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Men, masculinities and the material(-)discursive

Jeff Hearn

Abstract

This article addresses the relations of materialist and discursive analyses of men and masculinities. More specifically, it argues for a materialist-discursive, material/discursive or even a materialdiscursive approach to men and masculinities. In the first part, some of the intellectual and political influences on the development of this approach are outlined. These include elaborations on materialism towards discourse, elaborations on discourse towards materialism, and attempts to work across that boundary. This is followed by focusing on, first, the example of men and violence, second, the topic of men, and, third, men's and males' materialdiscursive bodies. The concluding section discusses the importance of situatedness of knowledge, and the possibility of working towards the abolition of the social category of 'men'. To deal with this complex problematic, a concept that speaks across the non-equivalence of males, men, masculinity is needed, and for this I suggest 'gex', rather than sex or gender.

Keywords: discourse, feminism, masculinities, materialism, material-discursive, men

Some materialist reflections

How to locate oneself within Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities is a very important question. Just because people work on men and masculinities does not mean they agree on anything at all. To put this another way, I seek to deconstruct the dominant of men (Hearn, 1996a), masculinities, and the hegemony of men (Hearn, 2004, 2012c). Or to frame this in a third way, the personal is not only political; it is intimately linked to the activity of work in the

broadest sense, and the personal/the political/the work is linked to the theoretical (Hearn, 1983, 2008b). Here in this article I want to focus on the question of the relations of materialist and discursive analyses of men and masculinities.

An important part of my intellectual and political background stems from various materialist traditions. I have long been informed by materialism, in thinking of the materiality of men.

Perhaps stemming from my working class cultural background, I have consistently been aware of economic class, and am dismayed when generalizations about bourgeois men or (projections about) working class men are applied to all men. A materialist approach (to men?) has often been interpreted as *men's* relations to economic class, work, production, and the economy and the economic (whether mechanically, or dialectically), and specifically with labour-based, technological production and its products – as within economistic marxism. Such a focus on the 'base' of production in turn reproduces the somewhat broader view of materialism as production *and* reproduction, as equally important are men's relations to care, reproduction (in the very broadest sense), and embodied existence. This involved from the start a critique of the limited (productive) materialism of Marxism, as usually conceived (Hearn, 1987). Indeed Marx himself embraced two very different versions of reproductive materialism: a biological naturalism, and as a first social oppression (Hearn, 1991). Such views of materiality do not necessarily exclude attention to the realm of ideas, as in various materialist theories of ideology (many people would now say discourse).

In addressing the realm of ideas and ideology, Abercrombie and Turner (1978) pointed out that Marx presented two different theories of ideology. In the first, set out by Marx (1975a) in the *Preface to the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, the 'social being determines consciousness', so that the particular social experience of particular social classes determines the

ideas of members of the class. In this view, ideas follow immediate material relations, both in terms of general economic and social structural locations, and the conduct of everyday economic and social life. This approach lays the basis for articulation of several class-based systems of ideas, even a pluralist analysis. In the second, also set out in the *Preface* but more famously in *The German ideology*, 'the economic structure, the real foundation' determines 'a legal and political superstructure', such that the ideas of 'the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas' (Marx & Engels, 1970, p. 64). This notion of ideology, like the first, embodies both material and intellectual force. It is, however, more deterministic, more concerned with the whole social formation than the activities of particular classes and class fractions.

These various different, often non-gendered approaches to materialism and Marxism have been critiqued and developed in a very wide range of Marxist feminisms, materialist feminisms, socialist feminisms. These include those focusing on biology (Firestone, 1970), the domestic mode of production (Delphy, 1977, 1984), kinship patterns (Weinbaum, 1978), family (Kuhn, 1978), economic systems (Eisenstein, 1979; Hartmann, 1979), 'the politics of reproduction' (biological reproduction, care of dependent children and care more generally) (O'Brien, 1981, 1990), 'sex-affective production' (the production of sexuality, bonding and affection as core processes of society) (Ferguson & Folbre, 1981; Ferguson, 1989), sexuality (MacKinnon, 1982, 1983), and various combinations thereof. In different ways, such approaches tended to either analyse the relations of economic class and gender relations in employment, the family, sexuality, or draw parallels between economic class and gender/sex class, or highlighted intersections of class/gender/race as materially foundational, or focused on materialism as gendered reproduction or highlight the materialism of the body. After all, we are bodies, material bodies! Some of these materialisms may turn Marxism upside down.

