Women and the Underside of Meetings

Symptoms of denial in considering strategic options


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Introduction

The following commentary complements the challenges posed by the so-called Masters of the Universe, notably in relation to the collapse of the financial system, its economic consequences and their involvement in reforming the economic system -- with little consideration of the perspective of women. The problems created by the mindset of the Masters of the Universe are discussed in Engaging with Globality through Cognitive Realignment (2009) which includes annexes premised on the assumption that sustainable governance is necessarily sexy -- and if it is not then it is unlikely to be sustainable.

The nature of the involvement of women in the process of rethinking the future is considered symptomatic of the inadequacy of the thinking brought to bear upon the challenges faced by humanity as a whole -- as further discussed in Framing the Global Future by Ignoring Alternatives: unfreezing categories as a vital necessity (2009).

Patterns of strategic and gender denial

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"Mistresses of the Universe"?

It is curious how little reference is made to the visibly predominant role of males in international strategic gatherings and bodies -- a reflection of the "glass ceiling" issue within national contexts. It has been argued that the financial crisis was primarily triggered by men in the hothouse environments of financial institutions -- without the merit of the insights of a complementary cognitive mode -- as "Masters of the Universe". This is well-illustrated by the manner in which women are frozen out of considerations for the G20 summit (London, April 2009), framed as vital to respond to the financial crisis (Framing the Global Future by Ignoring Alternatives: unfreezing categories as a vital necessity, 2009).
However much it is resented, such references as there are tend to be relatively unsystematic, as with that of V. M. Moghadam (*Gender and Globalization: representations, realities, resistances*, 2005) -- referring critically to both "Davos Man" and "Porto Alegre Man". Naomi Klein formulated a challenge for the World Social Forum in terms of the lengthy speechifying by "big men", as exemplifying what the movement was seeking to move beyond (*Cut the Strings*, Guardian, 1 February 2003). The problem is common to most international gatherings claiming to respond to the challenges of all humankind.

The question was raised on the occasion of Davos 2009 as to whether a more representative feminine presence would have prevented the financial crisis. Katrin Bennhold (Where would we be if women ran Wall Street? International Herald Tribune, 2 February 2009), notes a consensus there that if women had run Wall Street, they would have saved the world from the corrosive gambling culture that dominated many a trading room.

Subsequently commenting on the same discussions as "some of the most interesting" at Davos, Nicholas D. Kristof (*Mistresses of the Universe, International Herald Tribune*, 10 February 2009), noted a consensus that the world would not have been in the same mess today if it had been "Lehman Brothers and Sisters". He notes that the male-dominated environment results in "second-rate decision-making". The high testosterone levels (predictably associated with higher profitability), according to one study, could lead to greater assumption of risk and inhibiting ability to engage in rational choice -- especially when surrounded by males of similar status.

Kristof's commentary has elicited further widespread comment, as for example by Women's Voices for Change (Why Mistresses of the Universe Can't Wait, February 2009). The issues have been discussed in roundtable format by seven leading business women (Ruth Sunderland, 'We cannot return to the old macho ways', The Observer, 15 February 2009).

**Gendered financial trading**

Less than 5% of financial traders are women compared with some 28% in the broader category of securities and financial services. David L. Swartz and Vera L. Zolberg (*After Bourdieu: influence, critique, elaboration*, 2005) discuss the implications of the thinking of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in relation to this, to the effect that:

> The gendered performance of trading further illustrates the need for psychoanalytic interpretation. The aggressive practical logic of the pit competition as well as the trading discourse that valorizes and legitimates mark the exchange as a quintessentially male theatre, a natural "context" for the performance of male excellence, while women are imagined in this very same context to be naturally unequipped for such activity. Thus, what the practice of trading reproduces behaviorally, the cultural sphere of trader talk reproduces discursively, a reciprocally reinforcing dialectical circuit. (p. 225)

The authors comment on research on the use of sexual metaphors in other sectors (of which strategy meetings would be an example) but suggest the need for further research on the role of a "SuperTrader" (in effect a "Master of the Universe"). Traders use this cultural material to make sense of their world as male in flavour. They argue that:

> Such gender performativity is energized by the ego's structural lack. Given the ego's primary function as a systemic defense mechanism, it necessarily and continually strives towards what is always already impossible: namely to complete itself, to fill itself in, to defend itself against its own original and always threatening structural dis-unity... [which] implies that the ego itself is symptomatic and that the experience of wholeness is always necessarily a construction (or illusion), it is agreed that the ego is energetically, structurally driven to consolidate the experience of reality. (p. 226)

Clearly from such a perspective, understanding of the promotion and engagement with any form of "globalization" calls for more sophisticated analysis taking account of subjective factors. The argument has been developed by Richard Widick (*Flesh and the free market: On taking Bourdieu to the options exchange, Theory and Society*, 32, 2003). Personal experience, as a woman, is provocatively offered by Cari Lynn (*Leg the Spread: a woman's adventures inside the trillion-dollar boys' club of commodities trading*, 2004).

