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Men After Feminism: What's Left to Say?

Just for a while, it came as a surprise when the western world discovered that men overall, men in general, might have gender troubles of their own, even the most confident and authoritative of them. Having escaped exhaustive scrutiny for so long, as men probed and disputed the nature and complaints of women, a new social agenda began to resituate the usual agents of knowledge as themselves one of its most restless and demanding objects. To ask the question, 'what's wrong with men?' was definitely one of the many reverberations of feminism, when it re-emerged as a movement just over a generation ago. Once the question hovered, irretrievably, in the public arena, however, there was only one way for men to handle it. They would have to address it themselves. This meant that the initial publication of *Slow Motion*, in 1990, was in many ways propitious. 'Men's Studies', had just been launched, as ever, most visibly in the USA, with the study of men and their lives out in the open, on the move as never before.[i] Where are we now, and what is left to say? Oddly, after so much ink has been spilt on the problem of men, and masculinities, the questions in the popular domain have only intensified. The quarrels between different authorities addressing them remain as deep as ever.

If we are to track what has happened to men and masculinity over the last two decades we will therefore need to embark on more than one journey. The cascade of books that appeared on the topic during this time have now matched the sudden

outpouring of writing and research on women and femininity immediately preceding them, in many ways mirroring as well as partially replacing them. In both cases, the development of differing theoretical trajectories in academic scholarship often diverged from the parallel discussion of men and their apparently mounting difficulties occurring in the public domain. Internationally, throughout the 1990s, there was an unprecedented interest in men's lives, as economic and other social adjustments began to impact on specific groups of men, some of it the effects of so much change already underway in the world of women. In scholarly pursuits, men's new visibility was quickly an opening for detecting ambiguity, complexity, mutability in notions of 'masculinity', while in popular culture, a more concrete language of 'crisis' was widely used. In public culture, men emerged in the 1990s as society's new victims, portrayed as suffering from falling levels of confidence, losing out as they journeyed through life, in schools, jobs, personal relationships, overall health and well-being. It was now men who were popularly addressed as disadvantaged, every step of the way.[ii] More optimistically, this was also a time when we saw popular images of 'softer' aspects of 'masculinity', whether in the form of the 'new man' (even if regularly an object of media suspicion, when not a target for ongoing derision), alongside more positive backing for notions of new, more engaged fathering.

The connection between scholarly manoeuvres and popular concerns is that each reflects a world in which, after feminism and (quite independently driven) other changes in the workforce and households, men's once unquestioned legitimacy as the ruling sex could no longer be seen as inevitable. However, to query men's birthright as the literal 'master' sex does not, on its own, either overturn the habitual ways in which men have dominated women, or provide images of the future for either sex. In 2000, the best known psychiatrist in the United Kingdom, Anthony Clare, officially endorsed the notion of 'masculinity in crisis', arguing that men were now in danger of becoming 'redundant': 'At the beginning of the twenty-first century it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that men are in serious trouble'.[iii] Yet, if men are becoming redundant, those in charge of managing their fate now, with only minor changes from before, remain men themselves. Globally, men occupy all but 10 per cent of cabinet seats, as well as key positions in all international agencies.[iv] Moreover, to signal a point I will return to, the dawning of the 21st century has come with prolonged warfare on the global agenda, accompanying and extending the growth of religious fundamentalism, nationalism and ethnic strife. These are all forces trailing primordial images and practices of male toughness, with aggressive machismo the inevitable display behind military invasion and conquest. Whatever is new in the study of men and masculinity, therefore, can only arrive fraught with contradiction.

Popular Perceptions of Crisis

Indisputably, the main shift that has occurred since I wrote *Slow Motion* has been the public perception of crisis in the lives of boys and men, its description growing more alarmed year on year throughout the nineties and continuing to the present moment. Regular coverage now portrays men's ongoing higher incidences of suicide, alcoholism, drug addiction, serious accidents, cardiovascular disease and significantly lower life expectancies when compared with women. Indeed, at every age, widespread demographic studies have been undertaken to reveal men's poorer health overall and higher risk of death relative to women.[v] By 2003, the annual educational survey of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) confirmed that young women were achieving better results than young men in every developed country around the world, adding that this accompanied a significant shift in women's expectations and achievements, with 15-year-old girls more confident than boys about getting high-income jobs.[vi] [vii]After feminism, it would seem, things have never been the same for men. From the boardroom to the bedroom, women have not only been found sitting at the highest table, if in rather small numbers, but perhaps initiating the action. Meanwhile, male managers, while still in fact overwhelmingly monopolizing power and influence, say they feel 'besieged' on all sides by economic changes and new competition from younger women, as well as from other men.[viii]

