

# Beyond Blame

*Twenty years of guilt have paralysed the anti-sexist men's movement. Mick Cooper argues for a more courageous politics.*

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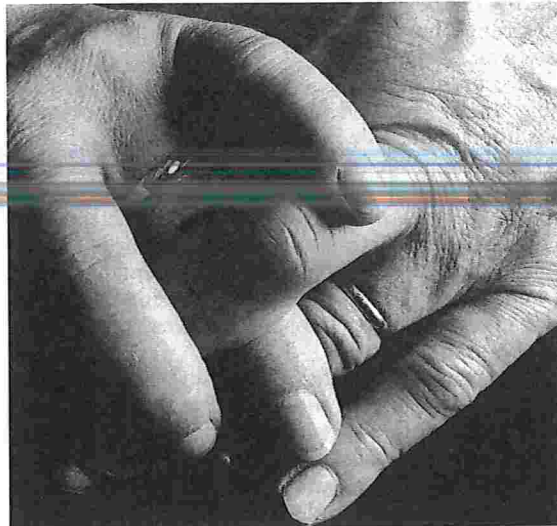
**M**y favourite comedy sketch: an old Jewish mother is rocking backwards and forwards in her chair. 'The dinosaurs...' she says. 'For millions and millions of years the dinosaurs ruled the earth. Did they make any trouble? Did they hurt anyone? Nuh... And then they all died out. She turns accusingly to the camera. 'And why?' She asks, 'And why?... Because you couldn't leave well enough alone. You had to get involved.'

Blame — it's as Jewish as chopped liver and just as unpleasant. I remember, as a kid, running around my parent's room and banging my head on the wall. What did my dad ask me? 'Are you OK?' 'Shall I get a bandage?' Would you like to lie down?' — not quite. 'Why did you do that?' He said. 'You should be more careful.' I've since trained my parents to avoid using the 's'-word' — threatening them with a lecture on non-judgemental empathetic listening skills every time they do so — but the legacy of all the 'shoulds', 'why did you do that', and 'don't you know how much you've hurt your parents' remains. It's called guilt, the inner Jewish parent, the part of me that says: 'you had to get drunk and start telling people they've got an anal personality, didn't you!' But whilst Jewish-guilt has become a Woody Allenesque cliché, what many people fail to realise is that Jewish-guilt is essentially just the internalised voice of Jewish-blame.

Perhaps it was my Jewish heritage that led me in the direction of the anti-sexist men's movement. After all, where else could I feel so thoroughly sodden with guilt? Who else but the anti-sexist man can feel guilty for being sexist, feel guilty for feeling guilty, and end up feeling confused for feeling guilty and guilty for feeling confused and confused that his guilt isn't as guiltlessly confusing as another man's confused guilt feelings? On one level it's amusing; on

another, tragic. Not only has this cycle of guilt and confusion left individual anti-sexist men feeling ashamed, perplexed, and dispirited; but its collective impact, over the last twenty years, has been to virtually paralyse any attempts by the anti-sexist men's movement to initiate and sustain consistent pro-feminist activities. Either men's fears of doing something 'wrong' has led to a timidity incompatible with concerted political struggle, or else men have avoided the whole issue of feminism by withdrawing to the less guilt-ridden world of personal growth. To develop a constructive anti-sexist men's politics, then, we need to deal with the issue of guilt. But to deal with guilt, we need to explore the phenomenon at the heart of it: blame.

As a Jew, guilt has arisen through the internalisation of blaming parental voices. As an anti-sexist man, guilt has arisen through the internalisation of blaming feminist voices. When I was young, I was surrounded by radical feminists who told me that: 'All men are bastards,' 'Men only think about themselves,' 'Men always oppress women.' I internalised these messages and applied them to myself: 'I'm a bastard', 'I only think about myself', 'I always oppress women'. And for every guilt-racked anti-sexist man I've ever met, the same voices exist inside his head, the 'inner blaming feminist', the



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internalised voice of one or more women — whether lovers, friends or family members — who have communicated to him the simple message that feminists are fundamentally right and men and fundamentally wrong.

Perhaps the simplest way for anti-sexist men to avoid guilt would be to ignore feminists altogether. But to do so would somewhat compromise the aims of a movement which is specifically committed to supporting the feminist struggle. The challenge, then, is to find a way of working alongside feminists whilst at the same time not falling into the



paralysis of guilt. I think we can do this by deepening our understanding of blame.

What is blame? To explore this question, I want to introduce the concepts of intent and effect. The intent of a behaviour is the reason why we act in a certain way; the effect, the impact it has on others. Sometimes the intent and effect of a behaviour coincide. More often, however, there is a degree of discrepancy between what we are trying to do and what we actually achieve. My partner may cook me a meal, for instance, to try and cheer me up; but I'm miserable because I'm feeling fat, and the thought of a tortellini carbonara only serves to depress me more.

