

Men, Power, and Politics

By John Bunzl

With so many global problems now threatening us—from financial market meltdown to global warming—calls for a global “paradigm shift” away from the present culture of reckless risk-taking to a more responsible, sustainable path have become commonplace. But what roles do sex and gender issues play in all this? And how should they change? For if there’s to be a paradigm shift in our political and economic systems, our perceptions of sex and gender can hardly be irrelevant or left out.

The feminist movement of recent decades has certainly brought major changes for women; more equality in the workplace, more sexual freedom and control, and a more equal social standing alongside men. But one can’t help noticing that women who achieve high positions of power, whether in business or politics, often seem to end up behaving much as men do. That is, they tend to adopt a masculine, power-oriented, competitive, logic-based approach which seems to leave little space for feminine intuition, compassion and feeling. This brings into question whether much has changed at all. For if women’s liberation has resulted in women arriving in business and politics only to behave in much the same competitive fashion as men, we can hardly claim to be on the cusp of a new paradigm!

So what’s going on?

Maybe there are larger, systemic forces at work which subtly set the narrow behavioural parameters that business-people and politicians—whether male or female—have little choice but to conform to. Rather like fish that cannot see the water they swim in, we all seem to be swimming in a culture that honours and accepts only one half of who we really are; that is, the macho-masculine, competitive, risk-taking, go-getting half. As psychotherapist, John A. Sanford, notes: “Masculine achievement, power, control, success, and logic are rewarded in our society by prestige, good grades in school, and generous paychecks. The feminine principle, which tends to unite and synthesize is undervalued culturally both in men and in women.”ⁱ

Women newly arrived in the world of business or politics are perhaps still too in thrall to their newfound independence to realise that the system largely excludes the very feminine qualities they were perhaps hoping to inject. Only with time will they discover, as a few men have, that the worlds of business and politics are not quite all they’re cracked up to be.

For most men, this is a realisation that, having for millennia been inured to the competitive world of warfare, work and politics, we’re yet to fully wake up to. Some of us—perhaps you, since you’re reading this article—are one of the few who sense a deeper malaise: that the worlds of business and politics are failing to offer either men or women what we both really need; that is, the opportunity for wholeness: for expressing *all*—and not just half (the masculine half)—of who we really are.

It's the system, stupid!

How, then, is the system tilted towards the masculine principle of competition? Well, here is where we veer into a bit of simple political-economy. For the dominance of masculine competition over feminine cooperation, I'm suggesting, trickles down from the global level; from the fact that, today, we have a *global* economy, but we're trying to manage it with only *national* governance. That might sound weird. But when capital and corporations move freely across national borders from one national economy to another, governments must do whatever is necessary to make their economies more attractive than other countries to ensure capital and jobs come to (or don't leave) *their* country—that is, they have to keep their economies *internationally competitive*.

As a result, government policies tend to favour the interests of corporations and markets while consequently *disfavouring* the interests of society or the environment. So it really doesn't much matter which party is in power, because longer working hours, downward pressure on wages, less care for the environment, more pressure to perform at work to keep your job, more pressure to perform at school to get a job, more pressure to pass exams to get into a good school, and more pressure on worried parents to frantically push their toddlers to learn the three Rs before they're really ready for it, are the inevitable outcomes! Such is the top-down pressure of international competition, it's hardly surprising that in almost any walk of life, only our competitive, masculine sides end up being honoured. The culture of competition that permeates almost every aspect of our daily lives starts, then, right at the top; at the global level.

But it would be wrong to think this pressure was created by corporations or investors bent on lining their pockets. There are, of course, some greedy business people out there. But this doesn't alter the general truth that, rather like nations, investors and corporations in today's global market cannot afford to lose out to *their* competitors. As the investment manager, George Soros, aptly pointed out: "As an anonymous participant in financial markets, I never had to weigh the social consequences of my actions. I was aware that in some circumstances the consequences might be harmful but I felt justified in ignoring them on the grounds that I was playing by the rules. The game was very competitive and if I imposed additional constraints on myself I would end up a loser. Moreover, I realised that my moral scruples would make no difference to the real world, given the conditions of effective or near-perfect competition that prevail in financial markets; if I abstained somebody else would take my place."ⁱⁱ So it's important to understand that the masculine, competitive principle is enforced all the way from the global level down to our everyday existence. Logically, then, it's to the global level that we must look if the feminine, cooperative principle is to have any chance of a look in.

A global perspective

The really silly thing, here, is that if we look at this from a higher, global perspective, we see that all nations, and all corporations, are stuck in a vicious circle from which they can't escape; that this whole problem isn't really down to any individual nation or corporation, but to the overall system itself. Since any nation (or corporation) that moves first to do the right thing will be

punished by capital, investment and jobs simply moving elsewhere, it's easy to see how politicians in whatever country don't act on so many pressing global issues such as climate change, top people's excessive pay, and financial market regulation. It's little wonder, then, that "feminine" policies that foster greater equity and social inclusion, as well as environmental sustainability are largely excluded or too often watered down to the point of insignificance.

But here's the point: the vicious circle all nations find themselves in, and the one-sided, damaging competitive pressure it exerts can only worsen until governance—the feminine principle that "holds" masculine economic competition and keeps it within healthy bounds—catches up and operates on the same global scale. Yes, you heard right: we need to balance our "masculine" global economy with "feminine" global governance. For until we do, the vicious circle that honours only our masculine sides can only continue—and it'll worsen. Until we have global governance, feminine qualities in both men and women cannot have any real chance of widespread enculturation.

