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THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF MASCULINITY

R.W. Connell

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... 'Masculinity' is not a coherent object about which a generalizing science can be produced. Yet we can have coherent knowledge about the issues raised in these attempts. If we broaden the angle of vision, we can see masculinity, not as an isolated object, but as an aspect of a larger structure.

This demands an account of the larger structure and how masculinities are located in it. The task of this chapter is to set out a framework based on contemporary analyses of gender relations. This framework will provide a way of distinguishing types of masculinity, and of understanding the dynamics of change.

First, however, there is some ground to clear. The definition of the basic term in the discussion has never been wonderfully clear.

Defining Masculinity

All societies have cultural accounts of gender, but not all have the concept 'masculinity'. In its modern usage the term assumes that one's behaviour results from the type of person one is. That is to say, an unmasculine person would behave differently: being peaceable rather than violent, conciliatory rather than dominating, hardly able to kick a football, uninterested in sexual conquest, and so forth.

This conception presupposes a belief in individual difference and personal agency. In that sense it is built on the conception of individuality that developed in early-modern Europe with the growth of colonial empires and capitalist economic relations....

But the concept is also inherently relational. 'Masculinity' does not exist except in contrast with 'femininity'. A culture which does not treat women and men as bearers of polarized character types, at least in principle, does not have a concept of masculinity in the sense of modern European/American culture.

Historical research suggests that this was true of European culture itself before the eighteenth century. Women were certainly regarded as different from men, but different in the sense of being incomplete or inferior: examples of the same character (for instance, having less of the faculty of reason). Women and men were not seen as bearers of qualitatively different characters; this conception accompanied the bourgeois ideology of 'separate spheres' in the nineteenth century.¹

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Such a focus is liable to exaggerate the coherence of practice that can be achieved at
any one site. It is thus not surprising that psychoanalysis, originally stressing contradic-
tion, drifted towards the concept of ‘identity’. Post-structuralist critics of psychology
such as Wendy Hollway have emphasized that gender identities are fractured and shift-
ing, because multiple discourses intersect in any individual life. This argument high-
lights another site, that of discourse, ideology, or culture. Here gender is organized in
symbolic practices that may continue much longer than the individual life (for instance
the construction of heroic masculinities in epics, the construction of ‘gender dysphorias
or ‘perversions’ in medical theory).

... A class of gender configuration are institutions such as the workplace and the school. Many find it difficult to accept that institutions are substan-
tively, not just metaphorically, gendered. This is, nevertheless, a key point.

The state, for instance, is a masculine institution. To say this is not to imply that
the personalities of top office-holders somehow seep through and stain the
institutions; it is to say something much stronger: that state organizational practices are
structured in relation to the reproductive arena. The overwhelming majority of top
office holders are men because there is a gender configuring of recruitment and
promotion, a gender configuring of the internal division of labour and systems of con-
trol, a gender configuring of policymaking, practical routines, and ways of mobilizing
pleasure and consent.

The gender structuring of practice need have nothing biologically to do with repro-
duction. The link with the reproductive arena is social. This becomes clear when it is
challenged. An example is the recent struggle within the state over ‘gays in the military’,
i.e. the rules excluding soldiers and sailors because of the gender of their sexual object-
choice. In the United States, where this struggle was most severe, critics made the case for
change in terms of civil liberties and military efficiency, arguing in effect that object-
choice has little to do with the capacity to kill. The admirals and generals defended the
status quo on a variety of spurious grounds. The unadmitted reason was the cultural
importance of a particular definition of masculinity in maintaining the fragile cohesion
of modern armed forces.

It has been clear since the work of Juliet Mitchell and Gayle Rubin in the 1970s that
gender is an internally complex structure, where a number of different logics are super-
imposed. This is a fact of great importance for the analysis of masculinities. Any one
masculinity, as a configuration of practice, is simultaneously positioned in a number of
structures of relationship, which may be following different historical trajectories.
Accordingly masculinity, like femininity, is always liable to internal contradiction and
historical disruption.