The crucial point about intent and effect, however, is that we tend not to distinguish between them. Much of the time, we assume that the way a person made us feel is the way that they intended to make us feel. In the example above, for instance, I might get angry with my partner for making me feel even more depressed, even though her true intent was to cheer me up. This is what I call blame: when we infer the intent of a behaviour from the effect. It's the times when we get furious with people for making a racket even though they're not aware of our presence; or the times when we feel like strangling the supermarket check-out assistant for keeping us waiting even though he's going as fast as he can. In both these cases, there's a tendency to 'demonise', to see selfishness, thoughtlessness or stupidity behind the other person's behaviour, a projection which is more a product of our own circumstances than the other person's psychological motivations. And the greater the negative effect that someone's behaviour has, the more inclined we are to blame them. A drink-driver who runs over a young child is likely to be seen as far more callous than a drink-driver who gets home safely, even though both drivers may have been equally inebriated behind the wheel.

A blaming feminist, then, is not one who says: 'sexism makes me feel furious,' 'I get upset when men see me as a sex object,' 'I hate it when men don't listen to me.' A woman who does so is simply stating the effect that men's behaviour has on her. Rather, a blaming feminist is one who says: 'sexism makes me feel furious... and men do it because they're bastards/selfish/untrustworthy!' It's this inference of malicious intent that makes the statement a blaming one.

Given the degree of political and psychological hurt that men's behaviour has caused women, it's not surprising that so many feminists have seen malevolence in men's intent; indeed, it is often the women most damaged by sexism who are the most blaming of men. But the reality is that the drunk-driver who killed the child didn't intend to do so any more than the driver who arrived home safely; and however negative the impact of men's sexism, the reality is that most men don't intend to oppress women.

It took me a long time to reach that conclusion. I was so convinced that everything I did in relation to women was fuelled by unconscious sexist motivations that I was virtually blind to other possibilities. It was only when I started to study the works of phenomenologists like Husserl, Sartre and Carl Rogers that I began to wonder whether those unconscious motivations really existed at all. The phenomenological/humanistic perspective, in contrast to the Freudian/psychodynamic one, focuses on the level of our conscious awareness, those moment-to-moment thoughts and feelings that pass through our mind.

Carl Rogers, a founding father of the counselling movement, doesn't talk about the unconscious. Rather, he refers to the 'unacknowledged', those thoughts and emotions we experience but find it difficult to admit to. I might be tempted to try and deny any feelings of fear during sex, for instance, because to acknowledge them would bring my masculine virility into question. Similarly, feelings of boredom or frustration during my university seminars might remain unacknowledged in order that I can continue seeing myself as a competent teacher. Whilst the Freudian unconscious is essentially unknowable, except through prolonged psychotherapeutic excavations, the Rogerian unacknowledged is fully accessible to consciousness — as long as we're prepared to look. Personal growth, then, comes through a process of acknowledging the unacknowledged — learning to be honest with ourselves. And when I looked at my honest, unacknowledged feelings towards women, they weren't hatred, contempt or a desire to hurt; what really lay down there beneath the veneer of politically correct self-blaming was fear, a desire to please, and, ultimately, a need to be loved.

Looking to other men in the anti-sexist men's movement, I found a similar story. However much these men searched for their unconscious sexism, what seemed to exemplify them most was a seemingly endless supply of positive intent towards women. These weren't men who were trying to manipulate, deceive or undermine feminists: they were men who were deeply committed to undermining patriarchy and fighting for a more egalitarian society.

What about the men 'out there', though, the sexist, chauvinist, *Sun*-reading bigots beyond the narrow confines of the men's movement. Seen as such a homogenous, depersonalised hoard, it's easy to point the finger of blame and find malicious intent in every ogling stare and sexually harassing wolf-whistle. But, in my experience, I've yet to meet a man who acts with the conscious intent of abusing women. Men who ogle or wolf-whistle at women generally seem to think that women find it flattering. And where men do act with the conscious intention of harming women, it's generally because they see women as too powerful and want to 'bring them down a peg or two'.

If that argument infuriates you, it's probably because you've confused what I've said with the traditional anti-feminist line. Most people who say that wolf-whistlers don't intend to insult women then go on to assume that wolf-whistling is harmless, and therefore that any women who complains about being whistled at is an uptight, humourless dyke. The error here, as pervasive as that of blame, is to infer the effect of a behaviour from its intent — he didn't mean to do it so it couldn't have hurt. The point of this article, however, is to suggest that we can neither infer intent from effect or effect from intent. Intent and effect rarely coincide, and, however tempting it may be to deduce one from the other, we need to hold each as a separate truth. A man may wolf-whistle with the intention of flattery, but its effect on a woman can still be deeply distressing. Just because we've understood someone's behaviour, it doesn't mean that that behaviour is harmless.