Many of these feminist materialisms influenced my own attempts to develop a materialist analysis of men (Hearn, 1983, 1987), particularly the recognition of bodily materialism and seeing sexuality as material (as what people *do* rather than what people are or think). I have long seen materialism as including (productive) labour/work, biological reproduction, housework, violence, sexuality, bodily generativity/degeneration, and culture/ideology/discourse (Hearn, 1987, 1992; Walby, 1986, 1990).

The intersections of radical feminisms and materialist feminisms have been further complicated by the impact of poststructuralism, postcolonialism, anti-racism and related perspectives. Indeed poststructuralism and postcolonialism, or at least some versions thereof, can be interpreted, not as a specific critique of materialism, but rather as an expansion of materialism. A related major and relevant influence on this way of thinking has come from, multiple social divisions, multiple oppressions, intersectionality, and transnationalizations. Thus materiality can be understood as reproduction in a fuller sense, as both reproduction of the social relations of production, *and* the reproduction of society through ideas, ideology and discourse. For myself, I discovered poststructuralism, especially through translations into English of some of the works of Foucault, and Kristeva, Irigaray and other French feminists, and later the works of Laclau and Mouffe, in part through a reading group that focused on discourse and related topics, initially in the early 1980s.

Another important influence, for me, in these complicating movements of and around the material towards 'the discursive', was Dorothy Smith's (1987, 1990a, 1990b) critique of political economy. Reproduction of society includes cultural reproduction, cultural continuation, including in discourse (even if there may be a tension between reproduction and discourse). The

convergence of the material and the discursive has also become foregrounded in some discursive approaches, especially critical discourse analysis (CDA), and in materialist approaches to literary and cultural studies, as in materialist theories of discourse. This can be seen in the material contexts of discourse, in understanding discourse as (including) material acts, in focusing on the material effects of discourse – hence the term, material-discursive practices.

Following this, since the late 1980s I have been preoccupied with the relations of materiality and discourse. Since realizing this coupling, I have tried, albeit often with great difficulty, to talk about materiality and discourse at the same time, in developing materialist-discursive analysis of men. It has seemed that the separation of materiality and discourse in some analyses (for example, ‘everything is discourse’) has been and is a considerable source of difficulty. Instead, I see a key challenge as talking about, analysing, recognizing the embodied nature of knowledge, materiality and discourse at the same time, even this is often itself very difficult.

While this way of looking at things then, in the 1980s, seemed rather strange, especially in view of the strong dichotomizing processes in much of the social sciences, it has now become one of the more enduring debates in the social sciences and in feminist studies. In seeking to develop this approach, I have used such terms as reproductive cultural materialism or the material-discursive (Hearn, 1992). Feminist technoscience, ANT and STS (Science and Technology Studies) scholars, such as Haraway (1992), Callon, Latour, and Law, have used the terms, the material-semiotic and material-semiotic actors, to address somewhat similar notions, in the realm of human-machine and similar relations. Materialism can now be understood as more complex, as the economic/technological, the ‘reproductive’, and the bodily/corporeal (including sexuality

and violence), as well as the materiality of discourse. This view of materialism is itself also discursive. Indeed Marx's notion of 'practical human-sensuous activities' (Marx, 1975b, p. 422) might be thought of as material discourse or as grounded subversion that is simultaneously material and discursive. Having said that, there is still major neglect of the materialities of age and ageing, disability, and also wider 'environments' (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008). With my own academic background originally in geography, my thoughts turn to links to anthropology, ethnology, sustainability, biodiversity, and (human) ecology.