Financial trading might be fruitfully explored as but one form of a more generic understanding of "transactions". The collapse of the financial system might then be understood as exemplifying a degree of collapse in psychosocial transactions generally. It is in this sense that any dysfunctionality in the transactions between male and female can be understood as symptomatic of a profound malaise in transactions between differences, if not complementary "opposites". It would then be no wonder that society is faced with a "clash of civilizations". Framed in this way recent indications of the pay gap between men and women performing the same task within the financial sector can be seen as very significant.


> Women working full-time in the financial sector earn 55% less a year on average than their male counterparts, with those in some of the most lucrative areas, such as fund management and futures trading, suffering the greatest disparities...with full-time female employees receiving 39% less per hour than men. The pay gap in the finance sector -- already under fire for its role in the current recession -- is approximately double that for the economy as a whole, both on an hourly and annual basis. Women working full-time in so-called auxiliary activities, including fund management, stockbroking and futures trading, suffer the largest pay gap in the financial services sector, earning on average 60% a year less than men.

> Among the highest earners in the finance sector, full-time female employees earn 45% less an hour than men, while in the
Role of women in sustaining dialogue

As one of the pioneering feminist scholars, Elise Boulding (The Underside of History: a view of women through time, 1976; Building a Global Civic Culture: education for an interdependent world, 1988) highlighted the vital role of women throughout history. Missing however is any exploration of the role of women as the "underside of meetings" -- especially international gatherings, notably the issue of "gendered conferences" and "gendered summits". Irrespective of the cognitive implications (considered below), it is not as though there is a lack of hard data indicative of this role, for example:

- characteristic use of women in infrastructure and logistic roles vital to most meetings
- characteristic use of women as "trophy companions" in an "accompanying person" role
- facilitation of formal interactions, as exemplified by the traditional social hostess role in facilitating dialogue (Ute Reader, Salons: The Joy of Conversation, 2000); this role is exceptionally well-recognized in the arts of the Japanese geisha.
- compensation for inadequacies in the formal processes, or belief in this role

The lack of analysis of these seemingly widespread phenomena (as with the pre-crash financial bubble) is indicative of its potential significance at this time.

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<td>Financial firms often hold meetings in lap dancing clubs, according to evidence to the UK Treasury select committee hearing into women's role in the City of London and prostitution is being used in client deals or in ways to generate business (Kathryn Hopkins (City bankers 'regularly offer prostitutes to clients', The Guardian, 14 October 2009)</td>
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Sexual behavior at conferences

This phenomenon can usefully be seen as an unexplored extension of the widely studied processes of sexual behaviour in institutions, whether corporations, government bureaucracies, military bases, religious institutions, intentional communities or prisons. Clearly this includes tolerable, even welcomed forms, as well as those associated with sexual harassment. Especially significant for conferences are the poorly documented (or acknowledged) sexual activities of the leaders of such bodies, when they are able to take advantage of their position. The case of Bill Clinton may even represent a norm rather than an extreme -- as anecdotal evidence regarding other national, regional or global leaders would seem to suggest (if only subsequently confirmed in biographies).

There would seem to have been no studies of sexual behaviour at international conferences, notably with respect to such issues as sexual harassment -- in contrast with a degree of flirtation natural in many cultures. Perhaps it is for the "Mistresses of the Universe" to ensure its documentation? Such studies might highlight how sexual behaviour manifests through:

- the characteristic availability of "adult movies" in conference hotel rooms
- the presence of "sex workers" at significant international gatherings, whether ensured ("informally") by organizers, conference hotels, or entrepreneurs -- or on personal initiative. The scope of this phenomenon is occasionally "alleged" by journalists with respect to summit gatherings; it has been noted with respect to meetings of European institutions, particularly in response to the regular parliamentary migration between Brussels and Strasbourg [more] [more]. Representatives of sex workers were however formally invited to the World Social Forum (2009) [more].
- the manner in which the declared purposes and values are undermined at the event
- rendering secondary or irrelevant more than token progress in formal sessions
- challenging the capacity of organizers to enable such behaviour and to cover up any embarrassing consequences

Given that "networking" at conferences is now widely valued over the processes of formal sessions -- especially by participants -- this might be understood, to a significant degree, in terms of sexual opportunities and their availability. The extent of such processes may be increased by the recognition, notably for women, of the unique opportunity they represent for personal career advancement.