We need at least a three-fold model of the structure of gender, distinguishing rela-
tions of (a) power, (b) production and (c) cathexis (emotional attachment). This is a
provisional model, but it gives some purchase on issues about masculinity.

a Power relations. The main axis of power in the contemporary European/American
gender order is the overall subordination of women and dominance of men—the
structure Women’s Liberation named ‘patriarchy.’ This general structure exists
despite many local reversals (e.g., woman-headed households, female teachers with
male students). It persists despite resistance of many kinds, now articulated in femin-
ism. These reversals and resistances mean continuing difficulties for patriarchal
power. They define a problem of legitimacy which has great importance for the poli-
cy of masculinity.

b Production relations. Gender divisions of labour are familiar in the form of the allo-
cation of tasks, sometimes reaching extraordinarily fine detail. ... Equal attention
should be paid to the economic consequences of gender divisions of labour, the divi-
dend accruing to men from unequal shares of the products of social labour. This is
most often discussed in terms of unequal wage rates, but the gendered character of
capital should also be noted. A capitalist economy working through a gender divi-
sion of labour is, necessarily, a gendered accumulation process. So it is not a stat-
istical accident, but a part of the social construction of masculinity, that men and not
women control the major corporations and the great private fortunes. Implausible
as it sounds, the accumulation of wealth has become firmly linked to the reproduc-
tive arena, through the social relations of gender.

c Cathexis. ... [Sexual desire is so often seen as natural that it is commonly excluded
from social theory. Yet when we consider desire in Freudian terms, as emotional
energy being attached to an object, its gendered character is clear. This is true both
for heterosexual and homosexual desire. (It is striking that in our culture the non-
gendered object choice, ‘bisexual’ desire, is ill-defined and unstable.) The practices
that shape and realize desire are thus an aspect of the gender order. Accordingly we
can ask political questions about the relationships involved: whether they are consen-
sual or coercive, whether pleasure is equally given and received. In feminist
analyses of sexuality these have become sharp questions about the connection of
heterosexuality with men’s position of social dominance.

Because gender is a way of structuring social practice in general, not a special type of
practice, it is unavoidable involved with other social structures. It is now common to say
that gender ‘intersects’—better, interacts—with race and class. We might add that it
constantly interacts with nationality or position in the world order.

This fact also has strong implications for the analysis of masculinity. White men’s
masculinities, for instance, are constructed not only in relation to white women but also
in relation to black men. Paul Hoch in White Hero, Black Beast more than a decade ago
pointed to the pervasiveness of racial imagery in Western discourses of masculinity.
White fears of black men’s violence have a long history in colonial and post-colonial
situations. Black fears of white men’s terrorism, founded in the history of colonialism, have
a continuing basis in white men’s control of police, courts and prisons in metropolitan
countries. African American men are massively over-represented in American prisons,
as Aboriginal men are in Australian prisons. This situation is strikingly condensed in
the American black expression ‘The Man’, fusing white masculinity and institutional
power. 

Similarly, it is impossible to understand the shaping of working class masculinities
without giving full weight to their class as well as their gender politics. This is vividly
shown in historical work such as Sonya Rose’s Limited Livelihoods, on industrial England in the nineteenth century. An ideal of working-class manliness and self-respect was constructed in response to class deprivation and paternalistic strategies of management, at the same time and through the same gestures as it was defined against working-class women. The strategy of the ‘family wage’, which long depressed women’s wages in twentieth-century economies, grew out of this interplay.9

To understand gender, then, we must constantly go beyond gender. The same applies in reverse. We cannot understand class, race or global inequality without constantly moving towards gender. Gender relations are a major component of social structure as a whole, and gender politics are among the main determinants of our collective fate.

Relations among Masculinities: Hegemony, Subordination, Complicity, Marginalization

With growing recognition of the interplay between gender, race and class it has become common to recognize multiple masculinities: black as well as white, working-class as well as middle-class. This is welcome, but it risks another kind of oversimplification. It is easy in this framework to think that there is a black masculinity or a working-class masculinity.

To recognize more than one kind of masculinity is only a first step. We have to examine the relations between them. Further, we have to unpack the milieux of class and race and scrutinize the gender relations operating within them. There are, after all, gay black men and effeminate factory hands, not to mention middle-class rapists and cross-dressing bourgeois.

A focus on the gender relations among men is necessary to keep the analysis dynamic, to prevent the acknowledgement of multiple masculinities collapsing into a character typology, as happened with Fromm and the Authoritarian Personality research. 'Hegemonic masculinity' is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable.

