

Andrée D. Chapatte

Invisible Work: Antimemetics and the Problem of Positive Masculinities

Over the past couple of years I've seen more content about "emotionally intelligent men" online than ever before. Sensitive guys sharing their feelings on Instagram. Men talking about emotions and crying on podcasts. "Softbois" in colourful cardigans talking about therapy. The Berlin-based fashion label Hot Boys Cry organises "Cry Sessions" - breathwork, ice baths, forest walks - and sells streetwear that reads "Echte Männer weinen" (Real men cry). It feels like the algorithm is discovering that male vulnerability performs, and the algorithm always refers back to what people are paying attention to.

And yet if last week you had asked the guys in your neighbourhood if they wanted to join a "men's circle," most of them would still have no idea what you were talking about, and some of those who did may have experienced a subtle but intense mix of fear and revulsion. Imagining themselves engaging calmly with other cis men on issues of patriarchy, gender, sexuality and culturally informed behaviours would bring on a visceral, full-body sensation, not unlike sand and oil grinding its way through the insides of their chest and stomach. Having experienced similar sensations in the past, I now understand this feeling as having simply been their body saying: "no thank you, sounds cringe."

I will gladly affirm this because I myself have noticed these emotions and sensations rising within me. Yet over the past six years, after participating in dozens of circles run by some of the most inspiring people I've ever met, I've gently found myself relieved by how restful, stimulating and even fun being in a circle with other men can be. What once seemed like entering an austere

scene from an action film where the protagonist walks into an AA meeting now feels like a real, embodied social club - a scene, and even a friend group.

Some moments stay with me. A sense of clarity that came from listening to others speak from their own subjective perspective in a circle - using "I" statements, thanks to the skilful facilitation of my dear colleague Hugo - and feeling that each person's sharing was my own thinking happening through others' recounting of their experiences. Or the sense of pleasure, joy and relief that came from the oxytocin and dopamine release after a prostate workshop, where for the first time I came into non-sexual and pleasant contact with other men's naked bodies - feeling like I had survived the impossible and came out of it enjoying it. Or the simplicity of a conversation I had at a falafel shop with a dear friend, a woman, with whom I'd had an emotional misunderstanding almost a year prior. The support and perspective I had received from an accountability circle allowed me to not only apologise to her, but to reconnect with a simplicity that made the whole misunderstanding seem almost silly in retrospect.

And yet, when trying to describe the process that emerges from regularly attending circles to someone who hasn't experienced it, I've often seen eyes discretely glaze over two sentences in, regardless of their gender. Not because they disagree or have anything specifically negative to say about it all - rather because something about the essence of the work refuses to stick. The idea enters their mind and immediately begins to evaporate, replaced by a vague discomfort in their body. The conversation then just stutters to a halt, leaving me confused how something that felt so real and concrete could become so abstract.

Now, after years of engaging with and applying the work of deconstruction - the method developed by Jacques Derrida for exposing the hidden hierarchies and contradictions within texts and concepts - to my own lived understanding of masculinity and gender, and struggling to explain it in conversations with peers, writings and grant applications, I've come to understand that this is not a failure of communication on my part. It's a feature of the work itself.

In her book *Antimemetics*, Nadia Asparouhova describes a category of ideas that resist being remembered, comprehended, or engaged with - despite their significance. Not because they're boring, but because something in their nature makes them difficult to retain. You encounter them, you potentially find them compelling, and then... they slip away.

Asparouhova asks us to consider: Why do we still observe Daylight Saving Time even though a majority of Americans want to abolish it and the Senate unanimously passed legislation to do so in 2022 - only for the bill to expire while waiting for the House? Why is handwashing compliance so low, even among healthcare workers, despite centuries of evidence demonstrating its effectiveness? Why do mass shootings trigger predictable media cycles calling for gun safety legislation, only for the issue to fade when the news cycle moves on? We agree these ideas are important. We largely know what to do. And yet the ideas just can't seem to remain in our grasp long enough for us to do something about them.

Asparouhova borrows from epidemiology to explain this. Memes spread through networks based on *transmission rate* (how easily an idea passes from person to person) and *immunity* (how resistant the network is to infection). But antimemes have something else: a *drag coefficient* - the amount of resistance that must be overcome before the idea can spread at all. Some antimemes eventually reach escape velocity and become memetic; others remain obscure but stable; still others are deliberately suppressed and potentially die out, unless kept alive by small communities within group chats, local networks, or scenes.