Of course, it could be argued that the motivation to abuse a woman through wolf-whistling operates on an unconscious rather than conscious plane. He may think that he's trying to flatter her, but unconsciously he's expressing his misogynistic rage and contempt. Such invocation of unconscious motiva-

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tions can be extremely convenient, but I think it is time to question the true validity of the 'unconscious'. There is a psychological maxim that you should only construct a new theory when the old one loses its explanatory powers, and if we can understand someone's behaviour in terms of their conscious intentions, why do we need to look for hidden, unconscious motivations? Perhaps it's because it makes it easier for us to fit their behaviour in to our preconceived interpretive frameworks. A man who says he hates women is a misogynist, a man who says he doesn't hate women is a misogynist in denial, and... hey presto... looks like all men are misogynists!

In trusting people's own explanations of their behaviour, on the other hand, we are challenged with the possibility that their interpretations may not coincide with the answers we wish to find. But we need to ask ourselves who we think knows best about an individual's intentions — the individual or the observer. To conclude that the observer has a greater insight into the individual's psyche is to contradict one of the fundamental ideologies of contemporary liberation movements: that only the individual — whether black, female, homosexual, etc. — can truly know their own experience. A woman may argue that, being immersed in a male-dominated culture, she has a greater insight into men's experiences than vice versa, but my experience has been — without wishing to put down women — that most women have very little idea of what it's like to be a man; just as most men have lit-

tle idea of what it's like to be a woman.

Moving beyond blame, then, means trusting our own knowledge of our intentions. It doesn't mean blaming women who blame men — after thousands of years of oppression, I think it's fairly understandable that some feminists are now giving men a hard time — and it certainly doesn't mean shutting our ears to women. What it means is hearing very clearly the effect that our behaviour has on women, but not taking on board, unquestioningly, any intentions that might be ascribed to us.

Moving beyond blame can further the psychological and political aims of the anti-sexist men's movement in three ways. First, I think it can give us a greater pride in our work. All too often, anti-sexist men's activities have been hampered by a fear that other men are going to accuse us of promoting wimpiness, or that radical feminists will come along and say: 'you're only doing that to get right-on women into bed!' I know for myself that when I recently set up a stall at my University to invite students along to a series of men's workshops I was absolutely terrified that the campus's women's group would harass and humiliate me (in fact they were extremely supportive and encouraging). What really kept me standing there all day, though, was a sense that deep inside I knew the real reasons why I wanted to run the workshops — to gain experience in facilitating groups, to encourage men to explore their feelings, perhaps even to contribute something to the dismantling of patriarchy — and that these intentions were fundamentally valid. And if we can

hold on to the reality of our positive intents, even when we feel we are being demonised by others, it gives us the strength to stand up against the possibility (or reality) of criticism and derision. We can talk to other men, to women, even to the media without the head-bowed apologetic stance so typical of the anti-sexist men's movement. At a time when hyper-masculine fascism is dramatically increasing, it is imperative that we begin to straighten our backs and argue an anti-sexist perspective with as much gusto as we can.

Second, moving beyond blame means having the ability to respond more effectively to the women's movement — being response-able, literally. Guilt-ridden anti-sexist men tend to have two standard reactions to feminist challenge: either they fall to a brow-beating, quivering heap on the floor; or else they turn defensive and struggle to protect their right-on credentials. The problem, in both cases, is that guilt has so undermined the man's sense of self-validity that the slightest criticism threatens to bring down the whole shaky edifice of his identity. She might simply



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be saying: 'I wish you'd shout a bit less when we argue'; but what he hears is: 'you're a macho, sexist pig for always shouting when we fight.' Consequently, he either collapses each time he's challenged or else he spends his life desperately trying to prop up his crumbling sense of self-worth. In either case, the chances of prolonged change are slight — by hearing the feedback as a fundamental challenge to his identity he's liable to ignore the actual behavioural alteration requested.

A man, on the other hand, who has a sense of his own self-worth and believes in the fundamental validity of his intentions is likely to be much more open to change. When challenged or given feedback, he'll be able to hear the effect of his intentions without closing himself off or falling prostrate to the floor. When his partner says to him: 'Isn't it my turn for the massage?' he can think: 'Maybe I should give her a massage now', not 'I'm such a sexist bastard, oh my God!... oh my God!... oh my God!...'