The contemporary perceptions of crisis in men and masculinity have triggered regular attempts to tackle the problem. In 1998 the Australian government set aside one million dollars for setting up a telephone help line for men in crisis, promising to assist up to 10,000 men annually deal with family and relationship problems.[ix] In Britain, the official reaction to perceptions of male troubles has been more piecemeal, but no less publicly deplored. David Blunkett, when Minister of Education, announced urgent action to boost boy's performance in schools when girls outperformed boys in A-Level examinations for the first time ever in 2000.[x] Various New Labour, 'New Deal' programmes had already been set up with government funding. In response to evidence that women in the workforce had begun to outnumber men from the close of the 1990s (by a minute fraction), they primarily targeted different groups of men.[xi] There has also been regular funding for research into possibilities for changing men's health patterns, especially in relation to sexuality and HIV/AIDS.[xii] In the USA, in 2001, Jane Fonda, donated twelve and half million dollars from her personal fortune for the establishment of a Centre for Gender and Education at Harvard University, telling the *New York Times* that she hoped this would help undo the damage inflicted on young boys by America's schools, where 'in many ways men suffer more' from their traditional sex roles: 'The damage done to boys as a result of these gender strictures is very profound.'[xiii]

However, the outcome of these projects may prove limited, when the disjunction between notions of men as the dominant sex and the realities of many men's lives has only a tangential connection with either the impact of feminism or the greater assertiveness and confidence of women today. The future facing both men and women in the 21st century is one where both jobs and the stability of family life are far from guaranteed, while the increasing employment patterns for women reflect distinct market demands, especially the fast growth in the service industry and the expansion of poorly paid, part-time work.[xiv] Nor has the consensus in public discussion that boys and men are in trouble generated any sort of agreement over what to do about it. One line of thought, for instance, promoted by the Harvard psychiatrist William Pollack in his bestseller, *Real Boys* (2000), in line with his British counterpart Anthony Clare, argues that men are 'in a desperate crisis' because they are still trying to conform to rigid, now outmoded, codes of traditional manhood.[xv] His fellow American psychologist, the renegade feminist scholar, Christina Hoff Sommers, maintains the opposite in her book, *The War Against Boys* (2000).[xvi] There we find the equally popular view that boys are suffering because our culture seeks to 'feminize' them, disparaging and devaluing manhood. In the former we are encouraged to solve men's psychological problems by reinforcing new forms of personal expressiveness, in the latter by offering models for 'manly instruction'. I wrote *Slow Motion* as an intervention in the debate over the nature and effect of

shifting relations between women and men in the face of feminist and other

challenges. More than fifteen years later, the debate rages more strongly than ever,

leaving my reflections on the dilemmas of either trying to reform *or* to reaffirm our

dominant conceptions of masculinity perhaps as pertinent as ever.

Between Men and Feminism

Unsurprisingly, many feminists were suspicious of the shifting public gaze onto

men's problems in the 1990s. This was not just because it often sidelined concern

with the specific pressures and anxieties still confronting women and girls, most

prominent in the heyday of feminist campaigning in the 1970s and '80s. It was also

seeing male gender issues routinely packaged as boys 'losing out' to girls, ignoreing

the overwhelmingly weightier contrasts between different groups of boys. In one

characteristic illustration from the UK, David Blunkett, pronouncing on the

educational failure and low self-esteem of (some) boys, attributed it to schools

encouraging 'too much equality', too much 'aggressive assertiveness', in girls. This

government minister of the day even thought it wise to warn women, especially

'young women', that unless things change 'there will be a very substantial backlash

from males'.[xvii] His menacing response was issued when, for the first time ever, less

than 1% of girls out-performed boys at A-levels in 1999 (by a mere 0.6%). More

generally, such spurious comparisons serve primarily to obscure the sources of

trouble, when most boys are neither 'losing out' nor 'failing'. They are doing better

than ever before at school, and even better again as they move from school to university, or into careers. Moreover, there is nothing at all new in the educational failure of working class and certain ethnic minority boys, whose alienation in school has always accompanied the assertion of a reactive form of rebellious bravado. As Michèle Cohen notes, the question that needs to be asked is not 'Why are boys now underachieving?', but rather why it is that 'boy's underachievement has now become an object of concern.'[xviii] Sadly, there is nothing new, either, in blaming women, in this case girls, and feminist-inspired teachers, for male problems, now that young women, overall, are not falling behind boys quite as early on as they once did.