Having said all this, for a long time I have been suspicious of searches for, and ideologies of, integration, and its reassurances; contradiction says much more. Thus, in working at the boundary of the material and the discursive, and seeing men as materialistdiscursive, I am not seeking simply to reiterate the modernism-postmodernism dichotomy. I want to work across and beyond that, not least as much modernist thinking is heavily idealist, not materialist. Similarly, Foucault and many other discourse theorists are not non-materialist in some aspects of their writing, though again talking of bodies and embodiment is no guarantee of materialism. To be more precise: the ontological includes the non-human, and is not only human, even if humanly constructed; the epistemological is (still) fundamentally human, even if the human is not a strictly separate category; and the methodological, including the ethical, is human.

Epistemology, methodology, ethics and the writing of theory are, at least up to now historically, human activities. There can be a danger of collapsing and conflating epistemology with (all) social theory, an approach resisted in critical realism (cf. Jónasdóttir & Jones, 2010). Seen thus, the 'materialdiscursive' might primarily be an epistemological, methodological and ethical, rather than ontological, category. Despite sticking with the concept of 'the material-discursive', I

remain unsure if the 'materialdiscursive', even with its 'integral' invoking of 'the material', can be an ontological category. On different days I am drawn either for or against this proposition; this is a persistent uncertainty.

Some initial examples

You might be wondering: what has all this to do with men and masculinities? In fact the intimate relations and simultaneity of materiality and discourse have, for me, been particularly highlighted in a variety of empirical, historical and theoretical studies of a number of aspects or arenas of study of men and masculinities, albeit in different ways. These include: organizations, film, emotions, postcolonialism, globalization and transnationalizations, information and communication technologies (ICTs), sexualities and violences.

In particular, it was studying the parallel impacts of, first, the history of men's domination of and men within institutional, organizational and economic changes, and, second, informational, visual and representational changes on patriarchal social relations, men and masculinities that inspired me to take up the simultaneity of the material and the discursive. This way of thinking came from the work. I wrote consciously in this way for the first time in a conference paper on men's sexuality, film and organizations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see Hearn, 1988, 1990). At that time I had become a bit obsessed with the rise of visual technologies, especially early film, in historical transformations towards public patriarchy (Brown, 1981; Hearn, 1992) and the mode of information (Poster, 1984).

More recently, I have increasingly been drawn to studies of the transnational: transnational militarism, transnational capitalism and MNCs, transnational ICTs, and so on. Trans-forms of life bring multiple contradictions, as in the emergence of new forms of citizenship and

trans(national)patriarchies (Hearn, 2009) or in the complex impacts of the many, various and changing information and communication technologies (Hearn, 2006, 2008a), that are likely to press more insistently in coming years. ICTs and their use in, say, the sex trade are a perfect example of the entangling of the material (bodies) and discursive (screens) to produce materialdiscursive phenomena.

The example of violence

In the early 1990s this elaboration on the materialdiscursive was strongly reinforced in doing empirical work on men's violence to women. What could be more simultaneously material and discursive than violence? The case of violence is very instructive in thinking and acting on materiality and discourse. Debates on the relation of the material and the discursive, and on the transcendence of the macro and the micro, and structure and agency, were especially important to me from the late 1980s as the context of detailed research on men who were and/or had been violent to women. This research was reported in the book *The violences of men* (Hearn, 1998). Significant theoretical influences were feminist, especially radical, materialist and structuralist analyses of men's violence, along with poststructuralism or 'post-poststructuralism' (Johnson, 1987; Hearn, 2008a, 2012c; cf. Lykke, 2010), in emphasizing materiality and bodily effects – especially those of violence, violent acts and violent words. A crucial question was and is the relations of men's talk (present) and men's actions/violences/body (past). The focus was on violence, and stopping violence: it was practical research, though heavily theory-driven. Having said that, there are possible misuses of 'discourse' in addressing violence, in diverting attention from the bodily materiality of violence.