What's more, if we want to change, it's imperative that we know the real intentions behind our behaviour. If the feelings we're blamed for feeling aren't the feelings we're feeling at all, then however hard we try to stop feeling what we never felt in the first place, we'll always feel guilty for failing to overcome our non-existent feelings. Meanwhile, the real feelings at the root of our behaviour will remain unchallenged, and we'll continue to behave in 'unacceptable' ways, all the time feeling guilty about our 'unacceptable' feelings.

Let me give you an example: John never does the washing up. He never cleans, he never cooks, he never makes the bed. His partner, Dawn, accuses him of being sexist and threatens to leave him unless he looks at his assumptions around women and housework. John toddles off to a men's group determined to deal with the issue, but the problem is that John's domestic ineptitude isn't caused by his assumptions around women and housework — it's caused by the fact that John hates housework. And whoever John lives with, male or female, he never does any of the work around the house. So however much time he spends in his men's group talking about his assumptions around female domesticity, he's never going to 'move' on the issue because he never had an issue in the first place. Moreover, because he's not dealing with the issue at the heart of his hatred of housework — his hatred of housework — he's going to continue feeling like he doesn't want to do it, and hence continue feeling guilty about his laziness. If Dawn had said, on the other hand, 'You might not like doing the housework, but I hate it just as much,' then his behaviour would be challenged head-on. There's no men's group to sort this one out, just the unpleasant task of plugging in the Hoover...

And by knowing when we're not being sexist, we can have a much clearer sense of when we are acting with sexist intentions. Instead of sexism being conceived as one big unconscious mass ('I'm not sexist — my unconscious is'), we can begin to pinpoint when, where and why we act with gender-biased motivations and assumptions. One of the most powerful learning experiences I had around sexism was during a small encounter-type group where the focus was on being as honest as possible. What were my real feelings towards the women in the group? No, I didn't hate them, or feel contempt towards them, or ignore them; but what I did notice was that when we would have arguments in the group I would tend to direct my anger towards the other men in the hope

of earning the admiration and affection of the women. Effectively, I saw the women as 'cheerleaders' and this recognition allowed me to challenge an important assumption I had around women.

Perhaps more importantly, however, was the reaction my assumption received when I expressed it to the women in the group. One of the women said she felt quite disappointed and disturbed by my perceptions of her, and the next week she expressed outright anger. For the first time, I had an overwhelming sense of how my sexism hurts women. It wasn't about politically correct slogans, abstract academic concepts or sociological statistics; it was about a real relationship with a real woman and the way that real assumptions on my behalf had really hurt her. (Incidentally, at the end of the year the woman said that this exchange had been one of the most important, if painful, experiences for her too.) My feeling, now, is that the best way men can move forward in the anti-sexist struggle is by creating spaces in which we can communicate openly and honestly with women. We need groups where we can sit down (or dance — see Paul Wolf-Light's article) and share what it feels like to be men and women, without blame, generalisations or clichés. In the openness of a men's group we can discover the intentions behind our behaviours, but we can never truly know the effects that those behaviours have until we ask women. Consequently, we cannot truly know what it is women would like us to change. That's not to suggest that we should drag women screaming from the safety of their women-only spaces, or that we should relinquish our own men-only environments like *Achilles Heel*; but I think the time is approaching when an increasing number of men and women are ready to meet. Magazines like *Body Politic*, which bring together feminists and anti-sexist male perspectives, are beginning to forge a new path into the field of sexual politics (but then I would say that, being deputy editor).

Thirdly, and finally, I think by moving beyond blame the anti-sexist men's movement can become much more effective at challenging sexism in other men. You can't fix a car if you don't know how it works, and trying to tackle sexism through blame is like trying to fix a car by kicking it. To really understand why men act in a sexist manner we need to let go of our preconceived notions and learn to listen, to accept and to empathise. People intuit when they are not being valued, and as long as we feel that we understand other men more than they understand themselves, they'll continue to feel alienated by our finger-wagging arrogance. That's not to suggest that we should collude with other men's sexism, but we need to be able to challenge the behaviour whilst valuing the person.

In the politically correct culture of the nineties, it's all too easy to conform to the conclusion that 'all men are bastards'. But if all men are bastards for oppressing women, white women are just as much bastards for oppressing black women, and heterosexual black women are no better for oppressing their lesbian sisters... ad infinitum. At the end of the day, then, we have a choice: either we are all bastards, or else we are all struggling to do our best in a tumultuous, frightening, and uncertain world. For myself, I know that I am struggling to do my best, and to assume anything less of others would be both arrogant and illogical. To move forward, both personally and politically, we need to stop blaming and start understanding. As the saying goes: 'blame nothing but blame itself.'

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