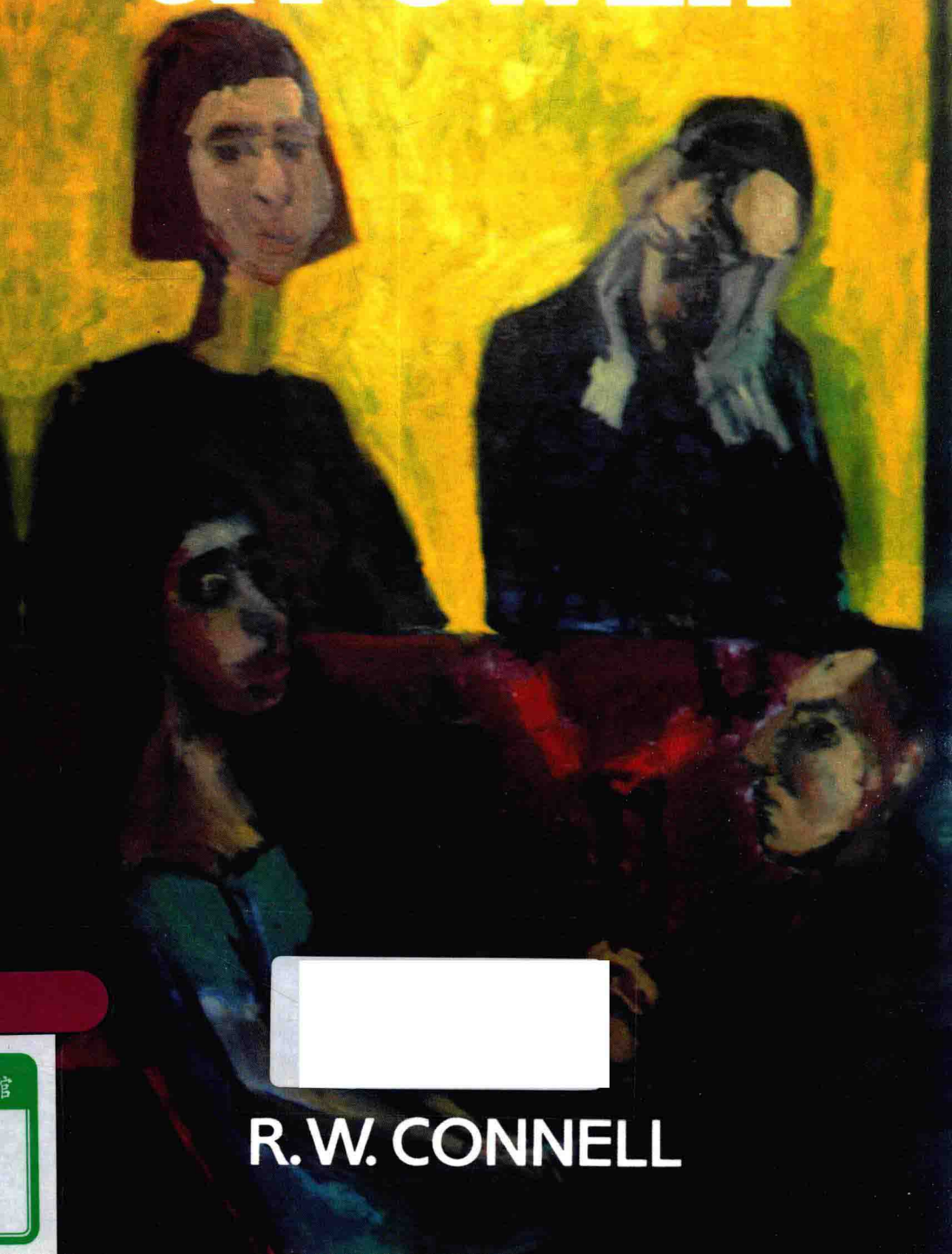


GENDER & POWER



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R. W. CONNELL

GENDER AND POWER
Society, the Person and
Sexual Politics

R. W. Connell

Polity Press

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Preface

The radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s opened debates about a range of practical issues to do with sex and gender, ranging from sexual expression to economic inequality, police violence against gays, and rape. Naming these issues, the new feminist and gay politics also posed theoretical questions and began to grow a theoretical language: 'sexual politics', 'oppression', 'patriarchy'.

By the mid 1970s when these terms were common currency, it was clear to anyone willing to listen that women's liberation and gay liberation required a profound change in our ways of understanding society. Sexual politics brought to light patterns of power, interest and conflict which made little sense in terms of socialist class analysis, conventional economics, political science pluralism or sociological functionalism. A theoretical revolution in the social sciences was called for.