A focus on relations also offers a gain in realism. Recognizing multiple masculinities, especially in an individualist culture such as the United States, risks taking them for alternative lifestyles, a matter of consumer choice. A relational approach makes it easier to recognize the hard compulsions under which gender configurations are formed, the bitterness as well as the pleasure in gendervised experience.

With these guidelines, let us consider the practices and relations that construct the main patterns of masculinity in the current Western gender order.

Hegemony

The concept of ‘hegemony’, deriving from Antonio Gramsci’s analysis of class relations, refers to the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life. At any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted. Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.9

This is not to say that the most visible bearers of hegemonic masculinity are always the most powerful people. They may be exemplars, such as film actors, or even fantasy figures, such as film characters. Individual holders of institutional power or great wealth may be far from the hegemonic pattern in their personal lives. (Thus a male member of a prominent business dynasty was a key figure in the gay/straight social scene in Sydney in the 1950s, because of his wealth and the protection this gave in the cold-war climate of political and police harassment.)10

Nevertheless, hegemony is likely to be established only if there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power, collective if not individual. So the top levels of business, the military and government provide a fairly convincing corporate display of masculinity, still very little shaken by feminist women or dissenting men. It is the successful claim to authority, more than direct violence, that is the mark of hegemony (though violence often underpins or supports authority).

I stress that hegemonic masculinity embodies a ‘currently accepted’ strategy. When conditions for the defence of patriarchy change, the bases for the dominance of a particular masculinity are eroded. New groups may challenge old solutions and construct a new hegemony. The dominance of any group of men may be challenged by women. Hegemony, then, is a historically mobile relation. Its ebb and flow is a key element of the picture of masculinity ...

Subordination

Hegemony relates to cultural dominance in the society as a whole. Within that overall framework there are specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men.

The most important case in contemporary European/American society is the dominance of heterosexual men and the subordination of homosexual men. This is much more than a cultural stigmatization of homosexuality or gay identity. Gay men are subordinated to straight men by an array of quite material practices.

These practices were listed in early Gay Liberation texts such as Dennis Altman’s Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation. They have been documented at length in studies such as the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board’s 1982 report Discrimination and Homosexuality. They are still a matter of everyday experience for homosexual men. They include political and cultural exclusion, cultural abuse (in the United States gay men have now become the main symbolic target of the religious right), legal violence (such as imprisonment under sodomy statutes), street violence (including intimidation to murder), economic discrimination and personal boycotts. It is not surprising that an Australian working-class man, reflecting all his experience of coming out in a homophobic culture, would remark: “You know, I didn’t really realize what it was to be gay. I mean it’s a bastard of a life.”11

Oppression positions homosexual masculinities at the bottom of a gender hierarchy
among men. Gayness, in patriarchal ideology, is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity, the items ranging from fastidious taste in home decoration to receptive anal pleasure. Hence, from the point of view of hegemonic masculinity, gayness is easily assimilated to femininity. And hence—in the view of some gay theorists—the fecocity of homophobic attacks.

Gay masculinity is the most conspicuous, but it is not the only subordinated masculinity. Some heterosexual men and boys too are expelled from the circle of legitimacy. The process is marked by a rich vocabulary of abuse: wimp, milksop, nerd, turkey, sissy, lily liver, jellyfish, yellowbelly, candy ass, ladfinger, pushover, cookie pusher, cream puff, motherfucker, pantywaist, mother’s boy, four-eyes, ear’ole, dweeb, geek, Milquetoast, Cedric, and so on. Here too the symbolic blurring with femininity is obvious.

Complicity

Normative definitions of masculinity, as I have noted, face the problem that not many men actually meet the normative standards. This point applies to hegemonic masculinity. The number of men rigorously practising the hegemonic pattern in its entirety may be quite small. Yet the majority of men gain from its hegemony, since they benefit from the patriarchal dividend, the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women.

... [A]ccounts of masculinity have generally concerned themselves with syndromes and types, not with numbers. Yet in thinking about the dynamics of society as a whole, numbers matter. Sexual politics is mass politics, and strategic thinking needs to be concerned with where the masses of people are. If a large number of men have some connection with the hegemonic project but do not embody hegemonic masculinity, we need a way of theorizing their specific situation.

