

The Changing Faces of Masculinity

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The problem of change

'One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.' Simone de Beauvoir's insight applies equally well to men: one is not born, but rather becomes a man. Men's bodies become masculine according to the way society interprets them. Dean C. a bus driver we interviewed, put it simply:

'I've always been brought up that the man is the breadwinner and that the man serviced the woman. They had children. She stayed at home and cooked.'

History and anthropology tell us that this familiar, apparently 'natural' arrangement is historically recent and culturally specific. In other times and places the arrangements about work, the family, and economic responsibility are very different. What a man believes to be 'masculine' or 'manly', the way he expresses his sexuality and identity, depend mainly on when and where he was born.

Masculinity, then, is produced by historical processes. To understand the way it works and its effects in the world we must study the way it changes. It can easily be shown that these changes are not trivial. In Renaissance Europe, for instance, the dominant form of masculinity made no sharp distinction between heterosexual pleasure and homosexual pleasure. A powerful man, such as a prince or a famous artist, could and would enjoy

himself both with boys and with women. By the late 19th century the homosexual and heterosexual components had been split apart. The dominant form of masculinity was now defined as strictly heterosexual. 'Homosexual' became the label for a minority whose whole social being was defined as criminal. Oscar Wilde was one of the men whose lives were destroyed in this process.

We are plainly living through another phase of change now, though its shape is not well understood. Since the rise of the new feminism in the early 1970s there has been a good deal of interest in 'men's liberation', masculinity and men's social position. Around 50 books on the subject have been published in English in the last 15 years. Unfortunately the volume of output has not been matched by quality. The research base of most of the 'books about men' is slight. They have also been plagued by theoretical hangovers from a basically conservative sociology of 'roles'. Most authors have taken one dominant form of masculinity for granted, as a definition of the 'male sex role', and have concerned themselves with where the shoe pinches - where men do and don't fit into their 'role'.

As a way of understanding the realities of men's lives, this is very limiting. It stimulates little curiosity about other forms of masculinity, especially those that are marginalised or stigmatised. It plays down the issue of sexual choice; most discussion of 'sex roles' conspicuously avoids the experience of homosexuality. Equally it avoids the issue of social power, whether of men over women or of men over men. In consequence the social acquisition of masculinity is presented as a rather bland process of learning sex role 'norms'.

But consider this account of a boy's first day at secondary school:

'The boarding school master and my mother were there and they handed me over to this guy named Anthony who was a charming young chap in Third Form, good family and all that. Anthony was supposed to show me around and look after me. But as soon as we left the office, it was 'biff bam' and I was hanging upside down by my legs with rope. It was quite cruel actually.'

(Matthew B, student)

Violence is a vivid childhood memory for many men, from all social backgrounds. (It is worth noting that Matthew B came from an affluent background and is talking about an elite private school.) The making of masculinity cannot be understood without taking close account of the patterns of social power.

Power, in turn, cannot be understood abstractly. It is about relationships, and can only be understood by looking at how men live their lives on a practical day-to-day basis in their personal and historical context.

A research project

To improve on the 'sex role' approach we need research methods that are sensitive both to personal and to historical context. One important option is the 'life history' method. Personal histories have been collected by psychologists and sociologists since the time of Freud. They have proved a basic research tool in studying psycho-social issues ranging from the causes of neurosis to the experience of migration.

Our research on changes in masculinity adapted this traditional method in the light of recent work on the theory of gender.⁽¹⁾ Our interviews move through the familiar stages of childhood, adolescence and adulthood. In each stage we raise issues about three key structures of gender: power and authority; the division of labour; and sexuality and emotional attachment. We rarely ask for 'attitudes' or beliefs. Rather the interviews concentrate on a person's practices and day-to-day strategies for dealing with gender issues, both in the workplace and in interpersonal relationships. Gender relations and sexual politics are approached as a 'lived experience'.

This method is intensive compared with paper-and-pencil surveys, so large samples are not possible and a statistical cross-section of a whole population is an unrealistic goal. Instead we have focussed on particular social contexts where conventional models of masculinity are under pressure and the social dynamic of change may be thrown into relief. Most of our interviews have been done among four groups: men in 'new' professions and technical jobs; working-class youth affected by structural unemployment; men involved in the counter-culture or in environmental politics; and men engaged in counter-sexist politics, both heterosexual and homosexual.

Social structure and masculinity

The life-history approach gives abundant evidence of the social pressures operating in childhood. A boy growing up encounters rules, rituals and symbols that define 'masculinity' in its dominant form. Conforming may not be easy. Adam S, now an

architect, offers an early memory:

'How a man throws a ball is different to how a woman throws a ball. I didn't want to throw a ball in front of my Dad because I wouldn't look right. It wouldn't be the way a good strong boy would throw it. And once, I remember, I was brave enough to throw it. And he made fun of me and said I threw it like a girl.'