This has been slow in coming. It was not clear what kind of theory would be adequate to understand the world of sexual politics. Attempts were made to adapt existing ideas. A quiet academic backwater, 'sex role' research, suddenly found itself enormously popular and influential. Biology was roped in to explain matters the biologists themselves hardly dreamed of. Rival schools of thought emerged within feminism, debating the universality of patriarchy, the usefulness of psychoanalysis, the impact of capitalism, the significance of men's sexual violence. Theorists of gay liberation searched for inspiration through psychoanalysis, Marxism, anticolonialism and the emerging theories of discourse. By the early 1980s one influential school of feminism was abandoning the basic theoretical assumption of ten years before, the fundamentally social character of gender.

This book is an attempt to resolve some of the difficulties raised by these controversies and to propose the outline of a systematic

social theory of gender. That is a generous ambition and one person's work can only be a fragment of the enterprise. But given the state of the problem it seemed timely to try out a large synthesis, to suggest how the different issues about gender might fit together. The argument, accordingly, ranges over a very wide field and the research has led me into some unexpected corners – from the archaeology of ancient south-west Asia (trying to get some grip on the evidence for feminist 'origins' arguments) to the lesser-known followers of Freud. It is inevitable that some parts of the analysis are thin, and some are relatively abstract or speculative. When there was a choice I put more time into problems that seemed relatively neglected, such as the institutionalization of gender, than into issues now widely studied, such as sexual ideology.

The basis of the synthesis, the logical starting-point, is the nature of social reality itself. Arguments about gender are plagued by an assumption that what is biological or 'natural' is somehow more real than what is social. For instance it was often suggested in the early 1970s that sex roles were 'artificial' because they were socially created (by media, schools or whatever). There was a sense that if you poked a finger at them it would go right through. Since then a good many fingers have been poked and they did not go through. Sexist stereotypes are still with us, showing impressive toughness and resilience. Social process has its own power to constrain, its own resistance to dissolution. And yet it is entirely human. The oppression of women and gays is a matter of human agency, not of nature.

How to get a good understanding of these qualities has been a central issue in social theory over the last thirty years, and an uncommonly difficult one. The debates around structuralism in the 1970s got badly hung up on a contradiction between the impersonality and the humanness of social process. There is, however, an approach emerging in social theory that has a more convincing answer, though it is still not widely known outside a technical readership. One of its sources is the theory of practice derived by philosophical critiques of mainstream Marxism; another is the dualist or recursive models of the relation between structure and practice developed in theoretical sociology; and a third is the contextual analysis of the self, personal action and intersubjectivity developing in social psychology.

There is no commonly accepted term for this approach; I will

call it the 'theory of practice' for short. It seems to me consistent with the best current research on gender and sexual politics, and to offer resolutions of some of the dilemmas the theory of gender has run into. Accordingly the general approach of the book is to bring together the theory of practice with the problems of sexual politics. This is far from being a one-way trade, an 'application'; it has involved reformulations of both. One of the unexpected outcomes was a demand for a practice-based approach to personality, which grew equally from a general principle of historicity, the findings of psychoanalysis and the experience of sexual liberation movements.

The reasons for undertaking the enterprise were partly that I wanted to understand the problems myself and partly that theory is important, at least in the long run, for practical politics. Bad theories will do harm. There are enough dilemmas and strategic conflicts in sexual politics to make a decent theory of gender a tangible asset for progressive politics of many kinds.

But theories don't grow on trees; theorizing is itself a social practice with a politics. Most of the radical theorizing of gender has been done by women or by gay men. I am a heterosexual man, married, middle-aged, with a tenured academic job in an affluent country – in world terms one of the very rich and secure. I owe an account of what I am doing here.

There is a view put by the 1970s 'men's movement' in the United States that 'men are equally oppressed'. This claim is demonstrably false. Some of the relevant evidence is set out below in chapter 1, which is intended as an introduction to the facts of gender inequality for those not already familiar with the issue.

Men in general are advantaged by current social structure, heterosexual men more so than others. What the debate about 'men's liberation' nevertheless showed is that there are costs for men in their social advantages, sometimes serious ones. It also showed that there are some groups of men who can recognize injustice when they see it and are far from comfortable with the position they have inherited.

For me, this discontent had several sources. I have been uneasy with conventional masculinity almost as long as I can remember, certainly since I was a teenager. I am not sure why; there may be an answer in what Dorothy Dinnerstein says in *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* about the men who became student activists in the 1960s. At all events my attachment to masculinity was

sufficiently fractured to make me sit up and take notice when the women of that generation mobilized in their own liberation movement. I read books like Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex* as well as those of the 'Freudian Left' and listened to a great deal of discussion about feminist principles and programs. A commitment to a socialism that stressed the theme of equality rather than textbook Marxism was probably important. Certainly important was the fact of living with a woman who was working on projects like setting up a women's health centre, and the fact of working in university departments alongside people engaged in feminist research.