When we look thoughtfully at the evidence usually offered for the crisis in masculinity today, we quickly decipher a picture in which all the most significant differences on display are differences between men themselves rather than between men and women. Thus, it is *particular* groups of men, especially unemployed, unskilled and unmarried men, who have far higher mortality and illness rates when compared with other groups of men.[xix] As with educational failure, class, ethnicity and 'race', not gender, are the major predictors of unemployment and crime. Unemployment is the common condition of the overwhelming majority of men who commit serious offences, while boys in caring, non-violent households, in non-violent neighbourhoods, are hardly more likely to be violent than girls from similar backgrounds.[xx] The destructive consequences of inequalities and differences between

men and their contrasting milieus do have a serious gender dimension, but it is one internal to 'masculinity' itself, the product of the toxic effects of boys and men anxiously comparing themselves and competing with each other to show that they are still the 'winners'. Instead of tacking the problems of masculinity, as such, the media packaging of research encouraged only the deceptive contrasts between men and women we saw above. 'Clever Girls', and the attention they receive from feminist influenced teachers, the BBC announced in the mid-1990s, create the problem of 'Lost Boys'. In its 'in-depth' reflection on 'The problem of Co-Education', we were told: 'Success for girls may now be being matched by failure for boys'.[xxi] The significant point for feminists, of course, is that it is only when gender contrasts appear in ways which seem to question traditional assumptions that men should be seen to be the dominant sex that media attention chooses to focus on them at all.

Not only were many feminists critical of the skewed media focus on masculinity, but also some were apprehensive about the concurrent growth of masculinity studies in higher education. They worried that those who helped promote the theoretical shift from Women's to Gender Studies were encouraging men to occupy the institutional space they had fought so hard to create just over two decades ago, threatening its evolving women-centred outlook and epistemology.[xxii] This is, of course, just what I myself had done, and was criticised for doing, in writing *Slow Motion*, thereby emphasising the importance of studying men's lives and the

multifarious provenance of 'masculinity'. Do 'masculinity studies' appropriate feminist scholarship, resituating men the new authorities on gender matters, making men rather than women the latest victims of normative masculinity? Yes, according to the U.S. literary critic, Sally Robinson, who reports that when teaching gender courses her male students see their own interest in masculinity as at variance with feminist scholarship and, indeed, female lecturers. Men nowadays, she argues, tend to be seen as the proper authorities for theorizing masculinity, despite a rejection of notions of direct 'experience' as the only grounding for research and pedagogy. [xxiii] In a report from another US campus, women teachers were apparently seen as more biased and polemical than men when addressing gender matters.[xxiv]

Without wishing to deny the routine sexism that most likely subtends these reports, I remain altogether more welcoming of male gender theorists. From the pioneering work of sociologists such as Bob Connell (now known as Raewyn Connell), Michael Kimmel, Michael Kaufman, Jeff Hearn or Michael Messner, to the recent semiotic forays of Fred Pfeil, Calvin Thomas, Joseph Boone or John Beynon, the focus of most of the scholarly work on masculinity has been attentive to the oppressive nature of dominant conceptions of masculinity on women and subordinated groups of men, even while noting their historically located ambiguities, turbulence and transition.[xxv] 'How can you trust groups of men not to repeat the old order, or not to erase women altogether in forming their own cosy communities?',

Boone asked, in the book he co-edited, the year *Slow Motion* was published.[xxvi] His question already challenges those men's networks and movements dedicated to 'Saving the Male', the largest of them born and flourishing in his own backyard, the USA, from the early 1990s.

The best known movements committed to healing men kicked off with Robert Bly's primarily middle-class, white Mythopoetic Movement, seeking to recuperate the ancient power of 'deep masculinity'. His book, *Iron John,* published in 1990, remained a bestseller in the USA for over a year, offering a therapeutic solution for helping men to feel more in touch with their 'deep masculinity', their suppressed masculine heritage.[xxvii] This was followed by the staging of the Black Million Man March on Washington in 1995, a gathering at least twice the size of the historic Martin Luther King march three decades earlier. 1995 was also the year the somewhat more mixed-race Christian Promise Keepers was launched, as another movement for reaffirming a more caring, responsible patriarchal paternalism, gathering over three million followers by the close of the decade.[xxviii] In the face of movements wanting to separate out men's issues from women's, usually wanting to overlook, if not refurbish, men's historic power over women, masculinity theorists have for the most part been critically interrogating the nature of these recent forms of male bonding. They should be seen, in my view, as legitimizing feminist concerns, not undermining them.[xxix] When the solidarities, conflicts and inequalities between

men, as well as their articulations of inner desires and confusion, all impact upon men's complex relations with women, the place of men and masculinity studies is surely best negotiated from *within* feminist pedagogy and projects, rather than defensively rebuffed.