What's crucial is that drag isn't just about the idea itself - it's about the network. The same idea might spread easily in one community while being completely antimemetic in another. And even when an idea does catch on, antimemes tend to have much longer *symptomatic periods* - the time during which an idea actively disrupts its host - because they're consequential, potentially disruptive, which is precisely why we suppress them. We, as humans functioning as nodes in a social system, tend to have strong built-in immunity to antimemes, so that we don't harm our networks by introducing big, disruptive ideas without good reason. With this in mind she writes: "Introducing a controversial idea carefully does not mean that it is any less valuable. On the contrary, it underscores its importance. Such ideas are so valuable that they must be handled delicately to ensure their survival."

Ironically, hegemonic masculinity itself has historically always had antimemetic qualities: it's invisible because it's everywhere. The unmarked category. The default. When a man walks into a boardroom, his gender is often unnoticed; when a woman does, it is. This is what feminist theorists, following Simone de Beauvoir, call the unmarked category, or the myth of neutrality: masculinity that passes as simply *human*, requiring no explanation. (Hegemony, here, doesn't mean most men embody it perfectly - it means this form of masculinity sits atop the hierarchy, defining what counts as legitimate manhood against which all other expressions are measured.)

The idea of "positive" masculinities is antimimetic too - but through absence rather than ubiquity. Its drag coefficient in popular culture is enormous. It generates no signal, no conflict, no data for the algorithm, and is nearly impossible to imagine. The only way one would realistically describe it is through a plurality of identities negating hegemonic masculinity across culture, class, and identity. A quality that is defined almost entirely contextually - an anti-icon.

Consider: toxic masculinity makes for memorable content. Andrew Tate's misogyny went viral precisely because it provoked outrage, engagement, shares. The transmission rate was high; immunity was low (even among people who hated him - they still spread his name and content). The symptomatic period was short: you watch, you react, you move on.

But what about masculinities that are accountable? Masculinities that listen? Masculinities that show up, do repair work, don't need to be the center of attention? There's no hook. No controversy. The transmission rate collapses. And when someone *does* try to describe it, most reasonably educated networks' immunity kicks in, and the idea feels vaguely therapeutic, vaguely boring, vaguely suspicious. It gets suppressed before it can take root.

Even within feminist and progressive networks, the idea of positive masculinity struggles. Not only do some disagree with its existence, but for those who do, it's an idea that keeps slipping away - as if within the void of what could be imagined: critique, vanity, or materialist theory constantly slip into its place, meaning that the generative work of imagining alternatives - what I'll call *speculation* - naturally gets deprioritised and even forgotten. Even I have rediscovered the concept periodically and keep feeling like I'm encountering it for the first time.

And yet within the current discourse around masculinities, the *performance* of vulnerability, allyship, and emotion seems to be what manages to gravitate around the void.

John Stoltenberg warned us about this decades ago. In *Refusing to Be a Man*, he argued that men could easily adopt the performance of sensitivity without committing to structural change. Sharing your feelings becomes the new status quo - and beyond that, nothing. No commitments to structural change in policy, no defining a bottom line for gender justice, no action to fight for change.

This is the trap of representational positive masculinity. It *can* be photographed, tweeted, made into content. The sad-eyed man sharing about his depression. The father holding his newborn. The guy posting about how

he's reading only women writers for a year. These images circulate because they're memetic - lightweight packages that replicate easily, that deliver a message without friction.

But the actual work involved in change - accountability, mutual support, somatic embodiment - refuses the logic of virality. It requires sustained attention. Relational depth. Bodily presence. Commitment, planning, and action. It cannot be extracted and distributed without losing almost all of what makes it work.

The feminist critique that representational masculinity is "not enough" and the conservative dismissal of it as "performative" are, strangely, pointing at the same absence from different angles. Both sense that something is missing. What's missing is the antimemetic core: the part that can't be shown, only done.

In 2016, my colleague Wayne Lim and I began developing a concept we called "demasculinization" - not the medical term, but a cultural one. What would it mean to actually shed the habits and dispositions that masculinity installs in bodies? Not just to think differently, but to perceive differently, move differently, talk differently, touch differently?