I became convinced fairly early that the main feminist arguments about inequality and oppression were right. Somewhat later, I became convinced that they required a thoroughgoing reconstruction of socialist politics and the social sciences. Later again, that gay liberation raised crucial theoretical questions that were part of the same set of issues. Finally, that this was also the business of heterosexual men, who have some specific jobs to do (e.g. in the politics of masculinity) but also ought to be involved in the general analysis of sexual politics.

That is not necessarily easy to do. On the one hand men's settled ways of thinking have to be disrupted. The slow progress in getting issues of gender recognized in the mainstream of academic disciplines like history, economics or psychology, long dominated by men, illustrates the resistance. On the other hand there are currents in feminist thought which do not welcome men's involvement, and there is a fine line to tread between intruding on women's business and sharing the work on common problems. Even sympathetic men writing about feminism have attracted some pretty fierce responses. I do things in this book that a purist might not do, such as discussing the strategies of feminist movements. The reason is that no one of either sex can make an extended analysis of sexual politics without touching on these issues.

The number of heterosexual men working on these issues is still small. I don't think there is anything in itself admirable about being a dissident. I look forward to the day when a majority of men, as well as a majority of women, accept the absolute equality of the sexes, accept sharing of childcare and all other forms of work, accept freedom of sexual behaviour, and accept multiplicity of gender forms, as being plain common sense and the ordinary basis of civilized life.

If the number of people working to turn these principles into practice is to grow into settled majorities, there have to be good reasons why people will accept them as principles. These reasons need not all be the same. Sexual politics, like politics in other fields, is a matter of constructing coalitions. For some groups the reasons flow straightforwardly from a collective interest in change. The catch is always with heterosexual men, whose collective interest – as the evidence through the book confirms – is broadly to maintain the existing system. What reasons for change have enough weight, against this entrenched interest, to detach heterosexual men from the defence of patriarchy? There are, in my experience, five.

- (1) Even the beneficiaries of an oppressive system can come to see its oppressiveness, especially the way it poisons areas of life they share.
- (2) Heterosexual men are often committed in important ways to women – their wives and lovers, mothers and sisters, daughters and nieces, co-workers – and may desire better lives for them. Especially they may see the point of creating more civilized and peaceable sexual arrangements for their children, even at the cost of their own privileges.
- (3) Heterosexual men are not all the same or all united, and many do suffer some injury from the present system. The oppression of gays, for instance, has a back-wash damaging to effeminate or unassertive heterosexuals.
- (4) Change in gender relations is happening anyway, and on a large scale. A good many heterosexual men recognize that they cannot cling to the past and want some new directions.
- (5) Heterosexual men are not excluded from the basic human capacity to share experiences, feelings and hopes. This ability is often blunted, but the capacity for caring and identification is not necessarily killed. The question is what circumstances might call it out. Being a father often does; some political movements, notably the environmental and peace movements, seem to; sexual politics may do so too.

These are, at least, among the reasons for this book. It is also motivated by personal experience. Over the last fifteen years I

have tried to work through issues of sexual politics with other people in my household, my workplaces and the labour movement. Some of this has been very difficult indeed and has convinced me, as no theoretical writing could, of the sheer intractability of gender relations. It has also convinced me that relationships and customary practices do change, that collective projects of reconstruction are possible, and that oppositions of interest can be worked on and sometimes worked through, within such projects.

If social research is to have major value for that enterprise, it must do something more than show where we have come from or describe where we are now – useful as those jobs are. It must also concern itself with strategic issues: with where it is possible to go and how it is possible to get there. It is easy to speculate on these matters, difficult to produce well-founded arguments. Much of the literature on gender cannot do this job because of the way its theory is constructed. It has been one of my main aims to develop forms of analysis that are credible as social theory and which also key in to strategic argument. This is behind the following analyses of interest articulation in sexual politics, crisis tendencies at the level of the whole society, and the means of reconstructing personality ‘from below’. A social theory should also help to formulate the general goals of politics. I think the kind of theory developed here can do this, and the book ends with a discussion of what the ultimate outcomes of progressive sexual politics might be.

