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The Machismo Solution

Aniceto Aramoni

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Machismo—from the word "macho" (male)—is a way of being, a particular cultural solution to the existential problems of living, that can be considered positive or negative depending on one's viewpoint. It refers to exaggerated masculine characteristics ranging from male genital prowess and a particular type of valor, to a special way of resolving human controversies through demonstrating towering pride and fearlessness; it also expresses a specific counterphobic attitude toward women, and the anxieties of life and death.

From the outsider's perspective, machismo represents an essentially pointless and destructive struggle on the part of the man to overcome the humiliating feeling of being like an ineffectual little boy, especially in his mother's eyes. It is an ill-fated drama wherein the man, painfully attached to mother, sisters, and the Virgin, seeks their exclusive admiration and worship.

Overcompensating for his acute inner feelings of inadequacy and guilt, the machista struts through life giving and seeking challenges answerable in blood. Yet there is a positive striving in this absurd struggle which, in its own special way, epitomizes the fundamental problem of any person who is trying to emerge from a profound symbiosis; that is, the machista is impelled to deny his own weakness, extreme dependency, and a regressive undertow, and he attempts this through dominating others.

In other words, machismo is a uniquely Mexican answer—albeit a disturbed one—to the universal quest for individuation, dignity, and relatedness. There are many different ways for a person to come to terms with an entrenched sense of fear and inadequacy. The machismo response is not to yield to it, not to surrender to depression and apathy, but to go to the opposite extreme: to transcend the universally unbearable fear of aloneness and weakness through acting bigger, stronger, more gloriously. [101]

As Erich Fromm described so well in *Escape from Freedom*, the need to dominate another person (the essence of sadism) is a false solution that arises in the absence of active relatedness and mutual affirmation. Thus, overwhelmed by doubts as to the meaning of his life, the nature of his identity, and his effectiveness as a man, the machista—in Fromm's terms—seeks security in the overpowering and enslavement of others.

In this paper I want to show how this state of affairs shapes character in certain parts of Mexico, where and when the machista is facing another man. As I shall discuss below, this is based partly on an attitude of submission by the machista toward his own mother.



It is said that during some of the early battles in the Mexican Revolution, certain peasants attempted to muffle the sound of the cannon by covering the mouths of the cannon with their hats. Those who survived stopped doing it.

Analogously, some Mexicans have tried to mitigate problems stemming from male-female relationships, by means of violent and absurd behavior—by means of "machismo," but with the difference that they still continue to do so.

It is an intelligent principle not to place a person in the position of being unable to find any way out during a dispute. It generates hate and resentment in the other, and the wish to take revenge.

One day God told Davan, a peasant who lived across the river from Yavan, whom he cordially hated and who hated him in return, "Ask of me anything you wish, I am willing to grant you any request, whatever it may be, with only one condition: remember that I shall give Yavan double of whatever I give you. Tell me, what do you ask of me?"

Davan removed his hat, slowly scratched his head, turned toward God and said: "Tear out one of my eyes!"

Something similar happens between man and woman in machista behavior. She wreaks vengeance by taking half the suffering on herself, in order to leave a double amount to her lord and master. As she annuls herself, she becomes an absolutely passive being, whom the great man must then drag along, while she clings to his shoulder and lets her feet hang.

He on his part is so focused on revenge, unconsciously or consciously, that he makes impossible the alternatives of understanding and happiness.

Treating the woman like a thing, the machista man tries to make her feel inferior and good for nothing unless it is related to serving the master, in bed and out. And, like the feudal lord, he obtains: a docile woman but [102] resentful; submissive but passively resistant, or actively negativistic. She will react by taking possession of the children and exerting a powerful influence over them. She will also have her lord defend her, and perhaps meet his death in his struggle against other men in order to keep face in front of her.

It would be interesting to consider a continuum: At one end is the extreme machista attitude; at the other, the society of "Amazons" whose customs resemble those of machistas, except in reverse, with the man being dominated. Unfortunately, the "Amazons" are either a legend, or stemmed from an historical cultural condition that was transcended thousands of years ago, while machismo currently exists and even receives praise within a certain social stratum, even though it produces destructiveness and a high rate of homicide.

Of course machismo is not a typical trait of the Mexican. But within a certain social class with specific economic characteristics and a certain family constellation, the machista reaction is not rare. Actually, many factors make up a symptomatic complex like machismo and all these variables must be understood to account for something so confused and apparently so irrational.