Better targets for feminist resentment are those academics in the social sciences and humanities who, after all this time, either pay little or no attention to gender issues, or perhaps disregard if not disdain women's concerns, when focussing on men. In her book, *Cool Men and the Second Sex* (2003), Susan Fraiman, for instance, detects a casual disparagement of women, accompanying extreme ambivalence towards feminism in many cutting-edge literary scholars today. Fraiman's targets are those doyens of cultural studies she sees endorsing the 'coolest', most undomesticated forms of masculinity, as they confidently apply the tools of post-structuralist critical theory to their enjoyment of the heroic alienation or frenzied violence displayed by men in much popular culture. Her worries today update those expressed by feminist theorists over a decade ago, such as Tanya Modleski and Biddy Martin, fearing that the shift from feminist and lesbian studies to what they saw as the gender neutrality often characterising deconstruction and queer theory would lead to an erasure of women as the object of critical focus, replaced by a fondness for embracing new, proliferating images of sexual and gender dissidence. [xxx]

However, it is not so much the attention that has been paid to newly affirmed

gay, ethnic or other dissident masculinities in the 1990s that worries the feminist cultural critic, Sally Robinson (who, like Modleski and Fraiman, is based in the US academy), but rather the reverse. In *Marked Men*, she explores the contemporary cultural foregrounding of the heterosexual 'wounded white male' who, now that he is no longer the un-gendered, 'unmarked sex', is enthusiastically portrayed as the latest victim, assaulted on all sides by feminism and similar sinister external forces. Robinson surveys the widely acclaimed novels of writers such as John Updike and Phillip Roth, seeing them as complicit with an agenda aimed at supplanting the political criticism of men's continuing social dominance overall with personalized accounts of their sense of emasculation as individuals, in recent, less secure times.[xxxi] Similar displacements, as she notes, could be seen in many of the most sophisticated Hollywood films from the 1990s, typified by Pat Conroy's *The Prince of Tides* (1991) and Joel Schumacher's *Falling Down* (1993), which also condense the exploration of cultural shifts and falling living standards into a focus on personal crisis in men's lives. As others have noted, male power can be consolidated through cycles of crisis and resolution, enabling men to deal with the threat of female power by absorbing and appropriating it.

Discursive Freedoms, Gender Mobility

I wrote *Slow Motion* at the close of the 1980s with several goals in mind. The book had, first of all, a specific political agenda. Illustrating that men can and do change in

reaction to cultural forces, I aimed to explore the complexly layered impediments, as well as the possible incentives, that exist for gaining men's support for feminist goals. Given the divisions within feminism, I identified those goals as loosely as possible with the most open and practical ways of encouraging men's commitment to gender justice and social equality more generally (both interpersonally and within institutional sites), as well as with feminist efforts to understand and eradicate men's much greater, if far from uniform, perpetration of violence and coercion across the cultural spectrum. Though in no way reducing to it, the book's political project could not be separated from its second, equally knotty task of trying to provide adequate analytic tools for addressing the psychological, social and linguistic domain of masculinity, confronting its definitive symbolic primacy in the phallocentric grounding of sexual difference. This theoretical goal would need to encompass why men were everywhere emerging as the newly troubled sex, even as they remained, the world over, the most powerful one.

Many of men's dilemmas, however, are not so hard to fathom. Since all the linguistic codes, cultural imagery and social relations for representing the ideals of 'manliness', or what is termed 'normative masculinity', symbolize power, rationality, assertiveness, invulnerability, it is hardly surprising that men, individually, should exist in perpetual fear of being unmanned. Masculinity, as historical researchers have been exploring, has always been crisis ridden, although the social expression of

men's vulnerabilities would become more prominent at certain times, in certain contexts, than others. Surveying the creation of modern masculinity in Europe over the last hundred years and more, the impressive work of the late Jewish, German-born, American gay historian, George Mosse, illustrates that its ruling ideals of a strong, fearless, muscularly embodied manhood, were always under threat. Normative masculinity was regularly seen as undermined in panics over effeminacy, its survival threatened by the presence of sexual deviancy (especially homosexuality), gypsies, vagrants and Jews.[xxxii] Michael Kimmel provides much the same overview, without quite the same historical specificity, in his book, *Manhood in America*.[xxxiii] As I argue throughout this book, panics over effeminacy were pervasive because men's self-image could never exist in isolation from women, from the 'femininity' it had, definitively, to exclude. That self-image needed to be further buttressed by the presence of other subordinated, or marginalized, groups of men, those it also depended upon to define its strength against. *After* the ongoing challenges of feminism, *after* the increasingly confident resistance of an expanding array of sexual dissidents, *after* the battles of racialized and ethnic minorities confronting enduring cultural disparagement and exploitation (in all its mutating viciousness), we can only expect to find anxiety and insecurity shadowing the symbolic birthright of the straight, white, male.

