women collaborate in their own sexual objectification 'frantically baring their flesh' (Segal 2006) as an expression of empowerment (Gupta 2012, Segal 2006, Levy 2005).

Women have been disproportionate victims of neoliberalism's brutal market economics. Cut-throat competition as the road to empowerment has left women underpaid, undervalued, and underrepresented in a society that devalues the feminine, devalues women, devalues care and penalises those who provide it. Few women have reached positions of power and financial security or the celebrity status of 'Kardashian' (Walker 2019) heights via the neoliberal gateway. Increasingly they are exploited, low-paid, disposable workers in the deregulated labour market of neoliberalism. Women dominate the forty per cent of Australians in insecure work that sees almost a third earning less than the minimum wage. In the category of those workers earning the lowest wages, men's pay drops by two per cent when they move into a casual role, while women's pay drops by eleven percent (Pennington & Stanford 2020). Women are over-represented as living in long-term poverty (Emslie & Wood 2019).

Women as 'illegitimate authorities'

Meritocracies have not created misogyny. This has long been a feature of Australian history that has seen 'white male superiority normalised, while simultaneously creating a gradation of racialised, gendered others who either needed the protection of white males or were the object of their terror' (Gallagher 1999, p.546). Rather meritocracies under neoliberalism have reiterated patriarchy and absorbed its underlying misogyny (Gentile 2019).

Julia Gillard, Australia's first female Prime Minister challenged norms that are deeply embedded in Australia's national consciousness, in myths and stories in which heroes and nation builders are men. While in office, Gillard was subjected to a daily barrage of abuse. 'Ditch the witch', 'menopausal monster'; 'purposefully barren', 'a lying cow', 'a mouth on legs' and 'political slut' were just some of the epithets directed at her (Piterman 2015, Piterman 2013a & 13b, Summers 2012). 'According to Anne Summers, the intensity and vitriol of the media's representation of Gillard grew as her candidature progressed' (Sorrentino, Augoustinos & Le Couteur 2018).

It is no surprise that Australian women have stayed out of the top spot in political leadership. Doing gender wrong is a hazardous business as Queensland Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk discovered when she woke up to find herself featuring on the front page of one of Australia's daily mastheads in the cross-hairs of a rifle with the headline 'Anna, You're Next' (Meade 2019). Australian media shock jock, Alan Jones, encouraging Prime Minister Scott Morrison to shove a sock down the throat of New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinta Arden for expressing her opinion on climate change (Chrysanthos & Harris 2019), is not only designed to fuel the outrage machine but to intimidate women to stay clear of leadership roles.

Beliefs held by both men and women regarding female authority influence both conscious and unconscious prejudice against women in leadership (Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan & Nauts 2011; Rudman & Kilianski 2000). Women who defy gender norms face hostility as ‘illegitimate authorities’ (Vial, Brescoll & Napier 2016). A paper titled, ‘The Sexual Harassment of Uppity Women’, found women who ‘deviated from traditional gender roles’ were more likely to be sexually harassed (Berdahl 2007).

Despite years of ceaseless self-surveillance, self-discipline and ‘leaning in’ according to the exhortation of Sheryl Sandberg (Sandberg 2013) ‘womens executive presence’ (Hewitt 2014), the nebulous X factor required to gain the entry to the C suite, remains fragile. When one woman falls, gender diversity is on trial as a folly, a misguided endeavour, a recipe for disaster, an experiment that has failed. Judging from the media attacks on Catherine Brenner, former chair of AMP insurance, who was forced to resign in the wake of the Hayne Royal Commission, it was as if she were singlehandedly responsible for the wayward conduct of the financial sector. Chris Corrigan, chairman and company director, describes Brenner’s appointment as ‘demonstrably the case that she had only got the AMP job because she was a woman’ (Snow 2019).

Defence of male ‘brilliance’ in the ‘hyper-meritocratic’ cultures of ruthless competition

Women who aspire to senior positions enter a highly competitive domain. Protecting turf is a treacherous business when coveted positions of power and oversized compensations or both are viciously contested. Those at the top justify their positions by engaging in hyperbole and distraction to convince themselves and others that their elite status is reward for their ‘brilliance’. The hubris inherent in claiming to be the *The Smartest Guys in the Room* (McClellan & Elkind 2003) saw the fall of Enron, the GFC and the ongoing corporate misdemeanours that have become an almost daily occurrence. Eisold refers to the social defence of ‘mystification’, as a deliberate attempt to disguise the undue economic and social power that exists in the ‘hyper-meritocracies’ that Piketty describes (Eisold 2020).