This can be done by recognizing another relationship among groups of men, the relationship of complicity with the hegemonic project. Masculinities constructed in ways that realize the patriarchal dividend, without the tensions or risks of being the frontline troops of patriarchy, are complicit in this sense.

It is tempting to treat them simply as slacker versions of hegemonic masculinity—the difference between the men who cheer football matches on TV and those who run out into the mud and the tackles themselves. But there is often something more definite and carefully crafted than that. Marriage, fatherhood and community life often involve extensive compromises with women rather than naked domination or an uncontested display of authority. A great many men who draw the patriarchal dividend also respect their wives and mothers, are never violent towards women, do their accustomed share of the housework, bring home the family wage, and can easily convince themselves that feminists must be bra-burning extremists.

Marginalization

Hegemony, subordination and complicity, as just defined, are relations internal to the gender order. The interplay of gender with other structures such as class and race creates further relationships between masculinities.

Historical Dynamics, Violence and Crisis Tendencies

To recognize gender as a social pattern requires us to see it as a product of history, and also as a producer of history. ... I define[d] gender practice as ontic-formative, as constituting reality, and it is a crucial part of this idea that social reality is dynamic in
time. We habitually think of the social as less real than the biological, what changes as less real than what stays the same. But there is a colossal reality to history. It is the modality of human life, precisely what defines us as human. No other species produces and lives in history, replacing organic evolution with radically new determinants of change.

To recognize masculinity and femininity as historical, then, is not to suggest they are flimsy or trivial. It is to locate them firmly in the world of social agency. And it raises a string of questions about their historicity.

The structures of gender relations are formed and transformed over time. It has been common in historical writing to see this change as coming from outside gender—from technology or class dynamics, most often. But change is also generated from within gender relations. The dynamic is as old as gender relations. It has, however, become more clearly defined in the last two centuries with the emergence of a public politics of gender and sexuality.

With the women’s suffrage movement and the early homophile movement, the conflict of interests embedded in gender relations became visible. Interests are formed in any structure of inequality, which necessarily defines groups that will gain and lose differently by sustaining or by changing the structure. A gender order where men dominate women cannot avoid constituting men as an interest group concerned with defence; and women as an interest group concerned with change. This is a structural fact, independent of whether men as individuals love or hate women, or believe in equality or abjection, and independent of whether women are currently pursuing change.

To speak of a patriarchal dividend is to raise exactly this question of interest. Men gain a dividend from patriarchy in terms of honour, prestige, and the right to command. They also gain a material dividend. In the rich capitalist countries, men’s average incomes are approximately double women’s average incomes. (The more familiar comparisons, of wage rates for full-time employment, greatly understate gender differences in actual incomes.) Men are vastly more likely to control a major block of capital as chief executive of a major corporation, or as direct owner. For instance, of 55 US fortunes above $1 billion in 1992, only five were mainly in the hands of women—and all but one of those as a result of inheritance from men.

Men are much more likely to hold state power: for instance, men are ten times more likely than women to hold office as a member of parliament (an average across all countries of the world). Perhaps men do most of the work? No: in the rich countries, time-budget studies show women and men work on average about the same number of hours in the year. (The major difference is in how much of this work gets paid.)

Given these facts, the ‘battle of the sexes’ is no joke. Social struggle must result from inequalities on such a scale. It follows that the politics of masculinity cannot concern only questions of personal life and identity. It must also concern questions of social justice.

A structure of inequality on this scale, involving a massive dispossession of social resources, is hard to imagine without violence. It is, overwhelmingly, the dominant gender who hold and use the means of violence. Men are armed far more often than women. Indeed under many gender regimes women have been forbidden to bear or use arms (a rule applied, astonishingly, even within marriage). But the ideal definitions of femininity (dependence fearfulness) amount to a cultural disarmament that may be quite as effective as the physical kind. Domestic violence cases often find abused women, physically able to look after themselves, who have accepted the abusers’ definitions of themselves as incompetent and helpless.14

Two patterns of violence follow from this situation. First, many members of the privileged group use violence to sustain their dominance: intimidation of women ranges across the spectrum (from wolf-whistling in the street, to office harassment, to rape and domestic assault, to murder by a woman’s patriarchal ‘owner,’ such as a separated husband). Physical attacks are commonly accompanied by verbal abuse of women (whores and bitches, in recent popular music that recommends beating women). Most men do not attack or harass women; but those who do are unlikely to think themselves deviant. On the contrary they usually feel they are entirely justified, that they are exercising a right. They are authorized by an ideology of supremacy.