Surveying the existing writing on masculinity from historical, sociological and psychological sources, *Slow Motion* theorized men's possession of 'masculinity' as a culturally variable condition, which psychically was so often at least partially at odds with itself – as any life histories read through a Freudian filter highlight. Inspecting men's differing investments in normative masculinity, or their challenges to its precepts (sometimes intentional, often unavoidable), I saw possibilities for a degree of optimism in certain men's own thoughtful questioning of notions of sexual difference and dominance. I still do. Nevertheless, I was mindful of the ways in which such questioning of normative masculinity, along with efforts to 'reform' men's ways by persuading them to let go of the restrictions (and the prerogatives) of orthodox manhood, might merely dent rather than dismantle the recurring symbolic or structural repositioning of men as the dominant sex. However weakened one minute, there is always scope for recuperation the next minute, for those used to occupying the dominant position in any complex hegemonic structure, whether in the gender domain, or any other entrenched hierarchy. One major obstacle is that the very men who might seem to have most to gain by distancing themselves from masculinity's conformist competitive strivings for dominance are the very individuals whose daily indignities makes the unreliable promises of manhood the more seductively compulsive.

These contradictory forces were built into my analysis throughout this book, as I tried to highlight the recurrently paradoxical and fraught nature of men's attachment to, conflicts with, or selective rejections of normative masculinity, however close to or distanced they might be from Western ideals of manhood. Incongruity and doubt could be all too easily exposed in men's self-presentations of manhood, their assertive performances of masculinity, even – perhaps especially – when surveying its most determined Western exemplars, from Papa Hemingway to Norman Mailer or Sylvester Stallone. But in the late 1980s, I had yet to see where deploying the full armoury of post-structuralism's stress on the inevitable plurality and instability of meaning could lead. Throughout the 1990s divisions deepened within feminist scholarship and the related academic milieu, as those who came to be known as 'postmodern' feminists, primarily interested in language, discourse and its deconstruction, distanced themselves from the earlier seventies emphasis on social and economic concerns, tied in with cultural analysis.[xxxiv]

Once 'masculinity' was seen as culturally contingent, with men's confident possession of it apparently in need of constant verification, new forms subversive semiotics could arise. In particular, following Judith Butler's appropriation of diverse poststructuralist positions for rearticulating feminist frameworks, such moves began to flourish after my book was published, with the rapid growth of a deconstructive, 'queer methodology' throughout 1990s.[xxxv] Exposing the linguistic mobility, or

performativity, of gender categories, the human body was now seen as acquiring its sexed markings only through the range of discourses available for assigning significance to a definitive range of activities of particular types of bodies, leaving unmarked or unmentionable other activities of those same bodies. On this perspective, bodies became newly permeable, suggesting possibilities for observing, or imagining, situations where there was no necessary connection between masculinity and men, or femininity and women. Before writing *Gender Trouble*, Butler would later confide, she had spent her evenings in the in gay bars of the USA, surveying men in drag: '…it quickly dawned on me that some of these so-called men could do femininity much better than I ever could, ever wanted to, ever would. And so I was confronted by the transferability of the attribute.'[xxxvi]

In Butler's deconstructive analysis, representations, however seemingly fixed, could be conceived as 'open to significant rearticulations and transformations under the pressure of social practices of various kinds'. [xxxvii] Along these lines, an array of 'queer theorists' began celebrating the subversive possibilities for exposing the artificiality or constructedness of oppositional gender or sexual markings, delineations which, as again Butler emphasised, leaned, first and foremost on the active/passive binary (or 'heterosexual matrix') for distinguishing male from female performance in the consummatory hetero/sex act. Another prominent exponent of queer theory, Eve Sedgwick, suggested in the mid-1990s that what we now need to

do is to question the assumption that everything that seems distinctive about men can be classified as masculinity, or that everything which can be said about masculinity 'pertains in the first place to men'. 'As a woman', she wrote, 'I am a consumer of masculinities, but I am not more so than men are; and, like men, I as a woman am also a producer of masculinities, and a performer of them.'[xxxviii]

A few years later, Judith Halberstam published a book on 'female masculinity', tracing it back to the 'female husband' and the 'androgyne' of old, seeing it in the more familiar 'tomboy', 'butch dyke' or 'lesbian boy', today. As an alternative form of masculinity, detached from actual men, queer theorists saw such hybrid identities as one important way of rethinking oppressive aspects of normative masculinity, undermining the traditions in which it still conjures up 'a naturalized relation between maleness and power'.[xxxix] Here, however, the performative destabilization of masculinity could be used to provoke dissident recognition, pleasure and desire only, it seemed, within a lesbian space. From this position, Cindy Patton, like Butler and Sedgwick, writing from within the US academy, would celebrate: 'The marvellous revival of butch-femme erotics reminded us that we knew how to turn masculinity on its head, and that we did not have to be afraid of these powerful transgressions … macho dykes in leather', she gleefully continued, 'have undone the phallus with their collection of dildos'.[xl]