A number of studies show men justify not hiring women in leadership positions on the basis that women are not as smart as men. Caroline Perez author of *Invisible Women*, says ‘when ‘brilliance’ is considered a requirement for a job, what is really meant is a ‘penis’ (Perez 2019, p.100). Several studies have found that the more a field is culturally understood to require ‘brilliance’ or ‘raw talent’ in order to succeed the fewer are the number of women studying and working in it. In fact, femininity is inversely associated with brilliance (Perez 2019, Bian, Leslie & Cimpian 2018; Banchevsky, Westfall, Park & Judd 2016; Meyer, Cimpian & Leslie 2015).

In the face of men's deservedness of their dominant status, women's rise constitutes a usurping of patriarchal authority and an existential threat. Prime Minister Scott Morrison said in his 2019 International Women's Day address that he wanted women to rise up but not at the expense of men (Morrison 2019). He said this reflexively as if the imbalance was the common-sense order of things, an unstated, taken-for-granted assumption. 'Culture is symbolically, archetypally, and mythically male' (Peterson 2018, p.303). Women's demands are an assault, it seems, on the natural order and hence an attempt to destroy reality by destroying the notion of the Father embedded in the traditional Oedipal arrangement (Schwartz 2002, 2016). 'Women, Freud ruled, must overcome their penis envy as the literal desire to have what men have, a desire for masculine power and privilege. Phallic power is not for girls' (Gentile 2018).

The anxiety in response to women's perceived encroachment into traditionally male arenas sees a propensity for heightened defensive activity as men present themselves as victims of undue demonisation that has its basis in a politically correct, regressive ideological fantasy that is being acted upon as if it were an inviolable truth. (Peterson 2018, Schwartz 2003).

Sociologist Michael Kimmel has coined the term 'aggrieved entitlement' to describe 'men's sense of entitlement that can no longer be assumed and that is unlikely to be fulfilled' (Kimmel 2017, p66). This has seen men's overreaction to women's modest progress such that voices of power and privilege present as the voices of 'wronged masculinity'. It sees successful men such as company director and chairman David Gonski saying: 'a lot of my colleagues have complained that there is an active bias at the moment towards women. It is hurting men' (Irvine 2017). Chairman, company director and former chief of the ACCC, Australia's competition regulator, Graeme Samuel says 'a nuclear bomb was needed to smash down the impenetrable wall around the female club of directors, whose reputation was not always properly deserved' (Durkin 2019). Australian academic Dimitri Gonis wrote in *The Australian*, 'men are becoming passive acolytes of the new, effeminised vision of humankind; a place where the primal brutishness of males has been subdued and everyone is judged on their merit, on a level playing field' (Gonis 2018). A study by Chief Executive Women and Male Champions of Change found that forty per cent of men in the non-government sector say they do not believe in meritocracies and of those forty-three per cent cited 'reverse discrimination' as the main reason for this (Chief Executive Women & Male Champions of Change 2018). One would hope for generational change when Millennials outnumber their more conservative elders. But a growing number of Millennials appear to be alienated from gender equality initiatives and are backsliding into traditional value systems in which men control family, dominate sexual relations, and are better suited to leadership (Haussegger & Evans 2018).

Masculine identity, market success, and a denial of the feminine

Market societies heighten dynamics of competition and put masculinity on trial. A paper titled 'Precarious Manhood' finds male identity is synonymous with market success. Unlike womanhood, which is natural, manhood is precarious. It must be 'earned and maintained ... defended with active demonstrations of manliness and associated aggression' (Vandello, Bosson, Cohen et al 2008, p.1335). And its deservedness is contingent. As populist academic Jordan Peterson says, 'boys can only win by winning in a male hierarchy' (Peterson 2018, p298).

Fear of failure is felt viscerally, as losing the deal is tantamount to losing one's position in the pecking order and risks abandonment by the group. 'The unanimous expression of the will of the group' (Bion 1959, p65) sees the internalisation of the 'whatever it takes' mantra as one hangs on for dear life to stave off excommunication from the 'boy's club' and protect against feelings of annihilation and loss of identity (Eisold 2004).

In cultures where male success is predicated on domination men must deny the feminine and estrange themselves from their own feelings and bodies anchored in early forms of relatedness (to mother) so that they can dominate them and dominate the world (Gentile 2019, Rose 2014, Layton 2006, Mitchell 1974). It is no accident that sexual harassment is widespread in machismo cultures (Australian Human Rights Commission 2020, Willness, Steel & Lee 2007 and McCabe & Hardman 2005). 'Hannah Arendt says, 'it is the illegitimate and/or waning power that turns most readily to violence' (Arendt in Rose 2018). 'The idea of the phallus is a delusion. The unadulterated cruel expression of male power and authority is a fraudulent boast, a defence against the fact that men do not feel cocksure precisely because they are anything but cocksure' (Rose 2018).