Unacknowledged pain

Meantime, the psychic pain caused by this imbalance is hard to overestimate and yet it's too often overlooked. You may have noticed that George Soros, in the above quote, justifies his behaviour by noting that "if I abstained somebody else would take my place". In other words, the psychic pain of having to do the *wrong* thing by society and the environment is justified (that is, repressed and split off) by assuring himself that doing the *right* thing would have meant losing out or being replaced by someone else.

We can see, then, how the system too often forces us to do what we know may be wrong or harmful and to act against our deepest values and convictions, and that this pain manifests and accumulates both *internally* within each of us as a growing sense of guilt and repression, and *externally* in the form of worsening global problems. This, then, is the heavy pain we all carry; the pains of the world – or *weltschmerz* - as the Germans call it.

Being repressed and split-off, this pain is barely acknowledged in society. Instead, we consign it to our subconscious. But like all repressed pain, it only sits there increasingly nagging at us, weighing us down with guilt, frustration and doubt. As global problems worsen all around us, this pain can only come back to haunt us. If we don't deal with it—if we don't face up to the task of establishing some form of global governance—we'll surely all end up paying the price; perhaps even the ultimate price of the widespread wipe-out of humanity itself.

You probably never imagined gender issues play a role in global politics or vice versa. But perhaps you now see why, if our feminine, cooperative sides are to be properly and equally honoured, the world will have to adopt an appropriate form of global cooperation and governance. For only then could feminine feeling, compassion and cooperation be brought into balance with the male principle of economic competition. Only then could both men and women have full and equal access to the *whole* of who they are.

But how do we achieve global governance?

Seeing no easy way to have an influence on global problems, gives us another reason to ignore them. And after all, shouldn't our politicians be the ones to take this on? Trouble is, so preoccupied are they with having to keep their economies internationally competitive, they can't even *envisage* how nations could cooperate. So like it or not, the heavy task of achieving this necessarily falls to civil society – to us. Remote though the prospect may seem, you may be surprised to know that a practical start has already been made in the form of a global campaign called the Simultaneous Policy – or SimpPol, for short. (<http://www.simpol.org>)

The great thing about SimpPol is that it actually offers us a way we can use our votes in our national elections, but in a completely new and powerful way that drives the politicians of all parties to support and implement the policies needed to solve our most pressing global problems. With supporters in over 70 countries, the campaign is gradually driving politicians across the world towards a position where policies can be implemented *simultaneously* by all or sufficient nations. With simultaneous action, we all win and the vicious circle of destructive competition that presently causes so much pain can at last be broken. A form of cooperative global governance capable of matching and balancing our present already-global economy could thus be put in place.

"Pipe dream!", I hear you shout. But at the last UK general election in 2010, and despite only a handful of citizens being actively involved in SimpPol, no less than 200 candidates from all political parties signed up to the campaign and, of those, 24 are now Members of Parliament. MPs in some other national parliaments have also signed on and the campaign is going from strength to strength. There's no doubting the enormity of the task, of course. But acknowledging the power of the human spirit to overcome even the mightiest of obstacles, Noam Chomsky, the veteran U.S. political commentator, summed up the spirit of SimpPol by saying, "It's ambitious and provocative. Can it work? Certainly worth a serious try."

Men, power and politics in the 21st Century

With current UN and other efforts at international agreements routinely ending in failure and with global problems mounting all around us, SimpPol at least offers us—men and women—a way of giving our cooperative, feminine halves a practical, *political* expression, even though the aim of the campaign—global governance—remains to be achieved. Because if, in the wake of feminism, men now need to rediscover what masculinity means in the 21st Century, perhaps supporting SimpPol and so showing ourselves ready and able to cooperate, rather than remaining defined solely by our ability to compete, offers us a more balanced, mature and complete form of masculinity. For even though we each inevitably remain caught in the vicious circle of competition in our everyday lives, supporting SimpPol allows us to release the psychic pain we've collectively built up over past centuries and to discharge it through a positive, cooperative, and productive form of global political action; action designed to rebalance our masculine global economy with feminine global governance. For what greater gift could we, men, give to our women and to ourselves than delivering this historic integration? And what greater gift could

women give to us and to themselves than joining us in the effort to achieve it? And then, let us also not forget the children.

The paradox of this and all previous major evolutionary transitions is, that if left to reach a critical stage, the male principle of competition ultimately ceases to be a strategy for individual survival but instead becomes a strategy for collective suicide. At that point—a point we're fast approaching—the feminine principle of co-operation becomes in everyone's self-interest. But for a regression into chaos to be avoided and for cooperation at a new higher level to emerge, not only is global and simultaneous action required to overcome the barriers to international cooperation, an appropriate *catalyzing political process* is also needed. That, indeed, is what the Simpol campaign perhaps offers us: a transformative *political practice* enabling us to responsibly and consciously co-create an appropriate and healthy form of people-centered global governance; a world-centric governance born of a higher consciousness that integrates male and female principles, transcends and includes political parties and nation-states, and "through which runs the blood of a common humanity and beats the single heart of a very small planet struggling for its own survival, and yearning for its own release into a deeper and a truer tomorrow".ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ *The Invisible Partners – How the Male and Female in each of us affects our relationships*, Paulist Press, 1980, p48.

ⁱⁱ *The Crisis of Global Capitalism – Open Society Endangered*, George Soros, Little, Brown and Co. 1998.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality – The Spirit of Evolution*, Ken Wilber, Shambhala, 2000.