Symbolism

Curiously, whilst the cognitive role of women may be in various ways excluded from the conference process, it is to be recognized in the following:

- the terms "congress" and "intercourse", as applied in the context of meetings and dialogue, have other (even primary) meanings directly associated with the integrative process relating male and female -- through which the future is engendered
- the architectural symbolism of the front of large plenary meeting rooms typically involves a form of suitably draped proscenium of pillared archways deriving from traditions of theatre stage design (from which the dramatis personae emerge) -- often to be recognized as recalling elements of female genitalia.
- more controversially, as suggested elsewhere (Dialogue: policy forums as metaphors), is the body-language of speakers, especially in relation to the microphone and any proscenium, and that of the audience seated in expectation of stimulation (whether or not they are "turned on" by the gathering, or the result is considered fruitful). This is a reminder that unconscious factors may play a determining role in meeting processes.
- staging presentations typically ensures that "stars" enter through the proscenium into the moment of the "happening" -- a birthing process (meriting the sense that such events laboriously "give birth"). As an "event", the transition may be compared to passage through and out of the birth canal -- being reborn in a new space as the culmination of a process analogous to a mating ritual. It is
this that justifies explicit use of such symbolism in Wicca and Tantra.

- use of the term **seminar**, and its derivation **dissemination**, to characterize one environment in which participants engage in intercourse -- and the manner of the distribution of the outcome thereafter; curiously the possibility of an "ovular" (to receive such insights through "insemination")? would be considered ridiculous, despite frequent use of euphemisms (or the presence of "egg-heads" at such gatherings!). However extensive use is made of "incubator" in the form of business incubators of innovations -- possibly associated with think-tanks -- whether or not "conception" actually occurs.

Potentially even more problematic is the extent to which the presentation of proposals by males, to an audience in expectation of possibly being "turned on", is effectively set up -- given the typically male ("homosexual") environment -- as "blow jobs for change" (in the language of the Masters of the Universe).

However, even when the declared purpose of an event may be to facilitate an integration of contrasting cultures, only indirectly symbolizing male and female, this is typically a real challenge for the organizers -- as with the events of the World Academy of Art and Science (WAAS). The compromise is then to organize entertainment as a separate part of the conference programme to represent cognitive modalities typically associated with women or involving them (music, performing arts, etc), even a dance or a party.

There is never any question of considering how such different cognitive modalities might be fruitfully integrated (Aesthetics of Governance in the Year 2499, 1990; Ensuring Strategic Resilience through Haiku Patterns: reframing the scope of the "martial arts" in response to strategic threats, 2006; Knowledge Gardening through Music: patterns of coherence for future African management as an alternative to Project Logic, 2000).

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**Women's Forum for the Economy and Society**

This Forum, meeting regularly, was created in 2005 in reaction to the exclusive attitude of the annual, male-dominated World Economic Forum at Davos. The 5th such meeting was held in 2009 in Deauville (France) with 800 people. In contrast to the Davos gathering, a special song was sung by Arielle Dombasle - *Women, just a woman.* (Ruth Sutherland, *Deauville forum: Women want a different business agenda, The Observer*, 18th October 2009)

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### Asystemic strategies

If sexual behaviour at conferences is denied to such a degree (although evident to many participants, however it is appreciated), the question is then whether it is probable (as implied above in the references to "Mistresses of the Universe") that:

- there are associated cognitive processes inhibiting any **integrative consideration of global issues** as they are significant to both men and women?

- **consideration of longer-term outcomes**, as a consequence of fruitful intercourse, is inhibited in preference to those which do not involve significant responsibility?

- **assertions as to the "root problems"**, underlying issues on the conference table, are **systemically incomplete**, most notably in relation to any issues associated with sexual behavior, such as overpopulation? (Institutionalized Shunning of Overpopulation Challenge: incommunicability of fundamentally inconvenient truth, 2008); their systemic completion takes place in processes "under the table"

- the **credibility is severely undermined** of those known or rumoured to be acting in ways inconsistent with the values they publicly proclaim through their conference participation, especially when an ethical double standard becomes apparent; this goes to the root of questions of confidence, trust and solidarity for which leaders notably appeal in times of crisis

Ironically denial regarding sexual behaviour encourages a **complicity in any cognitive "cover-up"** of processes that cannot be contained by convention -- otherwise known as "turning a blind eye". Of particular interest beyond sexual processes, are those of corruption and torture -- both with their sexual associations. Any effort to discuss these is then framed as "unseemly", thereby avoiding any responsibility for addressing them (Global Strategic Implications of the "Unsaid": from myth-making towards a "wisdom society", 2003).

