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# MASCULINITY AND POWER

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**ARTHUR BRITTAN**

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# **Masculinity and Power**

**Arthur Brittan**

**Basil Blackwell**

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*Masculinity and Power*

For Jessica and Daniel

Men themselves were now split into a (female) interior and a (male) exterior – the body armour. And as we know, the interior and the exterior were mortal enemies. What we see being portrayed in the rituals are the armour's separation from and superiority over the interior: the interior was allowed to flow, but only within the masculine boundaries of the mass formations. Before any of this could happen, the body had to be split apart thoroughly enough to create an interior and exterior that could be opposed to each other as enemies. Only then could the two parts re-form 'in peace' in the ritual. What fascism promised men was the reintegration of their hostile components under tolerable conditions, dominance of the hostile 'female' element within themselves. This explains why the word 'boundaries', in fascist parlance, refers primarily to the boundaries of the body.

Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*

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# 1

## Masculinities

Most discussions of masculinity tend to treat it as if it is measurable. Some men have more of it, others less. Those men who appear to lack masculinity are, by definition, sick or genetically inadequate. Gay men, for example, are often regarded as men who lack a proper hormonal balance, and who consequently are not 'real' men. This assumption – that we can know and describe men in terms of some discoverable dimension is problematic – because it suggests that masculinity is timeless and universal.

My aim in this book is to examine this assumption. My position is that we cannot talk of masculinity, only masculinities. This is not to claim that masculinity is so variable that we cannot identify it as a topic. I am not in favour of a doctrinaire relativism which would make it an almost impossible object of study. It seems to me that any account of masculinity must begin with its place in the general discussion of gender. Since gender does not exist outside history and culture, this means that both masculinity and femininity are continuously subject to a process of reinterpretation. The way men are regarded in late twentieth-century England is obviously different from the way that they were regarded in the nineteenth century. Moreover, versions of masculinity may vary over a limited time scale. In this respect, Ehrenreich (1983) has documented the changes in American men's attitudes to marriage from the fifties to the eighties.

In the 1950s . . . there was a firm expectation . . . that required men to grow up, marry and support their wives. To do anything

else was less than grown-up, and the man who willfully deviated was judged to be somehow 'less than a man'. This expectation was supported by an enormous weight of expert opinion, moral sentiment and public bias, both within popular culture and the elite centres of academic wisdom. But by the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, adult manhood was no longer burdened with the automatic expectation of marriage and breadwinning. The man who postpones marriage even into middle age, who avoids women who are likely to become financial dependents, who is dedicated to his own pleasures, is likely to be found not suspiciously deviant but 'healthy'. And this judgement, like the prior one, is supported by expert opinion and by the moral sentiments and biases of a considerable sector of the American middle class. (Ehrenreich, 1983, pp. 11-12)

If the 'breadwinner ethic' has indeed collapsed among large sections of middle-class American men, then is there any point in talking about masculinity in terms of a generalized category? If men are now dedicated to the cultivation of their own pleasures, does it make much sense even to attempt to theorize about masculinity? Does the concept 'masculinity' have any meaning at all when it seems to change from moment to moment? Surely this is not what is being suggested by Ehrenreich. The fact that men are rebelling against their role as breadwinners does not entail the undermining of their dominance in the political and economic spheres. Nor, for that matter, does it imply that they have surrendered authority in the family or household. What has changed is not male power as such, but its form, its presentation, its packaging. In other words, while it is apparent that styles of masculinity may alter in relatively short time spans, the substance of male power does not. Hence, men who run away from family involvements are not signalling their general abdication of power; all they are doing is redefining the arena in which that power is exercised.

The fact that masculinity may appear in different guises at different times does not entitle us to draw the conclusion that we are dealing with an ephemeral quality which is sometimes present and sometimes not. In the final analysis, how men behave will depend upon the existing social

relations of gender. By this I mean the way in which men and women confront each other ideologically and politically. Gender is never simply an arrangement in which the roles of men and women are decided in a contingent and haphazard way. At any given moment, gender will reflect the material interests of those who have power and those who do not. Masculinity, therefore, does not exist in isolation from femininity – it will always be an expression of the current image that men have of themselves in relation to women. And these images are often contradictory and ambivalent.

Masculinity, from this point of view, is always local and subject to change. Obviously, some masculinities are long-lived, whilst others are as ephemeral as fads in pop music. However, what does not easily change is the justification and naturalization of male power; that is, what remains relatively constant in the masculine ideology, masculinism or heterosexualism. What I am proposing here is that we must distinguish between three concepts which often tend to be confused in the literature as well as in political and everyday discourse, namely masculinity, masculinism and patriarchy.