Despite an increasing number of organisations providing flexible arrangements, at least on paper, women remain the dominant sex in care giving. Fear of contamination with the feminine sees men privilege the public space and eschew the domestic realm. Only five per cent of men take up the opportunity to be stay at home fathers, barely a shift from 1991 when the figure was four per cent (ABS 2016, Crabbe 2019). Men who step outside traditional gender norms rate lower on masculine prescriptive traits and higher on feminine prescriptive traits (Vandello Hettinger Bosson & Siddiqi 2013). Men understand at an innate level that accepting the poisoned chalice would constitute 'career suicide' and render them 'girlie men', Schwarzenegger's immortal term to describe men who lack guts (O'Shei 2011).

Denial of the feminine is key to explaining the revolt against maturity, responsibility, and loss of perspective and of balance. It has enabled omnipotent fantasies that have seen capitalism go awry. It has led to a societal crisis transcending gender equality

that reflects deeper socio-economic, political, and cultural crises of liberal democracies (Kovats 2017). 'The degradation of women, as noted by psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, is fundamentally anti-democratic. Misogyny goes hand in hand with authoritarianism and the cult of power' (Gentile 2019).

Recovery – Where to?

How does society move towards reparation and recovery in a world where grievances are palpable, where division are extreme, where brutal dynamics dominate and where ethical enterprise has gone missing? How does society transcend what Melanie Klein describes as the inherently primitive, and aggressive impulses 'that have seen repeated attempts to improve humanity and make it more peaceable fail?' (Klein 1975 in Orozco & Robben 2000, p.28).

Ms Rowena Orr QC, counsel assisting the Hayne Royal Commission (Hayne 2019) said, 'it is vital to reclaim the meaning and importance of individual responsibility within the diluting context of large organisations. Otherwise, society as a whole is inviting an accountability vacuum, with ethical chaos the result' (Hooten 2018).

While Ms Orr's point of reference is the Australian financial sector her message has wide reach. It speaks to the dangers inherent in the ethical spin of the 'MarketWorld' (Giridharadas 2019, p.142), a world that sees responsibility denied and reality reframed as corporate leaders make gestures to rebrand themselves by attending Davos meetings, making large philanthropic donations, supporting Black Lives Matter and calling for #MeToo, while avarice and exploitation continue under their watch. Giridharadas refers to this dissonance as a 'giant sweet lipped lie' (p.1234) which brings to mind the notion of 'manic reparation' posited by Melanie Klein to describe a situation in which responsibility for the fallout from the GFC and from subsequent revelations of corporate misbehaviour are not confronted but denied and reframed through a process of omnipotent self-aggrandisement. These gestures have less to do with authentic reparation and more to do with 'the craving of power and prestige or the need to pacify prosecutors at any cost' (Klein 1975, p.190).

Orr's words also speak to a political leadership that looks to muscularity rather than mindfulness, that seeks political mileage by corrupting the notion of the 'fair go' and disavowing Australia's identity of 'mateship', albeit a selective one (Piterman 2014). It speaks to 'the great Australian blind spot' (Maley 2020, p.12) that has for too long provided a defence for Australia's fragile ego against the shadow of violence, slavery, racism and oppression, 'the contemporary legacy of its brutal colonial history' (Maddison 2020, p.26). And her message speaks to the denial of the feminine and the discrimination, violence, and grave human rights abuses that it invites.

The survival of democracy is contingent on a process that seeks recovery through reparation. This requires intersectional solutions that acknowledge the interconnectedness of society that has been intoxicated by libertarian fantasies of absolute autonomy and self-reliance. It requires strengthening the forces of democracy to build more robust, egalitarian institutions (Giridharadas 2019). It requires the pursuit of ‘a functioning sense of justice based on a reverent appreciation of humankind all together and one by one’ (Robinson 2020, p.46). It requires the humility to recognise the powerful force that is ‘Mother Nature’ and the futility of trying to bend her to the will of omnipotent fantasies and overblown egos. It requires eschewing masculine models that are tilted towards aggression as the default position for solving problems. It requires a more sober, humble ethical leadership that is able to integrate the feminine. It requires pursuing gender equality as both a woman’s issue and as an existential societal imperative. And finally, it requires a recalibration of the notion of self interest in the communitarian spirit of ‘BAOneness’ as opposed to ‘BAMeness’ (Long 2020) that for too long has enabled whole economic and social structures to be built on discrimination, on theft and on the regressive primitive dictum that ‘greed is good’.

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Biographical Note

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