What 'violence' is and what 'violence' means is both material and discursive. It is both a matter of experience of change in bodily matter, and a matter of change in discursive constructions.

Violence is simultaneously material and discursive. It is simultaneously painful, full of pain; and textual, full of text. This is what I learnt from researching men who use or had used violence. It is very difficult to find a definition of violence that works for all situations and all times: this is a matter of material discourse. Violence, and what is meant by violence, is historically, socially and culturally constructed. Talk and (men's) talk about violence is not just representation (of norms): it is (creation of) reality in its own right. This applies in the conduct of violence, and talk about violence. Similarly, agency policy, practice and intervention emphasize the importance of talk. In some cases, there is considerable correspondence between the accounts of men using violence and accounts of agency staff with whom they have had closest contact; specific constructions men use to talk of violence interconnect closely with constructions of agencies dominated by men.

The whole complex of violence, talk about violence, and responses to violence by individuals and agencies is a cultural phenomenon that is both material and discursive. In seeking to analyze in a material-discursive way, I wish to move beyond both materialist and discursive approaches, in effect to be both *more materialist and more discursive* than the hegemonic masculinity framework (Hearn, 2012c), at least as usually conceived.¹

The topic of men

This brings us to the topic of men. In approaching the topic of men, some writers in CSMM seem to retain a strong investment in identities, but this is not my agenda. I favour destabilizing (the people called) men's gender identities; I try to do this from what I see as the current political

situation. This may appear as an identity-orientated focus, but that would be a misreading. I see men as a social materialdiscursive category, not an identity-orientated category. There is currently a fashion to critique the category of categories. For me, the point of raising and naming the category it is to deconstruct it, to put ourselves out of a job! If one is studying an organization and all the top management there are defined as 'men' it is not good to avoid that any more than it is to avoid the category of 'girl' if studying a girls' school.

In studying these things, the notion of hegemonic masculinity, developing from work on gendered processes within patriarchy, has become almost hegemonic. This process usage of hegemony has been by no means as popular or as influential as the other usage by Connell and colleagues, in linking hegemony to a specific form of masculinity. In this, 'hegemony' as a key social process mutates to 'hegemonic' as a descriptor of certain masculinities. In this latter scheme, *forms* of masculinity have been recognized, including hegemonic, complicit, subordinated, marginalized, and sometimes resistant, protest and ambivalent masculinities. In their 1985 paper Carrigan, Connell and Lee write that hegemony

[...] always refers to an historical situation, a set of circumstances in which power is won and held. The construction of hegemony is not a matter of pushing and pulling of ready-formed groupings but is partly a matter of the *formation of these groupings*. To understand the *different kinds of masculinity* demands an examination of the practices in which hegemony is constituted and contested – in short, the political techniques of the patriarchal social order. (Carrigan, Connell & Lee, 1985, p. 594, my emphases)

There seems to be a slippage here from formation of groupings to different forms of masculinity. Over almost 20 years now, there has been growing debate on the usefulness and meanings very concepts of masculinities and hegemonic masculinity, with critiques from *inter alia* more micro and macro, structuralist and poststructuralist approaches (Hearn, 1996b; Clatterbaugh, 1998). The latter emphasize problems of relativism, if patriarchal contexts are ignored; use as a primary or underlying cause of other effects; tendency towards idealism; neglect of historical, (post)colonial and transnational differences; and reproduction of heterosexual dichotomies. Most importantly, the concept of hegemony has generally been employed in too restricted a way; the focus on masculinity is too narrow. Masculinity does not *necessarily* become ideational, but rather that seems to be one tendency. I should be clear here that I do not reject Connell's approach; it has been and is immensely useful; but I think it does not go far enough in deconstructing gender and gender relations; I want somehow to be both more materialist and more discursive. If we are interested in what is hegemonic about gender in relation to men and masculinity, then it is 'men' who or which are far more hegemonic than masculinity. Instead, it is time to go back from masculinity to men, to examine the hegemony of men. This involves addressing the hegemony of men – in both senses. The hegemony of men seeks to address the *double complexity that men are both a social category formed by the gender system and dominant collective and individual agents of social practices*. This perspective raises key social processes, regarding:

