

## **MEN, MASCULINITIES AND GENDER POLITICS IN SOUTH AFRICA: A REPLY TO MACLEOD**

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The last decade has seen a growth in academic work on men and masculinity in Southern Africa. Inspired by a global trend, local studies have extended their range, empirical depth and analytical sophistication. The major consequence of this turn to the study of masculinities and men has been an enhanced understanding of gender relations in Southern Africa.

Many gender scholars have welcomed the new theoretical and empirical work on men. But there have certainly been voices of caution and dissent, though thus far these have been somewhat muted. In her article Catriona Macleod expresses doubts about my approach to the study of men in South Africa. In this article I respond to her concerns. While my response indicates disagreement, I think Macleod's critique is important for the study of gender in Southern Africa because it promotes debate, allows the opportunity for the restatement of position and opens up a discussion on the link between academic work and politics.

Macleod argues that my work is promoting, or could promote, a "phallogentric" agenda, and in so doing will harm feminist goals of ending the oppression and subordination of women. In opposing this argument I assert that the introduction of the concept masculinity/masculinities into the field of gender studies in South Africa has both extended and strengthened the analytical capacity of gender work and has contributed practically to the work of promoting gender equity.

This article is divided into three sections. In the first I locate my work in a broader intellectual setting and demonstrate its strengths. In the second, I respond specifically to Macleod's argument. In the third section, I offer some thoughts on challenges facing feminist theory in South Africa.

### **1. CRITICAL MEN'S STUDIES: ITS ORIGINS, AMBIT AND APPLICATION IN SOUTH AFRICA.**

My work on men and masculinity in Southern Africa owes a huge debt to the work of scholars who have collectively, if loosely, been described as constituting Critical Men's Studies (CMS). The theorists and researchers of men and masculinity come from diverse backgrounds though the discipline of sociology is most strongly represented amongst them. Until recently, theorization and work was predominantly conducted in developed settings, particularly in the UK, US and Australia. In the 1980s a focus on

men and masculinity emerged. This was in response in part to two pressures: a lacuna in the existing feminist literature and the political imperative for left-leaning men to support feminist struggles. It is very important to note the political nature of these origins. The men who were pioneers in the field, R W Connell, Jeff Hearn, Michael Kaufman, Michael Kimmel, Michael Messner, David Morgan, Vic Seidler were all connected with a broad critical intellectual tradition which in the early 1980s was termed “left” and, in some instances, “Marxist”. This did not mean that all the scholars were historical materialists or adhered to one or other Marxist conception of social change. It did mean, however, that issues of gender oppression were considered alongside issues of race and class injustices.

Not all theorists and intellectuals are interested in praxis, the doing of politics. But by and large the founders of CMS were concerned not just to understand the world, but to change it. The publication of **Achilles Heel** (Seidler, 1992) and the formation in 1991 of the White Ribbon Campaign (a Canadian based organisation committed to combating violence by men against women) established in the aftermath of the murder of 14 women at a Montreal university in 1989, are just two examples of political initiatives taken by key CMS authors. These initiatives brought a range of gender concerns together, particularly gay rights and women’s oppression.

The involvement of men in feminist work raised many questions and some objections. These included that the focus on men simply marginalised women while another argument suggested that CMS was a cover or a justification for male domination (Canaan & Griffin, 1990). Terminologically, there were debates about whether men could be feminists. Out of these debates emerged the term “pro-feminist” and an explicit commitment to pursue feminist goals. Historical work (for example, Kimmel & Mosmiller, 1992) began to make the point that some men had, over time, committed themselves to feminist causes. Implicit in such work was the recognition that not all men were the same, not all were committed to the domination of women and that some had, by their actions, worked for a more equitable gender order.

This literature might look like apologia but it is important to locate it in the theoretical developments that were taking place. In 1985 Carrigan, Connell and Lee wrote a seminal article on “hegemonic masculinity” which introduced a concept that remains highly influential and widely used to this day (cf Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The focus on men and masculinity grew stronger culminating in Connell’s **Masculinities** (1995) which remains the most significant theoretical contribution to this subject so far. A quarter of a century since the first rather hesitant steps were taken to focus on men and masculinity in the context of a broader commitment to gender equity and women’s emancipation, the effect of this initiative can be summarized in a number of simple propositions.

- Unequal power relations continue to divide men and women globally. Men are still ascendant.
- All men, by virtue of being men, have a social advantage over women but they have a choice about whether to accept “the patriarchal dividend” (Connell, 1987).
- Not all men are the same and they do not all have the same privileges and power.
- Some men are dominated and oppressed by others on grounds of race, social class, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, disability.

The take-off of research and theoretical work on men and masculinity has been marked by a concomitant rise in its visibility in policy and development work. In South Africa and abroad, men are now slotted into developmental and gender work and there is a commitment by the UN General Assembly to a gender programme of action working with men. All these programmes are gender programmes where the broader goal of gender equity and the “empowerment of women” are the major aims (Cornwall, 1997; Pringle & Pease, 2002; Mehta, Peacock & Bernal, 2004; Connell, 2005). Yet not everybody has been at ease with these developments. The dangers of men taking over a development agenda and replacing women as the object of development work has been warned (White, 2000).