More generally, the fashionably 'postmodern' attention to surface, style and

performance in re-staging and de-centring the gendered basis of power can indeed

serve to emphasise the conceptual mutability of gender categories, exposing their

survival as highly regulated performances. Exposing, certainly, but to what extent,

one may want to ask, does such disclosure undo the binary itself, that is, efface

perceptions of masculinity's old entitlements? Today, the most sophisticated cultural

theorists will know how to soften their grip, how to hang loose, in their

identifications; or at least, how to appear to. 'What can antihomophobic straights do

to help make the world "queerer than ever", to help students 'recognize the social

and political realities of male domination and women's oppression'?, US gender

theorist, Calvin Thomas, wonders.[xli] For him, as for others wanting to provide a

critical analysis of dominant masculinity as discursive fiction, haunted by all it tries

to exclude, the answer is to reveal, over and over again, this essential dependence of

the presumed dominant identity on its subordinated outside. To fight against such

hierarchical configurations, one must always be prepared, Thomas insists, to promote

erotic and political connections with others, and with the world, that can be sustained

only if 'identity and identifications are allowed to be put at risk'.[xlii]

Illustrative of this process, the Canadian philosopher, Brian Pronger argues in

'On Your Knees' that men must open up their bodies to the possibility of feminism

by celebrating new forms of <u>receptive</u> desire, displaying their own passageways to

welcome, after Cixous, 'the dwelling place of the other in me'. 'The erotic event of

being willingly…joyfully, penetrated orally and anally', he writes, 'deterritorializes the bodies of [men] and literally opens the gates to the freedom of demasculinized desire'. He sees such enthusiastic bodily surrender as subverting the whole 'point of [phallic] masculinity': which has hitherto been 'to become larger, to take up more space, yield less of it', producing normative masculine desire as not so much heterosexual as quintessentially homophobic. [xliii] It is, for sure, a sentiment that looms large in empirical studies of schoolboys' talk. [xliv]

Such subversive erotics are undoubtedly instructive in their exposure of the charade of 'masculinity's' hard, inviolable male body. However, a straight man can personally ironize and question the fictions of iconic manhood, without either losing the acceptance it bestows on him, or seriously undermining the multiple codings securing its ties to cultural power, phallic assertiveness and 'heteronormativity'. The contemporary preoccupations with gender outlaws in queer theory – female masculinity, cross-dressing, transexuality, and other combined and repackaged gender and sexual signifiers – do tell us something useful about the mutable, mimicable nature of gender codings. Yet, queer theory's energetic reiteration of all the conceivable permutations of masculinity and femininity might also be thought to keep us in thrall to their now ever-expanding pleasures, fears, demands and anxieties. Indeed, female to male transsexual Jay Prosser argues that if we listen carefully to transsexual and transgendered narratives, they tell us more about the continuing

cultural force of feelings of biological embodiedness, and related gender belonging, suggesting 'not the revelation of the fictionality of gendered categories but [rather] the sobering realization of their ongoing foundational power', fictional or not.[xlv]

A more mundane distancing from what is seen as masculinity's imperious constraints is sometimes observed if we turn from theoretical conjecture and autobiographical narrative to some of the recent empirical investigations of young men's self-descriptions. Here, a sardonic, mild detachment from the dominant ideals characterized many men's accounts of themselves, whether through a partial awareness of the ways in which men can suffer from strict adherence to its codes, or simply because a self-parodying playfulness is more likely to be a sign of inner confidence than of inner frailty in one's gender identification. Analysing young men's 'discursive practices' to see how they construct their sense of identity, psychologists Margaret Wetherall and Nigel Edley report that most spoke of their distance from notions of heroic masculinity: about which they were ironic, playful, detached.[xlvi] Moreover, as their own and other research on black male youth indicate, the forms of 'physical toughness' and 'emotional coolness' seen as characterising dominant masculinity are often most pronounced in boys and men most lacking in social power, and help to keep them that way.[xlvii] Yet, in a rather similar study, Stephen Frosh and his fellow researchers interviewing 11 to 14 year-old London schoolboys, illustrated how boys still forcefully police themselves and each other by

teasing banter to be tough (but not too tough); cool (but not stupid); good at sport; not a swat; not 'gay'; not soft. These prevailing notions of hegemonic masculinity are indeed multifaceted and shifting, strongly inflected by class, ethnicity and other affiliations, but none the less their power and pervasiveness hugely <u>narrows</u> the range of permissible boys' behaviour. And this is so, even though boys know that they will fall short of the ideals themselves.[xlviii]