- i. *social processes by which there is hegemonic acceptance of the category of men.*
- ii. *the system of distinctions and categorizations between different forms of men and men's practices to women, children and other men ('masculinities').*

- iii. *which men and which men's practices – in the media, the state, religion, etc - are most powerful in setting those agendas of those systems of differentiations.*
- iv. *the most widespread, repeated forms of men's practices.*
- v. *description and analysis of men's various and variable everyday, 'natural(ized)', 'ordinary', 'normal' and most taken-for-granted practices to women, children and other men and their contradictory, even paradoxical, meanings.*
- vi. *how women may differentially support certain practices of men, and subordinate other practices of men or ways of being men.*
- vii. *interrelations between these elements above ... relations between 'men's' formation within hegemonic gender order, that also forms 'women', other genders and boys, and men's activity in different ways in (re-)forming hegemonic differentiations among men.*
(Hearn, 2004, pp. 60-61).

These various aspects clearly suggest a multi-faceted and embodied account of men and masculinities. The hegemony of men is a dialectical material, embodied formulation, highlighting *naming men as men* (Collinson & Hearn, 1994; Hanmer, 1990), the gender class of men, yet also critiquing how the taken-for-granted category of men obscures intersectionalities. The naming men as men is only half of a dialectical analysis. The point of naming men as men (or other similar strategies) is to deconstruct men: naming goes with deconstruction.

Men, males and bodies

A further and key example of the materiality/discursivity of men concerns bodies. Talk about men and bodies is politics: the personal is political is work is theoretical. So this is the canvas, a canvas of and for the bodily materiality of men. I do not believe there is such a thing as ‘the male (bodily) essence’ or even ‘the male perspective’, and certainly not in the singular. These kinds of terms can so easily suggest some kind of so-called ‘deep bodily masculinity’ that supposedly only men can know about, and that is men’s or males’ special *property*. On the other hand, there is another usage or meaning of ‘male’: something that speaks to the specific social, political and embodied bounded experience of men ... the boundaries, bodies, skin, fluids, leaks and all, all embodied, material, all social and cultural. And this makes some more sense, but I am still a cautious of the word, ‘male’ – as it can so easily be misused out of context; this is partly why I often prefer to use the concept of ‘men’ rather than ‘male’. Yet having said that, I am still influenced by a very social constructionist version of sexual difference theory – a form of social, that is, social structural, essentialism.

Males and men have so often been represented as taken-for-granted biologically driven bodies. Yet at the same time, men may be constructed as taken-for-granted disembodied, or least as primarily (‘rational’) minds, rather than bodies. There has been a long running debate on how could this ever be possible. This tendency can be illustrated whenever men are seen as the primary and ‘authoritative’ conveyors (even ‘embodiments’) of ideas, ideology, religion, rationality, knowledge. Bodies as minds and images of men are shown throughout history as the monopoly bearers of knowledge, even when woman is represented as ‘justice’, often as ‘beauty’, sometimes even as ‘truth’.

According to some social theorists, malestream theorists grant epistemological and usually idealist privilege to men, constructed as minds, over women, constructed as bodies (O’Brien,

1981). Such construction of men can be traced back to many ancient traditions, intellectual and spiritual, including classical social theory, and reappearing in many guises. Dichotomizations of mind/body mirror many other dualisms: man/woman, culture/nature, public/private, reason/passion, and so on. The absence of the body in discussing men and men's knowledge as minds is very far from material realities; males without bodies tend to be bourgeois 'enlightened', spiritual religious, non-othered constructions of males/men. Seeing males as rational minds, as without bodies, as absent bodies, can be the other side of the coin from the solely biological body. The contradiction of males as both *simply bodies* and as *absent/without bodies*, separated from bodies, is much to do with social locational, specifically with economic class, ethnicity, and other signifiers of the dominant, the unmarked.