If there has been a global acknowledgement of the importance of working with masculinity and men in gendered ways towards the goal of gender equity, the reservations about such an approach have been fuelled by initiatives and organisations that have not aligned themselves with feminist goals. These are well documented but include the mythopoetic movement and more recently the “crisis of masculinity” discourse which has been appropriated by states and groups around the world in order to champion the interests of males and to turn back the gains made by women as a result of feminist struggles (Kimmel, 1995; Schwalbe, 1996; McDowell, 2000).

Some of the strongest statements about “the crisis of masculinity” have been made in the realm of education. In Australia and Britain concern about boys falling behind girls in academic performance and being failed by the education system has been stridently expressed. Public pressure has fuelled a new research agenda and influenced policy. Critics of the “what about the boys” turn have argued that in fact school boys and male teachers are not doing badly, still have a major advantage in the world of work and still enjoy a dominant position in schools insofar as resources are concerned (Epstein, Elwood, Hey & Maw, 1998; Linaard & Douglas, 1999; Martino & Berrill, 2003; Thornton & Bricheno, 2006).

Since there are many ways in which “men’s interests” can be taken up politically, Messner (1997) has proposed a model to make sense of the gender politics of men’s groups. Using three indicators – institutionalized privilege, the costs of masculinity and differences and inequalities between men - Messner generates a model by which politically to locate men’s groups. He identifies four “types” of male grouping: essentialist, men’s rights, pro-feminist, and racial and sexual identity groupings, and suggests that a number of men’s groups (exclusively those in the pro-feminist and racial and sexual identity camp) occupy a “terrain of progressive coalition politics” wherein gender, racial and class injustices can fruitfully be challenged.

In summary, while some men who organise along sex lines may be attempting to roll back feminist gains others may be allying with feminist, anti-racist and anti-classist groupings to pursue the goal of social justice, including the dismantling of patriarchal privilege.

The work of mine that Macleod reviews is centrally concerned with gender relations, gender inequalities and constructions of masculinity. While trying to offer a description of the gendered terrain, it also attempted to offer an assessment of the gendered state of play. My initial point of entry was gender-based violence. I linked South Africa’s high

levels of violence to historical constructions of masculinity, trying to show how colonialism and apartheid had provided fertile ground for constructions of masculinity that endorsed and legitimised the use of violence in a variety of public and private contexts. I also tried to show violence was not a “natural state” of gender relations between men and women in South Africa and pointed to initiatives that were addressing this violence and to constructions of masculinity that inclined towards gender equity.

With the benefit of hindsight I can see that this point of entry, while being obvious in the sense of tackling one of the most public and important aspects of gender relations in South Africa, also laid the ground for work that focused rather too heavily on the violence of men. I was particularly aware of the fact that as a white, middle class man I may possibly give the impression that male violence was the violence of “other” men, of black men. Although my work has never actually endorsed this and has actually paid particular attention to the violence of white men (for example, Morrell, 1997) I have been sensitive to the view that portrayals and discussions of black men have tended to demonize them (Staples, 1995).

There can be little doubting that violence and masculinity are linked and that in a country like South Africa, much of the violence is perpetrated by black men. It needs to be emphasized that this demographic observation has nothing to do with race per se. Violence is not caused by skin colour but rather is the effect of various historical, social and psychological factors. Quite how widespread is violence in South Africa, is debated but quantitative research on rape rates among young African males is alarming. Jewkes et al (2006) found that over 20% of young men in the Eastern Cape had been involved in the perpetration of rape or sexual violence. Attempts to explain men’s violence has attempted to break the essentialist link between sex and behaviour and has shifted the focus to look at deep causal factors such as poverty as well as the importance of context in fuelling, legitimating or undermining and combating violence.

Explanations of the link between violence and masculinity are varied but in a variety of contexts where men perceive their positions to be under threat, levels particularly of domestic violence are much higher (Hautzinger, 2003). The reason for violence is not an attempt by men to perpetuate the domination of a wife or intimate, rather it is an attempt to secure a position of status which is central to the man’s experience of being a man, and in this way is tied to societal expectations of manly behaviour.

The practical implication that flows from these insights is that men (rather than women) need to take responsibility for anti-violence gender work. The only lasting way to reduce levels of violence is to reconstruct masculinities and men are the most important constituent in this work. To leave the task to women is to misunderstand the dynamics of violence and to let men off the hook. Failure to include men in anti-violence work either sidelines them or leaves them as the unchanging, unchangeable perpetrators of violence.