Masculinity refers to those aspects of men's behaviour that fluctuate over time. In some cases these fluctuations may last for decades – in others it may be a matter of weeks or months. For example, if we look at the fashion in male hairstyles over the past 20 years or so, we find that they range from the shoulder length vogue of the sixties, to the punk cuts of the late seventies and early eighties. During the same period men have experimented with both macho and androgynous styles of self-presentation. At the same time, we have been bombarded with stories about role reversals in marriage and the home. Men are now 'into' fatherhood. They look after their children, they sometimes change nappies and, in some cases, they stay at home and play the role of houseperson. The speed of these changes, it is sometimes suggested, has led to a crisis in masculinity. The implication here is that male identity is a fragile and tentative thing with no secure anchorage in the contemporary world. Such fragility makes it almost impossible to talk about masculinity as though it had some recognizable substantive basis. And yet, in everyday and academic discourse, we find that men

are commonly described as aggressive, assertive, independent, competitive, insensitive and so on. These attributions are based on the idea that there is something about men which transcends their local situation. Men are seen as having natures which determine their behaviour in all situations.

Indeed, the habit of attributing some kind of exalted power to masculinity is so ingrained in our culture that it makes it very difficult to give credence to those explanations which stress its contextuality. This is precisely the point. Those people who speak of masculinity as an essence, as an inborn characteristic, are confusing masculinity with masculinism, the masculine ideology. Masculinism is the ideology that justifies and naturalizes male domination. As such, it is the ideology of patriarchy. Masculinism takes it for granted that there is a fundamental difference between men and women, it assumes that heterosexuality is normal, it accepts without question the sexual division of labour, and it sanctions the political and dominant role of men in the public and private spheres. Moreover, the masculine ideology is not subject to the vagaries of fashion – it tends to be relatively resistant to change. In general, masculinism gives primacy to the belief that gender is not negotiable – it does not accept evidence from feminist and other sources that the relationships between men and women are political and constructed nor, for that matter, does it allow for the possibility that lesbianism and homosexuality are not forms of deviance or abnormality, but are alternative forms of gender commitment.

### Masculinism as a Dominant Ideology

However, I am not for one moment suggesting that the connection between masculinism and masculinity is tenuous. This would be absurd. If, for example, we look at the exaggerated politeness of male behaviour in some middle-class contexts, and then we observe the more direct male assertiveness in a working-class environment, this does not entitle us to draw the conclusion that middle-class and working-class masculinity are qualitatively different. Alternatively, if we examine the behaviour of men cross-culturally

and discover that the number of ways of 'being a man' appears to be flexible and varied, it is then wrong to assume that this variation undermines male domination. Just as there is a large number of styles and behaviours associated with class relations so there is an almost infinite number of styles and behaviours associated with gender relations. Working-class life in the north of England is not a carbon copy of working-class behaviour in the south. This is not to say that the specificity of working-class life in different parts of Britain cannot be subsumed under the rubric of a more general view of class. Similarly, the fact that men have a multitude of ways of expressing their masculinity in different times and places does not mean that these masculinities have nothing to do with male dominance.

I realize that there are problems in talking about masculinism as a dominant ideology. To assume this is to accept without reservation that a dominant group's ideology is inevitably imposed upon everybody else. In the case of the masculine ideology, this is to claim that men have a collective ideology which they collectively force women to accept as being natural and inevitable. This implies that men constitute a class, and that they maximize their class interest. Now this is a vulgar version of ideology. It proposes that ideology is some kind of monolithic worldview which is used by a ruling group to justify and legitimate its claims to rule. By no stretch of the imagination can men be considered to be a class in this sense. One has only to look at the position of black and white men in Britain, or in the United States, to establish that their membership of a common class is problematic. Of course, it is true that black and white male workers may occupy the same class location, but this does not mean that they constitute a homogeneous class. Furthermore, it may be asked, in what ways do white working-class men have the same interests as black men workers in a country like South Africa? To assert that these men are a class sharing a common ideology poses all sorts of difficulty.

Accordingly, the proposition that masculinism is the ideology that justifies and naturalizes male domination needs to be qualified. Granted that men collectively do not

form committees to ensure their continued domination, and that men themselves are exploited and dominated by other men, we can nevertheless still speak of a set of gender relations in which the power of men is taken for granted, not only in the public but in the domestic sphere as well. Masculinism is reproduced and reaffirmed in the household, in the economy and in the polity. Even when there is a great deal of gender and sexual experimentation, as was the case in the sixties and the early seventies, masculinism was never under real attack because gender relations remained relatively constant. The great amount of attention given to the increased participation of men in household chores and the emphasis on 'democratic' family relationships did not, in any marked way, alter these gender relations. Despite the feminist analysis and demystification of patriarchy, the masculine ideology remains intact, as evidenced by the successful counter-campaign of the New Right in the United States and Britain.

### Male Natures

It may seem peculiar, after nearly a century of counter-arguments, that there is still strong support for the thesis that human nature is something that can be discovered and measured, that it is knowable. Despite the apparent success of the social sciences in accounting for socialization as a learning and social process, the idea of an original and underlying basis for human behaviour remains a central aspect of much academic and everyday thinking. Moreover, this thesis has been given new life by the emergence of sophisticated biological approaches such as ethology and sociobiology. While the crude social Darwinism of the nineteenth century has long since been relegated to the academic dustbin, this is not to say that its influence is dead. On the contrary, the new evolutionists have re-entered the debate about human nature with new ferocity. In the case of gender, they claim that there is no way in which it can be seen as a social construction. Gender behaviour is rooted in biological imperatives which serve evolutionary purposes. Of



course, they are not so naive as to deny the influence of social and cultural factors, but this does not amount to anything more than suggesting that culture is itself a particular kind of manifestation of evolutionary mechanisms (Sahlins, 1976).