Significantly, the first substantial discussion of 'hegemonic masculinity' was based in the discussion of boys' and men's bodies, within the patriarchal context, in the paper 'Men's bodies' (Connell, 1983). This considered the social construction of the body in boys' and adult men's practices. In discussing 'the physical sense of maleness', sport is marked as 'the central experience of the school years for many boys' (p. 18), emphasizing the practices and experiences of taking and occupying space, holding the body tense, skill, size, power, force, strength, physical development, and sexuality. In addressing the bodies of adult men, Connell highlighted physicality within work, sexuality, and fatherhood, stressing

[...] the embedding of masculinity in the body is very much a social process, full of tensions and contradiction; that even physical masculinity is historical, rather than a biological fact. [...] constantly in process, constantly being constituted in actions and relations, constantly implicated in historical change. (Connell, 1983, p. 30)

This emphasis has often been forgotten by later writers employing the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Male bodies may also be understood as the agents of patriarchal collectivities. Here, the body becomes the collective body, the historical, (post)colonial subject (or object). This may be most clear when considering the body within the onslaught of famine, war and macro historical and societal contexts. This is also clear when we reflect on how the *disembodied* bourgeois male body is strangely at odds with another dominant account of men and men's bodies, in everyday life and in academic writing, namely, men's bodies as machines, sometimes as proletarian machines. Machinic bodies care can be seen in terms of physicality and physical labour, and even the proletarianization of the body. In some ways the biological body and the disembodied mind are two sides of the same coin, just as are the proletarian machinic body and the disembodied bourgeois mind.

On the other hand, the construction of the men's body can easily become over-socialized. In recent years, debates on the body have moved beyond oppositions between biology versus social constructionism, and towards a concern with the embodied material-discursive practices and processes. Stephen Whitehead (2002) has written on the discursive materializing of the male body; Calvin Thomas (2002) has argued for re-enfleshing boys' and men's bodies. He argues that the 'matter' of the male body may be 'one possibly productive way to analyze male power and hegemony, and to reconfigure male identification and desire' (p. 60). This in turn may serve to change gender relations and men's dominance in the bodily and sexual realms, and elsewhere. Such multiply faceted concerns with the male body open up various possible, more complex accounts of masculine bodies, being masculine, and doing bodies. One approach is to seek to address the relations of the phenomenological body in being men, the material body, and the discursive body, simultaneously.

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How this works may vary for different occurrences of bodies. To take one example, in researching older men's bodies, the combination of feminist phenomenology, sexual difference theory, and queer theory may be relevant (Hearn & Sandberg, 2009). This may so as ways of making sense of older men's bodily relations to movement (or lack thereof), bodily (hetero)normativity (Gerschick, 2005), taking up space and activity, changed and perhaps queer disabilities, and bodily boundaries, fluidity, and leakages (Grosz, 1994), in contrast to those male bodies characterized as impermeable, hard and hermetic (Waldby, 1995). Sexualities of older men may challenge dominant male sexualities and genderings.

Concluding: Situatedness and towards the abolition of the social category of 'men'

In making sense of these complex materialities/discursivities of men, situated knowledges are crucial. These are a means of engaging with the major question of the relations between men as a gender class, and differences between men. From specific objectifications, which themselves constitute part of oppression by men, and patriarchies more broadly, subjectivities may develop, as bases of knowledge. A plural, composite materialdiscursive approach is likely to yield greater insights than attempts to impose a single grand theory.

Plural situatedness is part of a methodology for deconstructing the hegemony of men. Men's relations to this theoretical object may range from dismissal as irrelevant to immense uncertainty and humility to even a certain kind of social paralysis for some men, or onto an awakening of renewed optimism of a future where gender is degendered, with the abolition of the category of men. This resonates with Judith Lorber's (2005) multiple framing of feminism (Egeberg Holmgren & Hearn, 2009). Gender rebellious feminists seek to 'take apart the gendered social order by multiplying genders or doing away with them entirely' (Lorber, 2005, p. 12).