I'm struck now by the negative structure of all these terms: "The Myth of Neutrality" (something false), "Refusing to Be a Man" (rejection), "DeMasculinization" (removal), "Deconstruction" (taking apart). They define the work by what it's against or undoing, never by what it actually is. The only term that escapes this negation is "positive masculinities" - which overcorrects into hyperbole, sounding like a marketing slogan or an HR initiative. And yet "positive masculinities" is the only framing that ever got me funding. Perhaps this is itself a kind of confirmation: the funding structures are memetic, they need the hook, and the hook requires either opposition (against toxic masculinity) or affirmation (positive! healthy! good!). The actual work - which is neither opposition nor affirmation but something slower and stranger - has no language that sticks.

Years after joining my first men's circle, after facilitating many workshops on touch and masculinity, I've come to understand something that feels both obvious and strangely difficult to hold onto: the abolition of hegemonic masculinity requires perceptual and somatic unlearning, not only political clarity.

Masculinity is maintained not just through ideology but through habituated perception, fantasy, and bodily entitlement. Political critique operates at the level of language, law, and refusal - and this matters enormously. But

masculinities are also reproduced at the level of image, sensation, desire, and market logic. These layers aren't secondary. They're where masculinities are most effectively installed, and therefore where they must also potentially be dismantled.

The practices I've developed don't aim to heal or redeem men. They retrain capacities that patriarchy suppresses: slowness, restraint, listening, responsiveness. This is not therapeutic indulgence but a necessary condition for non-dominant behavior. I believe men need to practice non-dominance in relation to their own bodies and sensations before they can successfully sustain it in their politics. Without changing how masculinity is felt, desired, and embodied, critique remains abstract. (Centering men's bodies, I should say, is not the same as centering men's comfort. That distinction matters.)

And after years of trying to communicate what I'm doing to funders, colleagues, friends, lovers, allies, and peers, here's what I've learned: the work I'm engaged with is antimemetic by design. You can describe a men's circle, but describing it doesn't transmit what happens there. The knowledge is tacit and constantly evolving. It lives in the nervous system. It spreads through consistent presence, not broadcast.

Asparouhova ends her book by asking how we keep antimemetic ideas alive. She identifies key figures: *truth-tellers*, who blurt out suppressed truths and allow networks to recalibrate, and *champions*, who take on the task of tapping people on the shoulder, ensuring important ideas don't fade.

It's ironic - and even a bit annoying - that perhaps this essay is an act of championing. And that I'm starting to write as a mnemonic device against forgetting. I'm trying to name something I've been circling for years: the structural invisibility of some of the work I believe matters most and that has made some of the biggest changes in my life.

If you've made it this far, I'm sure the idea has already begun to slip. You might be experiencing some unpleasant sensations, or you might save this essay and never read it again. You might nod in recognition and, by next week, struggle to recall its argument. This is not your failure. It's the nature of the thing itself.

But maybe - if you're someone who's felt that strange resistance when confronted with the possibility of men doing this work together - something will stick. Not as content to share, but as a quiet recognition: that enabling change sometimes means working *around* the issue itself. Giving space, time, and resources, and trusting that bodies can invent futures outside of patriarchy without being asked to perform that invention for an audience.

Memes sway elections, shape the values of young people, narrate how the world works. Antimemes offer something else: a way to step outside those narratives and encounter reality as it actually is - ambiguous, chaotic, slow, and resistant to easy comprehension.

The work of speculating will remain mostly invisible. That's fine. Visibility was never the point.



Research from “The Unanswered Question” with Hans Muller, 2019

Process Note

This essay began as a rambling voice memo I recorded while walking, trying to explain to myself why this work is so hard to talk about. I then worked collaboratively with Claude (Anthropic, Opus 4.5) and a text editor over a single session to shape it into something readable - six drafts, back and forth, with Claude proposing structure and language while I pushed back, added memories, cut what felt false, changed formulation and made the final calls. The theoretical framework was mine; Claude helped me find the words for this idea I've been circling for years.

I'm committed to transparency about my tools and collaborators. And I believe thinking happens in editing - the voice memo captured something true but formless; the passes gave it shape; Claude enabled me to formalise the language. Neither alone would have produced this.

Related Reading

- Nadia Asparouhova, *Antimemetics* (2024)
- John Stoltenberg, *Refusing to Be a Man: Essays on Sex and Justice* (1989)
- Wayne W.J. Lim, *On Demasculinization* (2017) → [read it here](#)

Andrée D. Chapatte is a Brussels-based artist, practitioner and writer who facilitates workshops on touch and masculinity through [Liminal](#). His work explores the nature of embodied images, demasculinization, and the conditions for non-dominant behavior.

andreechapatte.com / adchapatte@gmail.com