The insult by Adam's father points directly to the main social basis of the dominant form of masculinity: the subordination of women. In white Australian society (and many others) men are supposed to be stronger and more powerful than women. Broadly, men are supposed to have authority over women. To be 'like a girl' is to be weak, to be in danger, to have a flawed masculinity.

In a patriarchal society, popular culture is permeated by the belief that men are superior to women. The assumption is often unstated or only half conscious, and generally contradicts official, legal and religious declarations of equality. But it is still constantly assumed in practice that men rather than women are the people who matter, as a simple content analysis of the daily newspaper will show. Accordingly, to become a man is to acquire a position of social power. To 'be a man' is to show the qualities needed to sustain power - courage in the face of threat or conflict, command over resources, etc. These qualities define an admired, socially dominant form of masculinity.

But this does not settle the everyday reality of men's lives, for most men can't or won't live according to the ideal pattern. Rather, it defines a basic tension in masculinity. The

tension about power may be built into an individual life, as is clear in the case of Adam S. At a collective level, it marks out relationships between the dominant - better, 'hegemonic' - form of masculinity and less honoured forms. There are subordinated or marginalized kinds of masculinity. In contemporary European cultures these include homosexual men, effeminate heterosexual men, very young men (i.e. boys), and a broader spread of adult men who simply don't live up to the dominant pattern.

Differences in resources or in prestige may become bitter experiences of subordination, even when they are transient. Peter G, a journalist, recalls such an experience at the age of 15:

'I had another scene with a girl at that stage. But she started going with one of the guys there - about 18, and had his own car, his own income and everything ...I don't think my life really started until I started work about the age of 17, and had an income and was independent. That was the first time ever in my life that I felt good. I had a motor-bike, and I had a job, and I had lots of money...and I could get girls.'

In Peter's story the relationship between masculinities is mediated through women. This illustrates a general point. Masculinity never exists by itself. It exists in relation to femininity, in the context of an over-arching structure of gender relations. To understand that structure is a complex proposition. The structure includes - at least - the social organisation of production, the structure of power and authority, and the social organisation of emotion. A recognition that

structural change is important is nevertheless a key to understanding what is happening to masculinity as a form of personal character.

Two men 'in transit'

Let us explore this through two case studies drawn from our 'new professions' group, a journalist and an architect. The changing social organisation of work creates problems for conventional masculinity, for instance about whether a high degree of technical competence can give a livable social identity outside the recognised professions.

Peter G, whose teenage memories were just quoted, started his working life as a wool-classer. The wool industry in Australia has a heavily masculine identity. His new status as an adult man meant a lot to him:

'I went and lived in a tent down at the beach.
...and I had lots of money...and I used to spend about
eighty percent of it on beer.'

But he wanted to get on in the world, and wool-classing was a dead-end job. So he shifted into journalism. He learnt that profession the hard way, starting on country newspapers - being sacked from one for fucking the editor's daughter on the office floor. Peter rose rapidly to become a top reporter/photographer on a metropolitan daily by the time he was 30. He was 'first [cab] off the rank' when a new story broke. He was often sent by his employers across the continent, and was given the most difficult issues, such as gangsterism, to chase up.

He was leading 'a really fast lane kind of life', with a lot

of prestige and a lot of pressure. Suddenly he saw it all as absurd. His technical skills as a journalist had not given him a stable social identity. Indeed, they probably provoked the crisis in his perception of himself. Peter threw in his job, bought a farm on an island, and swept his wife and five children off to a rural idyll:

'We walked out of the hotel at 9 o'clock in the morning, and at 4 o'clock in the afternoon we were standing on a beach watching the plane taxi away. My wife was wearing high heels and a suit, and we waved. We had a truck, and climbed into that, and drove to our little shack. We didn't have any electricity. And that was the beginning of a whole new world.'

Not an easy world, as it turned out. They lost their money in the farm; later set up a health food shop, but that eventually collapsed. The family broke up and Peter found himself living alone in a caravan. He began to wander from household to household, with few possessions or money, 'relishing' his new found freedom. He would get up at 4 in the morning, roll a joint, and go off on an 'adventure' in the bush for a day.

Peter's rejection of mainstream masculinity was itself a masculine gesture, assertive and self-dramatising. He didn't consult his wife and children first. But he has followed through its logic, as far as voluntary poverty. The rural counter-culture, which is strong in his part of the country, provides support for people dropping out of a middle-class lifestyle. It does not provide a clear alternative sexual politics. So Peter is caught in a politics of personal gesture, and remains

emotionally dependent on women. After leaving his wife he moved through a series of short-term relationships, starting a new one as soon as he broke off the last. It is perhaps not surprising that he is now building a nuclear-family household with a second wife.