Wetherall and Eagley's account of men's apparent ironic detachment harmonizes with the satirical shamelessness which pervades men's new Lifestyle magazines, such as *Loaded*, written, it declares with a twinkle, 'for men who should know better'. *Loaded* encourages its male consumers to mock traditional masculinity in the very act of flaunting it. Such ambiguity or oscillation thus becomes part of the refashioning of an even more elusive 'masculinity', which can once again present itself as ideologically inscrutable, as British cultural theorist, Bethan Benwell notes, because it is essentially evasive 'about its own definition'.[xlix] Irony enables men strategically to distance themselves from misogyny, homophobia and traditional tough guy ideals, which is sophisticated and positive, while simultaneously providing an outlet for just such reactionary, anti-feminist fantasies, which is not so positive.

Overall, it seems clear from most of the empirical research now available, at least in the richer global metropolis, that we have seen continuing change and growing diversity in the activities, self-perceptions of men over the last few decades.[l]

What is less clear is the impact this diverse self-fashioning has on undermining the phallocentric framing of sexual difference or the structuring of male dominance in the broader societal and international domain. It is easy to locate evidence for gender shifts, especially in employment patterns and personal life. These are balanced by significant continuities: whether at the top echelons of political power, in practices of crime and violence, or the ever-proliferating, if at times deliberately hazy, gender markers in the world of fashion, sport or the background landscape of media images taken as a whole.[li]

Global Constraints and Gender Continuities

Concluding the first edition of my book when I did, at the close of the 1980s, I remained open-minded about the future: welcoming all the changes and growing diversity in men's lives and relations with women and children, noting the resilience, if now less all-encompassing, in patterns of gender hierarchy. Seven years later, in 1997, I still hovered between hope and hesitation, pondering our gendered lives: 'Although it will be many decades before women overturn men's economic privileges', I concluded, the trends in that direction are inescapable – determined by the compulsions of capitalism far more than the achievements of feminism, and thus operating at global rather than local levels'. [lii]

I was optimistic. Almost a decade later, I read that in Britain it will take two centuries, another 40 elections, on current trends, to achieve an equal number of

women as men in Parliament. The trends are still in the right direction, but they move unconscionably slowly. Yes, women are reaching higher levels in the workplace, yet this years report from the British Equal opportunity Commission (EOC), arriving exactly three decades after the implementation of the passing of the Sex Discrimination Act promoting equality between the sexes, showed that women's average hourly wages still lagged well behind those of men, at their best just over 13 per cent lower in full-time public sector jobs, at their worst 45 per cent lower in part-time private sector jobs.[liii] Even this level of economic progress in the richer western countries is itself currently dependent on more disturbing patterns in women's lives globally, as immigrant domestic workers have been leaving their own homes and families to care for children and households in countries far a field.[liv]

I was also a little too insular, back in the 1990s. Men receptive to change and to sharing power and responsibilities with women in their public and private lives are nowadays confronted with spectres of refurbished militaristic manhoods in the global arena. We have entered a period when political scientists are issuing urgent warnings of the likelihood of continuous warfare ahead, this new century.[lv] The escalating global inequality of recent decades, with its ongoing destabilization in poorer nations, has resulted in a constant resort to violence. The consequent displacement of millions of people has consolidated a ruthless strengthening of state powers and national borders to keep out those seeking asylum in richer Western nations. Meanwhile, the

power of virile metaphor is the ubiquitous accompaniment of states of war and
spreading militarization.

Interpreting the horror of the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York, on
September 11th 2001, reaction everywhere played upon images of the event as the
consummate symbolic emasculation of America's phallic power. As commentators
from both the Islamic and Western world have noted, the spectacular 'triumph' of
that event was adroitly staged both to assuage the sense of inferiority and injustice of
a deeply divided Muslim world, as well as ignite its anger against the US-Western
military onslaught certain to follow. Western hawks quickly become
fundamentalism's willing allies, eager to stage their own ruthless retaliation,
launching an eternal 'war on terrorism', proclaiming the messianic goal of 'infinite
justice'. These are mighty forces to confront for those of us trying to undermine the
binding of masculinity to acts of dominance and violence. The current president of
the USA, George Bush Junior, is a man who loves to see men in uniform, parading
himself as their Supreme Commander, while strutting an invincible American
masculinity: 'Your man has got *cojones*', he says of the British Prime Minister, Tony
Blair, after the Camp David meeting where he agrees to back him all the way in war
against Iraq.[lvi] Any optimism surrounding the proliferation of new, more egalitarian
and compassionate images of masculinities in Western discourses seems threatened
when much of the world watches in alarm as the USA transforms itself from sole

superpower into what many see as arrogant 'imperial bully', its massive military deployment straddling every point of the globe, supported by the British government and all its other 'willing' satellites.[lvii]