Take the example of male aggressiveness. The socialization case is that aggression is learned. It is acquired in a context in which men learn that it is both rewarding and expected to behave in an assertive way. Boys grow up in environments which encourage certain kinds of conduct, rather than others. They learn to be 'men'. Aggression, from this point of view, is a response to specific kinds of experience. Men will only behave aggressively if they have learned it is appropriate to do so. The implication is that a society's proper functioning depends upon the inculcation of aggressive patterns of behaviour in young boys.

Even as small boys, males are trained for a world of independent aggressive action . . . males are groomed to take the universe by storm, to confront the environment directly. Males learn that society's goals are best met by aggression, by actively wrestling their accomplishments from the environment. Force, power, competition and aggression are the means. Achievement, males are taught, is measured in productivity, resources, and control – all the result of direct action. In the Western world, the importance of self reliant, individual action is systematically inculcated in males. To be masculine requires not only self reliance and self control, but control over other people and resources. (Lipman-Blumen, 1984, p. 55)

Sociobiologists take issue with this. They argue that to talk about aggression exclusively in terms of learning is to fly in the face of evidence from the study of animal populations. While agreeing that human behaviour cannot be explained only in terms of evolutionary forces, they are not too worried about this. Aggression has an evolutionary significance for primate societies – it allows dominant males to pass on their genes to suitable female partners, thus ensuring the survival of the group. What is functional for the baboon or chimpanzee is, therefore, equally functional for human males, provided one accepts the evidence that there is indeed a real

continuity between primate and human behaviour.

In this connection the observation that young boys are more aggressive than girls has been used to support this proposition. Now it is certainly true, if you watch small boys playing in a school playground, that the incidence among them of aggressive activity appears to be much higher than among girls of a similar age (Archer and Westeman, 1981). There often seems to be a great deal of gratuitous hitting and bashing going on which looks 'natural' and unrehearsed. Are we to conclude that this behaviour is genetically determined? Certainly, Maccoby and Jacklin seem to think so. Their studies of the difference between male and female aggressiveness have been very influential, although I suspect that they would be dubious about some of the ways in which their work has been used by others (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974).

One of the key problems in the controversy about aggression is the difficulty of linking individual and group behaviour. In a recent illuminating article, Morgan writes:

It may be possible to argue that the search for links is doomed from the start, that the level or types of violence are different things altogether and should be treated as such. Such connections as are made, it may be argued, belong to polemic or rhetoric, rather than to analysis. One may have some sympathy with this view, although at this stage it would be unwise to close off this field of exploration prematurely. Nevertheless, such links that do exist must be considerably more complex than assuming that wars are manifestations of masculine violence (or aggression) writ large, just as it would be simplistic to assume that individual manifestations are enactments of ideological or cultural definitions of 'man as warrior'. (Morgan, 1987, p. 185)

But even if we were to grant that individual and collective violence are not the same thing, there still remains a prior problem, namely that the whole discussion of aggression is saturated with unwarranted extrapolations from animal behaviour, especially the fighting behaviour of caged animals (Bleier, 1984, p. 96). The concept 'aggression' is highly loaded. It is a term we use to describe a large number of



discrete behaviours, ranging from the threatening gestures of two roosters to the belligerent stance of politicians trying to intimidate their opponents.

With respect to humans – the inordinate amount of scientific and popular interest in a biological basis for sex differences in ‘aggressivity’ does not have to do with explaining why women so seldom fight in bars, but rather with explaining differences in achievement in the public world. In such a context, the word is invested with qualities that remain unexpressed and unspecified, such as assertiveness, independence, intelligence, creativity and imagination, which are usually associated with men who are leaders; that is, aggressive. So, by means of semantic flim-flam animal experiments are used to ‘prove’ that men are naturally, hence inevitably, dominant or superior to women because of hormonal differences. Thus, however exemplary the work itself may be, it lends itself to misuse and misinterpretation when it uses language in ways that are both imprecise and laden with ill-defined, anthropomorphic values and meanings. (Bleier, 1984, p. 95)

It would be easy enough to see the behaviour of Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan in terms of an excessive excretion of testosterone. We could then see superpower politics as being nothing more than the interplay of uncontrollable androgens. Put like this, of course, the proposition is absurd, yet versions of this kind of thinking remain very pervasive. For example, the success of Margaret Thatcher as a leader is often attributed to her aggressive masculinity which presumably relates to her *male* hormones. This is not the place to replicate the countless discussions about the relationship between biology and culture. In a sense, nothing more can be said that has not been said before. With respect to aggressiveness, we can spend countless hours reporting the work of this or that researcher who has found a new correlation between hormones and behaviour, and we can equally spend hours refuting his or her evidence. There are certain things we cannot deny. We cannot deny the fact that it is men who rape; we cannot deny the fact that most crimes of violence are committed by men; we cannot deny the fact that men are also the victims of physical violence. Putting all these ‘facts’ together, and what