A second problem in conventional masculinity concerns the convention of 'toughness'. The admired image in Western culture, from John Wayne and Jack Kennedy to Sylvester Stallone, is constructed in such extreme terms that most men cannot live up to it. Tension about this toughness deficit is likely to be at its worst in adolescence and early adulthood. Not by chance, this is the age-group when men are most likely to be killed in car accidents or industrial accidents.

Adam S, whose childhood memory about throwing a ball was quoted above, recalls from his adolescence the moment when he saw himself as having a spoiled masculinity:

'We were running around on the beach, tackling and playing around. And my image, as I looked down at my legs and I saw that my thighs were fat - I was tackling or something - and they'd wobble like jelly. And I'd never noticed them like that before, and that's something I've still got embarrassment about. That also went along with being bigger in the hips than other boys, and smaller in the chest. Made me feel under-confident as a male.'

As this illustrates, the male body is a canvas on which masculine social images are painted. In gender, social relations - such as

dominance between groups of men - operate through body images and bodily responses.

Adam's memory also illustrates the self-criticism that is common among men whose form of masculinity is socially marginalised. He is bisexual, in the sense that he has kept up long-term sexual relations with both men and women.

Being 'bisexual' is not a clear-cut social or personal identity and Adam's picture of gender is strikingly ambivalent. He dislikes dominant men, football, motorbikes and the rest of the cult of machismo. But he likes 'big muscly men' as sexual objects and approves of athletics. He admires women, and was introduced to politics and cultural life by women. But he keeps his women lovers in a subordinate place in his private life.

A university-trained expert with a job in a large bureaucracy, Adam's working life is in the mainstream of technological modernism. But his experience of this work is alienating and he finds no personal base nor public identity in his workplace. His response has been to search for meaning and fulfilment in personal relationships, especially relationships that combine sexual excitement with a social or artistic stimulus.

In a very different context, therefore, Adam's practice has something in common with Peter's. Both needed to break with conventional masculinity, Adam because he couldn't begin to inhabit it, Peter because his success in inhabiting it became unbearable. Both moved towards a private resolution of the tension. And both are dissatisfied with the result, without having any serious alternative in view.

Sources of change

What are the prospects of a major alternative emerging? The 'men's movement' of the 1970s proclaimed a great transformation, but had no clear idea of where it might come from. Our research, taken together with recent theoretical work, points to several distinct sources of change in masculinity. They do not necessarily move in the same direction.

The first source is tension within the 'social construction' of masculinity. Contradictions emerge in relation to power, in the realm of production, and in sexuality.

The dominant form of masculinity in Western culture embodies men's social power over women. It emphasises force, authority, aggressiveness. But to sustain this cultural ideal, the majority of men as actual living people must be put down. Some fail to match up: their legs are too flabby, their chests not hairy enough, their glance insufficiently flinty. Others are actively oppressed, gay men and effeminate men most obviously. Gay men are still sometimes beaten to death on the streets of a city like Sydney.

Rabbit S - young, working class, unemployed, and as tough as they come - ran into this contradiction full on:

Gays I have trouble putting up with. That's half the reason I don't see my brother as much as I'd like. I used to go up to the Cross and poofteer-bash and all the rest of it.* When my brother turned queer I ended

* "The Cross" (King's Cross), the main red-light district in Sydney, borders on the main social centre for Sydney's gay men. "Poofteer-bashing" means gang attacks on gay men.

up stopping it anyway. So long as they stay out of my way. I just have to remember he's my brother first, a queer second, makes it a bit easier to handle.

The economy produces another contradiction. Traditional masculinity is constructed around traditional authority: landlord over peasant, boss over worker, husband over wife, old over young. The restless development of capitalism disrupts such authority as it disrupts all other cultural patterns. Even in the heartland of industry, and within the ruling class, traditional authority is challenged by technocracy, the rough old-style manager by the smooth Harvard MBA. Clyde W, a computer systems analyst, pokes fun at his managers' ignorance:

Like this computer for example, they [managers] have no idea what they are going to get. Actually I had very little problem persuading them because they don't know what I am persuading. They said 'why have you made these decisions' - and I had most of the answers. It's probably not good to have all the answers; they want to know that they have done something.

But the rise of technical rationality challenges patriarchy itself. The subordination of women is economically irrational. It means a loss of labour and of talent, as 'equal opportunity' campaigns in the rich countries point out, and as development agencies argue in the third world. The computer industry itself, highly sexist though its ideology promotes pure rationality, shows this contradiction in a strong form.