Second, violence becomes important in gender politics among men. Most episodes of major violence (counting military combat, homicide and armed assault) are transactions among men. Terror is used as a means of drawing boundaries and making exclusions, for example, in heterosexual violence against gay men. Violence can become a way of claiming or asserting masculinity in group struggles. This is an explosive process when an oppressed group gains the means of violence—as witness the levels of violence among black men in contemporary South Africa and the United States. The youth gang violence of inner-city streets is a striking example of the assertion of marginalized masculinities against other men, continuous with the assertion of masculinity in sexual violence against women.17

Violence can be used to enforce a reactionary gender politics, as in the recent fire bombings and murders of abortion service providers in the United States. It must also be said that collective violence among men can open possibilities for progress in gender relations. The two global wars this century produced important transitions in women’s employment, shook up gender ideology, and accelerated the making of homosexual communities.

Violence is part of a system of domination, but is at the same time a measure of its imperfection. A thoroughly legitimate hierarchy would have less need to intimidate. The scale of contemporary violence points to crisis tendencies (to borrow a term from Jurgen Habermas) in the modern gender order.

The concept of crisis tendencies needs to be distinguished from the colloquial sense in which people speak of a ‘crisis of masculinity’. As a theoretical term ‘crisis’ presupposes a coherent system of some kind, which is destroyed or restored by the outcome of the crisis. Masculinity, as the argument so far has shown, is not a system in that sense. It is, rather, a configuration of practice within a system of gender relations. We cannot logically speak of the crisis of a configuration; rather we might speak of its disruption or its transformation. We can, however, logically speak of the crisis of a gender order as a whole, and of its tendencies towards crisis.18

Such crisis tendencies will always implicate masculinities, though not necessarily by disrupting them. Crisis tendencies may, for instance, provoke attempts to restore a dominant masculinity. Michael Kimmel has pointed to this dynamic in turn-of-the-century
United States society, where fear of the women's suffrage movement played into the cult of the outdoorsman. Klaus Theweleit in *Male Fantasies* traced the more savage process that produced the sexual politics of fascism in the aftermath of the suffrage movement and German defeat in the Great War. More recently Women's Liberation and defeat in Vietnam have stirred new cults of true masculinity in the United States, from violent 'adventure' movies such as the *Rambo* series, to the expansion of the gun cult and what William Gibson in a frightening recent study has called 'paramilitary culture'.

To understand the making of contemporary masculinities, then, we need to map the crisis tendencies of the gender order. This is no light task! ...

The vast changes in gender relations around the globe produce ferociously complex changes in the conditions of practice with which men as well as women have to grapple. No one is an innocent bystander in this arena of change. We are all engaged in constructing a world of gender relations. How it is made, what strategies different groups pursue, and with what effects, are political questions. Men no more than women are chained to the gender patterns they have inherited. Men too can make political choices for a new world of gender relations. Yet those choices are always made in concrete social circumstances, which limit what can be attempted; and the outcomes are not easily controlled.

To understand a historical process of this depth and complexity is not a task for *a priori* theorizing. It requires concrete study; more exactly, a range of studies that can illuminate the larger dynamic ...

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Notes


9. I would emphasize the dynamic character of Gramsci's concept of hegemony, which is not the functionalist theory of cultural reproduction often portrayed. Gramsci always had in mind a social struggle for leadership in historical change.

10. Wotherspoon 1991 (chapter 3) describes this climate, and discreetly does not mention individuals.


12. See, for instance, the white US families described by Rubin 1976.

13. Staples 1982. The more recent United States literature on black masculinity, e.g., Majors and Gordon 1994, has made a worrying retreat from Staples's structural analysis towards sex role theory; its favoured political strategy, not surprisingly, is counselling programmes to resocialise black youth.