Connections with other social divisions, differences and oppression become central, as do deconstructions of the categories of sex, sexuality, and gender, and dualities (re)produced through them. Men, or rather 'men', become an unstable social category. This contrasts with gender reform feminism and gender resistance feminism. In the former, gender equality might be a matter of realizing the potential of women and men equally, albeit in the context of the current gender order: 'An overall strategy for political action to reform the unequal gendered social structure is *gender balance*' (Lorber, 2005, p. 13). The implication for men is that men can contribute positively to (or can position themselves against) such change towards the *abolition of gender imbalance*. Gender resistance feminists 'argue that the gender order cannot be made equal through gender balance because men's dominance is too strong' ((Lorber, 2005, p. 14). Gender equality *per se* is not a feasible aim, as it is likely to mean women becoming like men. More radical transformation is necessary, with women's voices and perspectives reshaping the gendered social order more fundamentally, including the *abolition of patriarchy*. Men's positionings are less certain; an implication is that men need to position themselves in relation to the radical project of abolishing patriarchy and patriarchal relations. In keeping with the progressive problematization of men, men's critical theorizing of men can usefully consider what might be involved in the *abolition of the social category of men* as a significant social category of power (Hearn, 2011, 2012a, 2012b). In seeking to understand possible moves towards the abolition of men, there are many possibilities.

A wide variety of texts have shown the limitations of both a view of gender as in any fixed relation to sex and an overly dichotomized view of gender relations. These include historical and cross-cultural analyses of 'multiple gender ideologies' (Meigs, 1990), 'gender ambiguity' (Epstein & Straub, 1991), and 'the third sex/third gender' (Herdt, 1994), all of which represent

movements beyond sexual dimorphism. Another set of approaches derive from historical dialectical processes of transformation of men as a gender class (Hearn, 2004; Howson, 2006). A third derives from practices of undoing gender, queer theory, transgender studies, refusing to be a man (Stoltenberg, 1989), effeminism (Dansky, Knoebel & Pitchford, 1976), and non-hegemonic heterosexualities (Heasley, 2005). This involves not beginning from the assumption that men are either the object or the subject of theory, but rather that the social category of men is historically transitory, as most other social phenomena. One of the clearest statements of this possibility of abolishing men is that by Monique Wittig in her analysis of the possibility of the abolition of the categories of women and men:

[...] it is our historical task, and only ours (feminists) to define what we call oppression in materialist terms, to make it evident that women are a class, which is to say that the category 'woman' as well as the category 'man' are political and economic categories not eternal ones. Our fight aims to suppress men as a class, not through genocidal, but a political struggle. Once the class 'men' disappears, 'women' as a class will disappear as well, for there are no slaves without masters. (Wittig, 1990, p. 160)

To deal with this, I think a concept is needed to speak across the non-equivalence of males, men, masculinity, and for this I suggest 'gex', rather than sex or gender. These are clearly not just academic questions. The hegemony of men involves men being a taken-for-granted social gender category in all sorts of everyday contexts. Men are formed with this gender system. But men also reproduce this situation in both individual and collective ways of being and doing. These ways tend to reinforce the hegemonic. But this is not a closed system; it is contested and potentially unstable. If you are a man, please recognize that, but please do not speak simply 'as a man'. Take (the problem, power and hegemony of) men incredibly seriously, but do not take your own self

‘as a man’ seriously at all. What is the use of certain kinds of knowledge if they do not stop *men’s domination, violence and sexual violence?* (cf. Widerberg, 2005).

Note

1. This approach might be compatible with, for example, rethinking hegemonic masculinity as an empty signifier, in the context of ‘ascendancy and authority within a particular hegemony of the hegemonic principles that set out the rules for men as well as women and the points for the expansion of meaning and practice’ (Howson, 2013, p. 18; also see Howson, 2009).

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