Meaningful Opportunities for Young Men

Keith Rankin, 30 April 2015

On 28 April ([New Zealand population dynamics before and after WW1](#)) I noted the special demographic circumstances of the years immediately prior to World War 1. Here I would like to extend the argument that young men in particular need constructive or otherwise meaningful roles inside or outside of their societies, and that quite serious social problems can occur when such opportunities are absent. The cohort of young men born between 1887 and 1897 – the WW1 cohort – were such a demographically superfluous group for whom that war created some sort of role that gave meaning to their lives.

While the words 'testosterone' and 'competition' cover much of what I will say, we should note that men evolved with testosterone-fuelled ambitions for reasons, and that societies' that fail to create appropriate opportunities for the young stand to face consequences that we tend to dismiss as unknowable unknowns.

I posit that there are four essential forms of young male self-expression, that almost all young men (let's say aged 15 to 30) require at least one of these forms of self-expression in order to make their existence meaningful, and that different men require different roles within these categories. The roles I have identified are: provider, creator, adventurer, and warrior.

The provider role can be classed as the economic imperative; making money to support a present or future family through a career or a business. Here being 'competitive' means being able to secure such a role.

We may think of the economy as a game of musical chairs, where sometimes there are sufficient chairs for all young men, though usually there is an insufficiency that expands and contracts through the economic cycle. If five young men live on a farm that can only productively employ two, then there are three men whose inherent make-up requires that they find other opportunities. As in the countryside, casual work in cities is tantamount to no meaningful work. Zero-hour contracts and the like may enable young men to exist in their parents' homes, but they are may not living in ways that their biology requires them to live.

The second 'creator' imperative does not necessarily require creation within a market context. It covers both the 'builder' concept (making things) and the more artistic, literary or scientific concept of creativity. This role tells us that there can be opportunities for publicly-oriented creativity, and it is in this area that a modern post-industrial (and increasingly post-market) society must look to as a way of creating roles for young men. Creation is by its nature competitive, in that only some creations will be widely valued. But the process of creative occupation can be satisfying even for those who do not gain public recognition. It's a 'striving for excellence' process that can facilitate a good and valuable life for a man whether or not that excellence is achieved or acknowledged.

The adventurer imperative is that of individual risk-taking, and can be fulfilled through a journey (or journeys) in distant places. Or it can be fulfilled through thrill-seeking activities such as mountain climbing or parachuting or motorcycling or running with bulls in Spain. Here the competition may be with nature, or through encounters with different people and different cultures. This role also includes the martial arts, boxing and other individualist sports; essentially competitive individual activities through which 'manhood' might be demonstrated.

The warrior imperative is that of finding a role within a 'team' of people whose purpose is to fight. In this role, a young man is happy to play a subservient role as 'just one of the team', is willing to take hits for his mates (even dying for their cause), and is prepared to hit (indeed kill) as part of forging his identity within that team context. (This is what Buffy Sainte-Marie meant by the 'Universal Soldier'.) Competition here takes the form of group rivalry. This imperative is for the most part satisfied in

modern societies through organised team sport; in both playing and supporting roles. It may also be satisfied through violent activities such as hunting deer or wild pigs with mates.

If these biological imperatives are denied to young men in constructive capacities, then they will emerge is destructive ways. Young men may be itching to go to war, not really caring who they are fighting or why. Bright young men may turn to crime, even (or perhaps especially) violent crime. Adventurous crime represents necessary risk-taking activities, including the known risk of facing capital punishment in a foreign country. Crime of course may also satisfy frustrated economic motives, and may involve a considerable amount of creativity. Suicide is another consequence of societies' inabilities to create meaningful opportunities for young men.

What are the circumstances in which there are unusually large numbers of young men unable to satisfy their biological imperatives in socially constructive or acceptable ways? Certainly demographic imbalances represent one such circumstance where societies must find constructive post-education roles for their young.

Another important circumstance of excess unfulfilled youth is that of an austere economic environment. Austerity can be understood as an extremely competitive game of musical chairs in which many chairs are withdrawn; opportunities to fulfil especially the provider imperative are severely constrained. This happens under conditions of both private and public austerity, and is especially problematic when private households, businesses and governments are all trying to be austere in their spending habits at the same time. (Business austerity tends to be a consequence of households saving too much and governments spending too little, but can occur autonomously.)

In this context we can see the austerity economics of Europe's Eurozone as creating a dangerous undercurrent of hopelessness among too many of Europe's young men. One result is the re-emergence of extremist politics and of ethnically-based gangs, as too many young men need something or someone to fight against. And we see it in the riots that too easily develop in American cities; tinder-boxes of young men with nothing fulfilling to do and nowhere to go.

We also see the enigma of increased risky economic migration from Africa to the very Europe that is itself in deep trouble with its young men. The phenomenon of the African boat-people – disproportionately young men – is not a simple consequence of poverty in Africa. African countries have had the fastest growing economies in the world in recent years. They have also had among the highest rates of population growth over the last few decades. Economic growth destroys as well as creates opportunities; hence the high levels of economic migration from the British Isles and Europe in the nineteenth century. A high population of young men unable to satisfy their provider and creator needs turn to adventure; depressed but wealthy Europe is their 'new world', and they knowingly risk death to experience something other than meaningless poverty in their homelands.

Finally here, the biggest geopolitical event this decade is the rise of the Islamic State. It's too easy to see this as essentially a war of religion. But it may be better understood as a war of the young; young people attracted to something romantic of their own creation; young people with Islamic backgrounds creating places for themselves in a world that otherwise seems to have no place for them.