A third contradiction arises in sexuality. The dominant form of sexuality is heterosexual, focussed on the genitals and

on erotic performance. Greg B, another computer specialist, reflects wryly on his sexual life in these terms:

I fell flat on my face...not being successful in getting it up, so to speak, because my mind was just turning me off. It's difficult to know if I'm going to perform properly or not. If it doesn't happen, it doesn't happen. It doesn't happen frequently. And they say, 'What's wrong'? And you go, 'Oh well, I'm not at my peak at the moment'.

The hegemonic form of sexuality has been socially constructed by tabooing other forms of sexuality. But as Freud showed, what is tabooed is not abolished. On the contrary it is likely to be given new symbolic and emotional power. Homosexuality haunts the masculine world, as endless jokes about football teams illustrate. Beyond flashy genital performance is a world faintly sensed by many men and actively explored by some (such as Peter G) of relaxed, mutual, whole-body pleasure. In this direction (though very much in the future) lies a form of sexuality in which gender would cease to be one's social fate and would become mainly a means of play.

These contradictions are emerging within the structure of masculinity. There are also pressures from outside. The most obvious is the demand for change from women. 'Women's liberation' as a political movement has lost some impetus. But modern feminism must not be underestimated as a cultural force. Every man we interviewed has been conscious of it. Some are receptive and some hostile, all feel the mobilisation of women as a presence. In the lives of some men it is a decisive presence.

A case in point is Barry R, who describes his encounter with feminism thus:

'I didn't really understand very much about sexism, like I just sort of knew there was something wrong about sexism... And I read some pretty heavy stuff which made me feel terrible about being male, for a long time. And I remember I found it really hard because there were these conflicting needs. I needed sex and I needed relationships, and then again I needed to set aside my ideals and my own sexism, and I couldn't reconcile these. So I went through lots and lots of guilt.'

Guilt does seem to be a common experience for men who take feminism seriously; it can be paralyzing, as it was for a time for Barry R. But he has worked through it to some purpose, and is exploring some new paths in his own life; among other things he has taken the unusual step, for a man, of training as a nurse.

General economic change also puts pressure on masculinity, as might be expected from the importance of 'work' in most men's self-images. There are now 30 million officially unemployed in the OECD countries, and much more hidden unemployment than that. Traditional work-based masculinity can survive quite radical changes in technology, as Cynthia Cockburn's wonderful study of British printing workers, Brothers, has shown.⁽²⁾ But structural change is now eliminating whole industries and categories of workers. What does it mean to be brought up a 'breadwinner', as Dean C was, if the bread is not there to be won? Young working-class men like Rabbit S - for all the media hype about

unemployed managers, unemployment is mainly concentrated in working-class areas - face a lifetime of at best intermittent casual employment.

Strategies

The pressures just sketched will certainly generate change in and around masculinity, but they do not by themselves settle the shape that change will take. That is a matter of social action, of collective choices about strategy.

Among those men who have become conscious of the politics of masculinity, the main reaction has been to try to re-make themselves in a new image, moving as far away as possible from mainstream 'macho' images.

This has meant new codes of conduct: leaving space for women, not pushing for control within families, not demanding the initiative in sex. It has meant trying to build new relationships: caring for children, opening up emotionally to other men. It has meant shifting the focus of life from careers and money to human relationships, from the mechanical world to the natural world, from computers and cars to people and trees. Peter G is one of the men who have consciously taken that track.

This effort is important in producing new models of masculinity, showing how men might live more peaceably with each other and with women. But there are also dangers in this strategy. Both Peter G and Adam S became inward-looking and individualised. Even a shared politics, if focussed on 'masculinity' alone, can go astray. Parts of the 'men's movement' come to the quite false conclusion that men and women

were 'equally oppressed' by their sex roles. Changing masculinity in these terms may be therapeutic and comforting but does nothing about the issue of equality.

In the final analysis it is equality that is central. In an 'advanced' country like Australia, the average income of a woman is 45% of the average income of a man. All the major centres of power are substantially controlled by men: the state, finance, media, industry, unions. That is broadly true across the world. Women are less likely to own their own houses or land, are more likely to be in poverty, and rarely control major institutions.

To reconstruct masculinity in a way that acknowledges its social dimension means men tackling those kinds of inequality. Partly it means quite conventional politics, in unions, parties, and workplaces. On the other hand it means an unconventional politics of households. Especially it means changing the mundane, and often unspoken, arrangements that require women to do most of the housework and virtually all the care of young children.

This is a collective enterprise more than an individual one. As it develops, the diverse sources of change in masculinity may become an asset rather than a source of confusion. For it won't be a change brought about by dramatic revolution. Rather it will mean complex alliances, many small gains and losses, twists and turns. It will be important for different groups of men to learn from each others' experience, as well as from the experience of women. Attempts to share experience, like this issue of N.I., are a hopeful sign.

1. See R.W. Connell, Gender and Power Polity Press, 1987.

2. C. Cockburn, Brothers, Pluto Press, 1983.