

HISTB226 Modern Europe

Response Paper#1

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Masculinity Within the Feminist Movement

In the late nineteenth century, European debates over women's rights advanced alongside broader conflicts of authority, tradition, and class. With ongoing imperial expansion and labor movements, feminists had to think not only of how to uplift women, but what it meant to be empowered during a period when understandings of authority were divisive and actively shifting. Central to the struggle between gender and authority is the understanding of masculinity and dominance, the various understandings of which led to competing visions of how women ought to empower themselves. Through the experiences of Lene Haase and Louise Michel, masculinity could range from being seen as a gender-fluid tool of empowerment or as part of an inherently flawed tradition that must be done away with entirely. These texts show that feminism of the era could not cleanly fit under a singular title when the uncertainty of foundational concepts like masculinity fractured even the basic terms of empowerment.

Haase, a white German woman, documented her travels through colonial Africa in a series of journal entries. Her experience in Cameroon, specifically, rejects masculinity as an innately male quality, instead viewing it as a set of traditionally male skills and mannerisms that could be adopted by women – the ability to shoot a gun, for example. One entry describes herself as displaying mastery of this masculine quality for a group of African soldiers by participating in target shooting: “a man thing,” as she puts it.¹ She manages to out-perform “even the best of the

¹ Lena Haase, *A German Woman's Experiences in Cameroon*, in *Women in European History, 1700–1914: A Sourcebook*, ed. Laura Levine Frader and Sonya O. Rose (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 233–236.

marksmen, the sergeant,” which fills her with “happiness and pride”.¹ Her empowerment comes from her mastery of tradition; she is uplifted by her success within an existing structure. This display overturns local gender expectations when the mountain people refuse to believe she is a woman since a “woman who...commanded (and men obeyed)...couldn’t exist”.¹ In this reaction, masculinity is determined by alignment with tradition rather than biology, implying that anyone who masters masculinity can then be revered as possessing traditionally male authority. While Haase’s unique colonial position (with authority already being skewed by her European dominance) makes this gender-transferability especially apparent, the concept of masculine customs becoming fluid extends beyond colonies. To Haase, regardless of the context, once masculinity is deemed to be transferable to women, it becomes a tool capable of empowerment. However, when masculinity is adopted by women, is it automatically separated from the broader authoritarian structures enabled by this dominance?

Contrary to Haase’s view of masculinity as empowering, Michel, another woman, treats traditional masculinity as an issue itself regardless of the gender it may be attached to. Writing as an anarchist amidst a period of wider social unrest, Michel is not only concerned with uplifting women but sees women’s issues as part of a larger structural failing in which authority – whether wielded by men, the state, or the bourgeoisie – produces oppression. She mocks the idea that women should aspire to dominate, stating that women “are not stupid enough to want to run things,” and that, if anything, men should “keep the power...so that authority may wither away more quickly”.² For her, masculine authority is inseparable from larger oppressive systems, namely capitalism and imperialism, that enable not only oppression of gender but race and class

² Louise Michel, “Women’s Rights (1886),” in *Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas*, ed. Robert Graham, vol. 1 (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2005), 238–42.

as well. Still, this doesn't mean that Michel believed women should continue to subject themselves until authority collapsed. Arguing that "little girls are brought up in foolishness and are expressly disarmed so that men can deceive them more easily," she argued against women adopting both dominance *and* submission, instead using education for the intellectual liberation necessary to reject both and move towards an anarchist society free from the oppression that masculine "titles" and customs are intertwined with.²

Through these accounts, feminism is divided by how empowerment itself is imagined when the very idea of authority is contested. In this tension lies a broader struggle facing social critics of the time: should the oppressed seek empowerment through reform or revolution? Should they find mastery within the system or should they abandon it?