Changing men, changing masculinities

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EDITORIAL

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When it comes to academic literature, a cursory survey of titles reveals that one constant in discussions of men and masculinities is change. Segal's (1993) *Slow Motion: Changing Men, Changing Masculinities* was already raising the issue of change in relation to men and masculinities over thirty years ago. Interest in the subject, however has intensified since the early 2000s, with hooks' (2004) *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love*, Hidaka's (2010) *Salaryman Masculinity: Continuity and Change in Hegemonic Masculinity in Japan*, Seidler's (2006) *Transforming Masculinities*, Roberts' (2013) *Young Working-Class Men in Transition* as well as his (2015) edited *Debating Modern Masculinities: Change, Continuity, Crisis?*, Anderson's (2009) *Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities*, and, recently, Luyt and Starck's (2022) *Masculine Power and Gender Equality: Masculinities as Change Agents* to name just a few. Even before this organisations such as Achilles Heel in the UK (see Seidler, 1991) and the women's liberation movement (see, for instance, Hanisch, 1969) were foregrounding the issue as important. Articles in recent issues of NORMA, too, have focused on the question of 'newer' forms of masculinity as well as central questions around what change is desirable and possible (Christofidou, 2021; Roberts, Elliott, & Ralph, 2021; Wolfman, Hearn, & Yeadon-Lee, 2021). The number of articles which deal with the issue of changes in the performance and characterisation of masculinity and the position and performances of men, are innumerably larger (see, for example, Duncanson, 2015; Ratele, 2014; Ratele, 2015; Segal, 1993) and expanding this out to even those which do not include change in the title, the corpus of literature becomes unmanageable.

There are essentially three aspects to this debate, revolving around theoretical, ethical and empirical considerations. The first concerns theories around if and why men change. CSMM, via Connell, has been indebted to a specific idea of hegemony, rooted in Gramscian notions of culture as something which is flexible and related to, but to a certain extent independent of, economic forces. Whilst Marx was notoriously economist in his approach to culture, Gramsci's (1971) revisions emphasised the independence of the so-called superstructure from the base, observing that culture could shape political influence and subsequently economic power rather than simply the reverse. For Connell, the promise of hegemony for theorising change was one of the key dynamics which hegemony offered over sex role theory which failed to grapple with the question (Demetriou, 2001, p. 339). Connell notes specifically that "I stress that hegemonic masculinity embodies 'a currently accepted strategy'. When conditions for the defence of patriarchy change, the bases of dominance of a particular masculinity are eroded … Hegemony then, is a historically mobile relation" (Connell, 1995, 77 emphasis added). Alongside these more structural approaches were, of course, poststructuralist critiques of gender and identity, more broadly, as malleable and fluid, which emphasised notions of gender as in flux, contextually variable and as changing over time (e.g. Beasley, 2008; Butler, 1997, 2008; Halberstam, 1998; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This suggested that change itself, is the de facto state of gender and societies more generally. There is also the question of where change emanates from and which men are perceived to have changed. Elliott (2020) and Roberts (2015) argue that change is almost always presumed to

come from the most privileged groups of men – what they charaterise as something seen to be emanating from 'centre' rather than periphery – whereas they suggest the reality is actually the reverse: change comes from the most marginalised and the privileged adapt to this. In principle the idea of enlightened or progressive men always assume a backward or regressive counterpoint with these values fought along colonialist, racist and classist assumptions (Segal, 1990).

The issue of if, why and how men *should* change is an ethical one. hooks (2004, p. xvi) argues that 'men are in our lives whether we want them to be or not … we need men to challenge the patriarchy, we need men to change'. This has been a fundamental tenet of feminist-inspired approaches to CSMM. The desire to see men change stems from a structural critique which links power to gendered cultures, behaviours and performances and which recognises that such imbalances are humanly constructed. Affecting change in relation to men's personal lives has been seen as political ever since the women's liberation movement, with Hanisch's (1969) infamous pamphlet *The Personal is Political* stating that men would benefit from such changes: 'The bad things that are said about us as women are either myths (women are stupid) … or are actually things that we want to carry into the new society and want men to share too (women are sensitive, emotional)'. Men have been involved in a host of feminist groups with the aim of affecting change either in terms of personal behaviours or hierarchies of power within existing occupational and political structures (Barber et al., 2016; Messner, Greenberg, & Peretz, 2015; Seidler, 1991).