In saying this I am including the intervention of all sorts of factors, from climate to



food, as well as atavism, tradition, and destitution. One must consider subtle psychological aspects related to education, the structure of the family, and the hierarchies within the social group—not to mention frustration, violence, exhibitionism, a promiscuous environment, and vital scarcities in every area. Also involved are the lack of respect for human life, the type of religion as applied to the concept of life and death; the forms of government and political action; feelings of manipulation, impotence and despair; laxity, and the monstrous socioeconomic problems that seem insurmountable; destructiveness in word and action, accompanied by the high rate of homicide, criminality, and alcoholism. To understand machismo one must also know the common amusements, the games and interests of children, the stories listened to during childhood, and the type of father and mother within the family nucleus.

Clearly it is very difficult to find the main effective causes. Perhaps one might proceed by way of establishing certain reliable statements related to the individual personality and social character of those who suffer from machismo.

Perhaps the most expressive media for transmitting the characteristics of machismo are rural Mexican songs. These contain qualities that are [103] unique, and unlike songs from other parts. Therefore, it seems useful to quote some representative passages:

I am a Mexican and proud of it
from birth I have scorned life and death
and if I utter bravados, so do I uphold them.
I am Mexican, and it is my good fortune
that life has so willed that in every place
I am recognized for my bravery.

It matters nothing to find death
by the window of a thankless woman
or to carry in your conscience
one more burden due to killing.
In search of their kisses go their men
without fear of the fight
between bloody scrapes
and gashes of a dagger.

I was one of the
"golden ones" of Villa
of those who have
no love for life
of those who going to war
carry with us our women
loving and singing
I'm a member of that band.

I come in search of an ingrate
a conceited young girl
she ran away with my love,



I desire now to find her
to teach her that a man
cannot be scoffed by a woman.

She left me suddenly
giving reason to the people
idly to gossip
but let's see now when I find her
and we meet face to face
what she will then say to me.

It is not difficult to formulate some conclusions from these texts; certain refrains occur persistently to constitute the leitmotiv of machismo. [104]

The machista wants a woman for his personal use, in a wholly disrespectful way. He makes the choice; she must guard against mistakes, and certainly not decide between two men. Even if she likes someone who cares for her and desires her, *she* must not choose; neither may she reject or scorn, because the consequences may be terrible. For the mere rejection of a dance, the macho is fully justified in shooting the woman. For a man to show interest in a woman whom another has noticed first is to gamble with his life.

The woman, like a toy in a shop window, can be selected and relinquished without any participation on her part. But tragically, as soon as she is possessed she loses all, or almost all, the interest she held for the wild and petulant macho, who regarded her mainly as an object of conquest. Nevertheless, he is capable of fighting to the death with another man over her! Both men act as though the woman were an element that produces a form of hyperesthesia, thus constituting a reason for machismo.

In actual fact the woman is a trophy in an arena disputed by men. It is reminiscent of knighthood, with its tournaments, except that the woman then was courted as a lady, and winning her was a supreme joy. Among machos things are different: The woman is a prize in a competitive struggle; but as a person, she matters little.

Significantly, three types of women are spared this depreciating and humiliating attitude: the sister, the mother, and the Virgin. Two of them are close, kindred beings; the third is close for another reason. All three are above contempt, not to be subjugated. It is not permitted to insult them under any condition. With women linked to them by blood ties, the machistas adopt a different attitude—one which they also demand from strangers who must beware of provoking their women.

It is paradoxical and absurd that the same individuals who demand respect for their sisters and mothers show none for the sisters and mothers of others whom they insult, seduce, and abandon. All agree, however, about the Virgin; she is idolized, the quintessence of a sublimated and all-powerful mother.

As I have described, machismo is an attitude toward existence; it reflects the way a special type of man responds to conditions of life which cast major doubts on his security. The response is usually stereotyped; it tends to be automatic and predictable because what matters most to the machista individual is achieving a compensatory narcissism based on a sense of manliness in terms of genital functioning.



Although the machismo attitude functions among men, the justification [105] for it, one might say, is the woman; it is a matter, therefore, of a closely linked triangle. Machismo represents a kind of a solution to life which occurs in an underdeveloped country of Latin America, one that is "so far from God and so close to the United States," rather nationalistic, and with a homicide rate that occupied first place in the world for many years and still remains among the highest five. It is the country where man-woman difficulties have been resolved in the most efficient form, with absolute domination by the masculine sex.