### Metaphoric impoverishment

Perhaps the most problematic consequence of denial, especially regarding sexual behaviour, is the inability to draw upon metaphors of sexuality to frame healthy (and unhealthy) strategic possibilities, and to communicate them successfully (Responding to Conceptual and Value Polarities: learnings from sexuality, 1998; Enhancing the Quality of Knowing through Integration of East-West metaphors, 2000). Given the worldwide familiarity with the associated processes and their subtle complexity -- beyond those adequately encompassed by rational discourse -- a **vital vehicle of communication is effectively lost**.

To the extent such behaviour is then recognized in discourse, only the simplest metaphors are used -- typically in their most primitive, violent form -- as is the case in corporate environments and in trading on the financial markets. As such they are fundamental to the language and strategies of the Masters of the Universe (Backside to the Future: coherence and conflation of dominant strategic metaphors, 2003).

### Dysfunctional compensation

Denial may be significant in other respects, however:

- "**groping**": anecdotal evidence suggests a surprising degree of "groping" by even the most eminent conference participants. This would seem to echo use of "groping" towards comprehension and organization of a more desirable global outcome for the formal event. Given the predominant use of linear thinking to this end, there may be a degree of irony with regard to the extent to which
curves (and especially the capacity to "handle" them) are a cognitive preoccupation outside the formal context.

- **Engagement with globality**: inability to engage effectively with, or engender, more integrative perspectives within conventionally organized formal gatherings may (whether consciously or unconsciously) displace attention into "acting out" such engagement through sexual behaviour of some form -- especially in the sense that it may offer the opportunity for more concrete "proposals" that may give rise to immediate "action".

- **"conceptual contraceptives"**: the learned necessities of precautious sexual behaviour -- "safe sex" -- may unconsciously engender analogous precautions in relation to engaging within the formal meeting processes with more creatively integrative projects involving commitment or a change of behaviour (and the possibility of outcomes for which unwelcome responsibility is expected).

### Challenging complementarity

To the extent that such cognitive dissociation does apply, a possibly ironic confirmation (worth exploring in some detail) is the historically concurrent emergence into global awareness of two seemingly quite unrelated concepts -- articulated in similar language:

- **Sustainability**: as a principal focus of international gatherings since 1992, which continues to be framed as the "holy grail" of global strategy through which (obsessions with) "growth" may be sustained -- effectively associating "globalization" with "growth". Remedies to the current economic crisis around the world are described as vital "stimulus" packages for flagging industrial sectors and economies.

- **"Viagra"**: patented as the drug sildenafil in 1996 (and aggressively marketed worldwide under various names) to remedy inability to sustain a satisfactory erection to complete intercourse -- and associated with (obsession with) a corresponding form of "growth" and its necessary "stimuli"

It is curious that both may be framed in terms of aspirations and quests for "globality" -- one understood objectively and the other subjectively, whatever the psychology of projections and mirrorings between them. To the extent that similar language is used, there is of course a concern that, if only unconsciously, cognitive modalities would be unfruitfully constrained in both cases. There is some probability that the same insights are being brought to bear in each case. It is unfortunate that the economic growth of the first case is then to be construed, in the light of the second, as an unconscious aspiration to a form of "economic priapism".

Needless to say, given the age and predominant sex of global leadership, there would appear to be a desperate need for some form of "cognitive viagra" to respond to the seeming impotence in sustaining the much needed political will for change, irrespective of issues of "growth" and getting the financial system "up" again -- even efforts to "talk it up" (echoing the efforts of the snake charmers mentioned below). Cognitively, is it a case of aphrodisiacs for male models beyond their retirement date?

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Addendum on the occasion of the G20 Summit in China (2016)
Fears British officials will be seduced by Chinese 'honeypot' spies at G20 summit (The Independent, 3 September 2016)
UK officials warned against falling prey to G-20 'honey pots': Report (CNBC News, 3 September 2016)

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• Rethinking Conference Interfaces: increasing participation value. 2007 [text]
• "Human Intercourse": "Intercourse with Nature" and "Intercourse with the Other". 2007 [text]
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