Prior to this, suffrage movements had their proponents amongst men who emphasised that change was both desirable and beneficial. Mill (1869/1996, p. 178) argues that

> the benefits which it has appeared that the world would gain by ceasing to make sex a disqualification for privileges and a badge of subjection, are social rather than individual; consisting in an increase of the general fund of thinking and acting power, and an improvement in the general conditions of the association of men with women.

An author in a US socialist newspaper from 1914 expressed this view more daringly in its claims

> feminism is going to make it possible for the first time for men to be free … feminism is going to do for men—give them back their souls, so that they can risk them fearlessly in the adventure of life. (Dell, 1914)

Even if the bulk of the article argues for financial independence from family life to allow men to be unfaithful and to avoid paying for their children, the argument that changes arising from feminism also benefit men have a longstanding precent. Today, arguments as to why men should change centre not only around the extent to which such changes benefit the men themselves as well as societies more generally. As Pulé and Hultman (2021) argue in their recent book on masculinity and climate change, given men's disproportionate impact on the environment, the question of men changing their behaviour and reforming the economic institutions in which men are most active is one of existential survival. They state it clearly when they argue that 'as the world we have constructed fractures, the socio-material enactments associated with masculinist dominator patterns in us all must change' (p. 20). Though they see masculinities as the root of the problem generally: 'targeting men through ethical and behaviour change practices is core to this endeavour, but must also include transformations of the masculinities in women and genderqueers as well' (p. 39).

In parallel, there has always been reactionary strands of thought which accepts that certain changes have occurred but, put bluntly, sees things as having changed for the worse. Not only are these claims about the durability of masculinity over time, empirically speaking, verifiably

false, but they also tend to attract far-right fanatics precisely because fascist movements have always relied on the fantasy of a pre-cultural masculine essence (Brittan, 2001; Ferber, 2000; Mosse, 1996). Culture, here, is the main culprit, and these authors advocating instead for a return to some pre-cultural, biological masculine essence. The founder of the Mythopoetic men's movement Robert Bly, for instance, observes that:

> in the seventies I began to see all over the country a phenomenon that we might call the 'soft male' … young men for various reasons wanted their harder women, and women began to desire softer men. It seemed like a nice arrangement for a while, but we've lived with it long enough now to see that it isn't working out. (Bly, 1990, pp. 2–3)

His skepticism of how these changes relate to masculinity becomes clearer later when he argues that 'the structure at the bottom of the male psyche is still as firm as it was twenty thousand years ago' (p. 230) emphasising that it is men's job to embrace these qualities which they appear to have lost. Closer to today, self-help guru Jordan Peterson (2018) makes similar arguments when he assert that

> boys are suffering in the modern world. They are more disobedient – negatively – and more independent – positively – than girls, and they suffer for this, throughout their pre-university educational career … strikingly these differences, strongly influenced by biological factors are most pronounced in the Scandinavian countries where gender equality has been pushed the hardest. (p. 298)

Peterson misrepresents his references here[1] and gender equality does not mean 'men and women behaving and being exactly alike in equal numbers'. It is clear, however, that his statement is more indicative of the argument that modern society has changed to the detriment of men especially. Again, as with Bly, his view of change as negative relates to his assumptions in the fundamental character of masculinity as something historical immutable as well as shifts in what he sees as complementary gender roles. This attitude obvious when Peterson states that: 'the personalities we have evolved to perceive have been around in predictable form, and in typical, hierarchical configurations forever, for all intents and purposes. They have been male or female, for example, for a billion years' (p. 39).

Putting aside, too, the fact that humans have only been around for 200,000 years, moral panics around changing men are not overly new and find resonance during periods of cultural and economic transition. They appeal largely because of their simplicity and the ontological security they offer. The 'crisis of masculinity' argument has a particularly long shadow. British Labour MP Diane Abbott was claiming in 2013 that young men were suffering from a crisis and risked becoming a 'Fight Club' generation as hey turned to increasingly macho behaviours as a response to a loss of clear roles and role models[2]. However the same debate took place in the 1990s (Horrocks, 1994; McDowell, 2000), the 1980s around the new man (Edwards, 2006), in the 1960s surrounding the women's liberation movement (Winter, 2004), there were concerns too in the early 1900s surrounding the suffrage movement, though precipitated by the shift to industrialised societies (Petersen, 1998, p. 20) and, as