Maintaining a situation of slavery and surveillance that does not permit the least expression of hostility or rebellion, he has so defeated her in the tournament of sex that she accepts his "use" of her during the sexual act. In this environment of domination and patriarchal unbalance the best portion is for the man and he demands of the woman chastity and virginity.

In this war the man apparently defeats all women, in front of whom he exhibits an extraordinary ferocity; all banners and booty are used by him as an offering to be placed on two different dates at the feet of the same person attired in different garments: on the Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, December 12, and on Mother's Day, May 10, thus making her a participant in his overwhelming triumph.

Paradoxically, he has defeated the woman in bed and perhaps in the home itself, but when proceeding to enjoy his triumph it is the general of the opposing army, in her two manifestations, who takes possession of the spoils: the *Virgin* and the *Mother*, who in their turn defeat the God-man-father and son.

As if it were a make-believe war, he wins all the battles, and in the end surrenders to the opposing leader. Such behavior offers a solution, but one full of absurdities. Ostensibly the opponent to be defeated is the woman, but on looking closely, only occasionally is the woman destroyed; more frequently, one man attacks another who should be considered a member of one's own army.

This alienated behavior mixed with a treacherous attitude has no simple explanation. If a warrior, during a battle, were to hurl himself against the soldiers of his own army he might be examined by a psychiatrist, or be considered a traitor.

No such thing happens with the machista.

This situation would be paradoxical, unless one knows that what matters is to acquit oneself well before the hidden commanding general: Virgin-Mother. Once this is understood, the attitude becomes plausible: It is a [106] war in appearance only, domination in appearance only; the war is really an operetta with traces of a melodrama, although unfortunately it frequently ends in tragedy and death.

In other words, this tragic comedy of errors makes sense if we assume that it is the goal of life to prove to the mother that one is a man. To achieve this, it has become necessary to dominate the woman and conquer another man in taking her away from him, destroying the rival. This shows one's mother—before whom one feels like an impotent child—that one is a man who can go to bed with many women; that is, one informs the mother about them, like a notorious seducer. The hope is that one's mother will acknowledge the fact, and finally bestow the accolade of manhood.

It is with a primitive and archaic attitude that the male relates manliness to the



domination of woman, to hypersexuality, to enormous genitals, and to the defeat of another man equal or similar to himself. It is, then, a war *sui generis*: one man against another man, over a booty neither cares about deeply. This war, as though it were the "flowery war" of the Aztecs, is performed in a ritualistic and stereotyped way.

Furthermore, there is reason to assume that the woman who is apparently loved is unconsciously hated and feared. This is why she must be disarmed and subdued, until she is made impotent and harmless. But then the woman, subjugated and regarded as an object, resorts to her children to justify her existence, reflecting in her relationships to them all her hopes and frustrations, her hatred and vindictiveness.

By means of overt seduction, or even without it, she manages to become the most important woman in her son's life; all the others, outsiders, will appear as usurpers. Frequently, the son, encouraged by her, will adopt the position of surrogate husband and savior, showing loyalty and devotion. He will try to fulfill the hopes that the inadequate father was unable to achieve, sometimes remaining a bachelor as long as his mother is alive.

The son, then, belongs to the faction of the mother and women, to the feminine world; his role is to betray the father, the masculine faction and, it goes without saying, himself as a person.

One might imagine that the son would leave his mother, and try to become an adult. He is held back, however, by powerful guilt feelings and by a sense of inferiority, as well as by the anxiety evolved by these reactions. He is also undermined by guilt over the abandonment of his father and the surrender of his own masculinity. Other barriers are a religion which demands reverence for parents, and cultural elements that reward loyalty to [107] parents and also punish its absence with ostracism. Hence the cycle is perpetuated.

In summary, machismo is a reaction and a paradoxical behavior in which the attempt is being made not only to show manliness, but hypertrophied manliness to prove oneself "very much a man," or "very macho." Grammatically, though, the word "man" cannot be qualified in a comparative and superlative manner: man, more man, most man. The optimum quality has to do here with the attributes of man which must mature until they reach, simply, the category "man," which is sufficient, even though, if the truth be said, not often achieved.