Unsurprisingly, it is feminist scholars and activists who have most closely studied the reactionary rhetoric of gender in warfare. For over thirty years, no one has been more sensitively attuned to the significance of the 'masculinist' postures and practices of warfare, and the situation of women caught up in them, than the American feminist, Cynthia Enloe.[lviii] In the UK, Cynthia Cockburn has been equally visible, organizing with women globally in conflict zones.[lix] As they and others observe, it is the ongoing militarization of societies that helps explain why men's violence against women is still increasing around the world, along with the rapid growth in the sexual trafficking of women.[lx] The branch of the United Nations most concerned with global education and welfare, UNESCO, has recently declared violence against women, a 'global epidemic' of the 21st century, reaching immeasurable levels of brutality and cruelty in many situations of conflict.[lxi] Wherever armies invade, or national or ethnic conflict occurs, domestic violence increases rapidly, both during and after hostilities, as a direct effect of militaristic cultures, alongside the strains, displacements and traumas of war.

However, what feminists, like most men themselves, have said less about is the ways in which men too are the constant victims of the violence of other men,

overwhelmingly so in times of conflict, when they too are more likely to suffer sexual

humiliation, rape and all other forms of bodily fragmentation and abuse. The

Canadian academic, Adam Jones, is one observer of wars and genocide who stresses

the importance of a broader gender frame in studying the causes and effects of

conflict, including the gendered targeting of men, both as the anticipated perpetrators

and the victims in the staging of violence. He notes that the targeting of specific

groups of men is one of the most reliable indicators of the onset, or impending onset,

of genocidal conflict. The demonization of out-group males was a key feature of the

propaganda discourse instigating the three classic genocides of the twentieth century,

against Armenians in Turkey, Jews in Europe and the Tutsis of Rwanda, where all-

out genocide was preceded by various gender-selective measures, including mass

roundups and localized killings of men.[lxii] In the most recent atrocities in Rwanda, for

instance, Adams emphasises the inordinate stress placed upon maintaining traditional

masculine gender roles stemming from years of economic crisis and resource

scarcity, with young Hutu boys and men systematically targeted to focus their anger

on the Tutsie menace.[lxiii] Clearly, it is not only in sensational atrocities, from

genocide to the torture of prisoners in Abu-Graub or indefinite detention of Islamic

captives in Guantanamo Bay, that we need to ponder the ways in which men suffer

hideously, primarily at the hands of their fellow men. Men become victims all the

time, whether in school-yards, workplaces, hotel bars, football terraces, prisons or

battlefields.

To focus on the nuances of men's actual suffering is already to begin to undermine the myth of masculinity's invulnerability compared to women. As Judith Butler argues in *Precarious Lives*, we need to begin with the premise that all human bodies are fundamentally dependent and vulnerable. Our common condition is precisely this shared helplessness, which is as evident in the susceptibility of our desires and attachments to rejection and loss, as in our enduring physical injurability.[lxiv] It is playing 'masculinity's' own game to suggest that men do not experience fear, trauma and bodily shattering, much like a woman. Men have no doubt often been hurt and humiliated by the actions or taunts of women. However, the point to stress is rather different. If men want to retain their grip on normative masculinity, the woes and worries they will have to learn not only to endure, but to underplay, even to deny, will from the beginning arise predominantly from the words and actions of other boys and men. Once again, it is the search for affirmations of 'manhood' that remain the cause of, not the solution to, men's deepest fears and suffering. If the recent stress on 'masculinity in crisis' could be put in terms of this broader context of shared human vulnerability, it would itself begin to turn around the ways in which men feel threatened simply as men.

Stressing men's shared human condition with women does not, of course, help shore up the dominant location of the 'masculine' in the gender binary. It is possible,

as we have seen, to expose the linguistic instabilities and cultural mythologies behind

those attributes that are necessary, although often never quite sufficient, to sustain

men's sense of a 'masculinity' that confers some inherent mastery. Yet, however

diverse, contested and potentially transferable, the masculinities individuals display,

men's sense of entitlement (or resentment at personal lack of it) is unlikely to shift so

long structural and institutional sites and practices, along with the old symbolic

framings, continue to position women, the world over, as less powerful than men. We

can learn from the discursive contradictions and fluidities of a falsely homogenized

and universalized 'masculinity'. But we still need concrete programmes for modifying

everyday gender practices, once we have taken on board the multiplicity of subject

positions women and men actually occupy, and the manifold complexities of the lives

they lead.

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