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[1]One of the works cited by Peterson concerns the fact that gender rather than class, plays a larger role in what cultural consumption in Sweden in contrast to other countries (Bihagen & Katz-Gerro, 2000). This does not concern personality. Another article (Costa, Terraciano, & Crae, 2001) states explicitly in the abstract that "gender differences are small relative to individual variation within genders". The article also does not look specifically at Scandinavian countries but Western European countries and the US where they suggest that stereotyping is more pronounced but less related to roles. Schmitt et al's (2008) study argues specifically that "the existence of innate sex differences alone would not explain the widening gap between the personalities of men and women with the development of more prosperous and egalitarian societies". In fact, whilst their study demonstrates that men and women tend to score higher and lower on similar personality traits within countries, they demonstrate quite significant variations across countries.

[2]https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/may/14/male-identity-crisis-machismo-abbott

Forth points out, Rousseau was bemoaning the weakening of men's moral fibre as a result of cultural transformations in the late 1700s (Forth, 2008, pp. 37–39).

Regarding the question of whether men and masculinity have *actually* changed, this raises empirical questions around how to document change as well as discussions and disagreements as to what should be taken as indicative of that change. Whilst some of the above have argued for a 'softening' of attitudes concerning sexuality, domestic labour and emotions (Anderson, 2009; Elliott, 2020; Roberts, 2013), amongst other things, others have shown that the actual divisions in terms of hours allocated to domestic labour have noy kept pace with attitudes (Craig, 2006; Craig & Mullan, 2011; Craig, Powell, & Cortis, 2012; Hook, 2006). 'Progressive' attitudes too, appear to have stalled (Diefendorf & Bridges, 2020; Edlund & Öun, 2016; Salin, Ylikännö, & Hakovirta, 2018). Such findings highlight the problems of a linear progress narrative in CSMM (O'Neill, 2015). Changing attitudes toward sexuality might be read by some as inclusive but we are now witnessing alliances between white nationalists and self-described feminists against trans individuals and trans women in particular. It may well be instead that 'we are witnessing co-existence of persistence and change' (Roberts, 2013 p. 672), as well as the persistence of multiple co-existing responses to broader cultural shifts (see, for instance, McQueen, 2017). To quote Chrissie Hynd in The Pretenders' 1986 *Hymn to Her*: 'Some things change, some things stay the same'.

This current issue of NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies contains three articles dealing with the theme of change in three different national contexts. These articles all deal with what has become a key issue in CSMM; namely, whether men can change, how this change manifests itself and how change relates to power privilege. The first article, by Grave, Pinho, Marques and Nogueira looks at sexual fluidity amongst 15 non-heterosexual men in Portugal. It focuses first and foremost on the issue of sexual fluidity amongst men who self-define as non-heterosexual, observing that whilst sexual fluidity in itself might be taken to destabilise many of the assumptions around hegemonic masculinity, in practice there is the incorporation of many hegemonic aspects in the Portuguese context. Grave, Pinho, Marques and Nogueira focus particularly on the experiences of sexual fluidity amongst non-heterosexual men provides an important insight into the experiences of a group of men who are often overlooked when discussing and understanding changes in the presentation and performance of masculinity. The second article by Olsson and Lauri deals with what they term 'The fantasy of the new man', specifically in relation to the Men and Gender Equality (*Män och jämställdhet*) project in Sweden. Utilising Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory and specifically the concept of fantasy to analyse representations of the equal man in the project's material, Olsson suggests that the Men and Gender Equality projects a certain kind of utopianism which, at the same time, imagines men as 'victims of traditional masculinity'. Through this, they argue that it may have the unintended consequences of portraying gender equality as a zero-sum game whereby women's improving status is equated with men's decline. The final article by Andersson and Eriksson explores changing representations of masculinity in Swedish cookbooks for men from 1975 to 2010. By employing a multimodal critical discourse analysis, they illustrate that whilst certain trends, namely the construction of the books as largely heterosexualizing and aimed at offering a vision of middle class masculinity have remained stable, there have been some key changes. These changes concern how cooking is presented as a skill which requires complex technical expertise and how the act of cooking is related to gendered divisions of domestic labour in the house. The changing use of visuals are particularly significant in that Andersson and Eriksson argue later books construct 'an alternative form of masculinity which is not about physical attributes such as a hairy chest and muscles'.

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