This book is the product of ten years’ work, not all of which has proceeded smoothly in one direction. My first attempt to get the issues together was an unpublished essay of 1976 called ‘Another Coup d’Etat Among Men’ (Robin Morgan’s joke about socialist revolutions), which sketched a theory of ‘hegemonic sexuality’ as a meeting-ground for socialism and feminism. About that time I began work with Dean Ashenden, Sandra Kessler and Gary Dowsett on a study of social inequality in secondary schooling, eventually published as *Making the Difference* and *Ockers and Disco-Maniacs*. We started with class inequality but developed an interest in gender and sexuality among teenagers. The interviews and case studies from this project have been important in my thinking ever since and are discussed at several points in this book. How femininity and masculinity are realized among adults, especially in the workplace, became a major theme in the study of teachers

that grew out of the same project, *Teachers' Work*. In 1979 I began very hesitantly to work on issues of masculinity, attempting a self-analysis à la Karen Horney and writing about the politics of my own relationships and experience of the body. Less hesitantly I began a series of essays on the theory of patriarchy and how to connect it with socialist theory. The few publishable products of these two enterprises were collected in *Which Way is Up?* from which the idea of this book developed. The detailed studies in that book on the concept of social reproduction, Sartre's theory of practice, the connection of patriarchy and capitalism and the nature of role theory, underlie parts of the argument here, as indicated in the notes. In the 1980s the work on masculinity turned into two new projects. One was a theoretical study, done with Tim Carrigan and John Lee and published as 'Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity', which reworked social-scientific studies of masculinity in the light of gay liberation, psychoanalysis and feminism. The other is an empirical study of changes in contemporary masculinity, done jointly with Pip Martin and Norm Radican, which is still in the field. These two projects underlie a good deal of the discussion of personality in Part III.

My work on these issues has been strongly influenced by the work of other people at Macquarie University. Rosemary Pringle's work on sexuality, on gender and capitalism, and the industry studies that became Ann Game and Rosemary Pringle's *Gender at Work*, have been a constant point of reference. Sue Kippax introduced me to the new social psychology; Sheila Shaver to the intersections of gender with welfare policy. I have learnt a great deal from several doctoral students with whom I have worked as supervisor: Teresa Brennan, who introduced me to feminist psychoanalysis; Clare Burton, whose book *Subordination* develops a detailed critique of socialist-feminist thought; Tim Carrigan's work on gay liberation theory; Carol O'Donnell's work on labour markets in *The Basis of the Bargain*; and the late Di Court, whose work on feminism and the state highlighted the problem of the central structures of power. The continued interest of several generations of undergraduate students has been both a stimulus to do the work and a test of what was produced.

The final stages were made possible by research assistance from Thea Welsh, who is responsible for much of the detail in chapter 1, and Pip Martin, on questions ranging from the membership of

the Soviet Communist Party to the recent history of Sydney theatre.

Many people have given feedback to working papers and drafts. I have been helped particularly by comments from Glynn Huilgol, Elizabeth Reid and Hester Eisenstein. Gary Dowsett, Lynne Segal, Rosemary Pringle, John Iremonger and Venetia Nelson read and criticized the whole manuscript. The bulk of the typing in the last few years has been done by Helen Easson, as it was in earlier stages by Heather Williams; the project would not have moved without their skill and critical interest. And I am deeply grateful for the tolerance and friendship of Robyn Dasey, in whose house the whole first draft was written.

Part of the work for this book was funded by the Australian Research Grants Committee with a grant for a study called 'Theory of Class and Patriarchy'. Grants for purely theoretical work are sufficiently rare that this should perhaps be celebrated. Part has been funded by Macquarie University Research Grants and by two periods of study leave from Macquarie University.

My greatest debt by far is to Pam Benton, who has been involved with the project through its whole development and at all its levels – intellectual, practical and emotional. I would like to dedicate the product to our daughter Kylie, in the hope that we can get enough right in this generation to make the world she grows up in a more equal, safe and rational place: less patriarchal and more human.

The plan of the book is straightforward: an introductory sketch of the facts of gender inequalities; three chapters on theories of gender; three chapters on gender as social structure; three chapters on gender as personality; and three chapters on politics and ideology. This plan, however, risks exaggerating the separateness of the parts. A central theoretical idea is that the social and the personal depend on each other and in an earlier draft of the book the chapters on personality came before the chapters on social structure. I would emphasize that Parts II and III should each be read in the light of the other.

Referencing is a problem with a complex and wide-ranging text, so I have invented my own (condensed) version of the Harvard system. The names of authors are mentioned in the text without dates and the details can be found in the alphabetical bibliography at the back. Any ambiguity about which work of a particular

author is cited is explained in the bibliographical notes at the end of each chapter, which are compiled section by section. Here also are references which would have been awkward to include in the main text and discussions of some technicalities which would have interrupted the flow of argument. These notes refer, as in the conventional Harvard system, to the bibliography; with the exception of the notes to chapter 1, which give directly the sources of statistical data used in that chapter alone.

NOTES

For an example of the trouble a man can get into when writing about feminism, see the criticisms of David Bouchier's *The Feminist Challenge* by Janet Bujra and others (1984). For the gender dimension of our educational research see Kessler, Ashenden, Connell and Dowsett (1982, 1985).

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