This is an important point from which to engage debates about the position of men in Africa. Africa is the world’s poorest continent. Many men on the continent live in conditions of great poverty and hardship. This is not to say that women are in any better position. Examining the situation in East Africa, Silberschmidt (1992, 2001) makes the argument that men have responded poorly to the challenges of poverty. Failing to find a job, they have abandoned families and turned to alcohol and mistresses. Societal

expectations which they have accepted demand that they act as providers. Failing to do this, they appear to give up. Women appear, on the other hand, to have made better use of new opportunities to engage in agriculture and are thus increasingly establishing themselves as heads of households. But another example suggests that men can and do respond in healthier ways. In the context of the AIDS pandemic women are identified as being the most at risk, yet it is by no means the case that men are unaffected. Poverty and hardship promote heightened sexual risk taking among men (Campbell, 2003). In a study of changing masculinities in KwaZulu-Natal, Hunter (2004) shows that while virile, assertively heterosexual models of masculinity amongst Zulu men have fuelled the pandemic, the corollary (of illness, the wasting of male bodies and death) have generated new understandings of masculinity that are less sexually predatory and more self-preserving.

In these two examples we see how poverty plays a part in shaping constructions of masculinity, how these constructions impact on the lives of women but also how men can and do respond in ways that promote more equitable gender relationships (and models of masculinity that are not vested in unchanging patriarchal privilege).

I have shown how the CMS approach generates a particular gender politics, how it is aligned to “feminism” (noting of course, the many and varied understandings of this concept and political position) and how its concepts help to link an understanding of men and masculinity with the state of men - and patriarchy - in Africa. I now turn to examine what advantages Macleod’s approach might provide.

## **2. CRITIQUE OF THE MACLEOD CRITIQUE.**

In this section I engage with Macleod’s ideas and respond to them by asking the question: What do these ideas offer feminists writing on, theorizing about and working in South Africa?

The major problem of my work, according to Macleod, is that it is “phallogocentric”. It equates human with man. Macleod seeks to substantiate this charge by making three different types of argument.

Her first is that “on minor occasions he slips into a simple phallogocentric equation of man equals human”. The suggestion is that at some sub(or un)conscious level I am ultimately imbued with a gender consciousness that is patriarchal, which is to say, that seeks to perpetuate the power of men over women. Macleod is not just charging that I am careless in my use of language or concepts. She is arguing that some deep patriarchal agenda is exposed when, for example, I use the term “youth” to refer to males rather than to all young people regardless of gender. The problem is that “youth” in South Africa as a political term referred and still refers primarily to young (and not so young), largely African, males. The current composition of the African National Congress’s Youth League testifies to this. In addition, numerous writers on “the youth” (for example, Seekings, 1993) have used the term in this way. The sexist politics of the “youth” and of the practices of its constituents have also been noted (Beall et al, 1987; Marks, 2001). My treatment of the category and use of the term takes all of this into account. Macleod does later admit that “perhaps this is splitting hairs”. Yet despite only offering one example (“the youth”) and that a very weak one, she chooses to retain this

piece of “evidence” as a plank in her overall argument. On the strength of this, it is an argument that will not stand much testing.

The second basis for her charge of phallocentrism is that the focus on men and masculinities marginalises women. This is a danger that is acknowledged by many writers within the CMS tradition. Tellingly however, not all feminists see it this way. In her introduction to the special issue on “Gender” of *Politikon*, Shireen Hassim writes: “The study of gender encompasses both men and women as subjects. New work in the field of masculinities has begun to explore the construction of masculinities, and the inter-relationship between male identities and political culture in South Africa. This new research will be integral to the project of making ‘the study of gender holistic and not something confined to the study of women’. (Morrell, 1998:7)” (Hassim, 1998:3). Apart from the general possibility that a focus on men might squeeze out women, little else is offered to support the view that my approach or that more generally of CMS has actually marginalised women. To underscore the point, a new volume on women in South African history appeared earlier this year (Gasa, 2007).

I would agree that there is a shortage of work on femininities and to some extent this has been an effect of the research attention given to the long neglected gender category, “man”. There are works on women and femininities (Weber and Mitchell, 2004; Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 2005) but there could be more. In conclusion, I see little indication that a new, subtle phallocentric hegemony generated by men masquerading as pro-feminists has emerged or is emerging either to warp the research agenda or to silence women.

The third support for her argument of phallocentrism is that CMS reasserts the male/female binary. And when it does this, the following things allegedly happen: “women once again become invisible”, “man is inevitably caught within the constraints of masculinity” and “the longevity of the masculinity signifier” is ensured. These charges are in part rhetorical. As already indicated, “women” have not become invisible. This is not to say that in some contexts they are suppressed, ignored, silenced and exploited, but this is not an effect of the critical enquiries of CMS scholars, or of the framing that they use, but of existing sets of power relations which need to be understood and challenged. What are the “constraints of masculinity”? I am not sure and Macleod doesn’t say but if we are to follow Judith Butler, then these constraints exist in a lack of imagination and in the current constraints that prevent various performative acts that make gender. These constraints can be and have begun to be analysed by CMS scholars with the concept “hegemonic masculinity” that helps to indicate what limits are imposed by current models of masculinity currently. What is “masculinity” (singular) a “marker” of? Again, Macleod doesn’t say except to imply that somehow it is the universal signifier of women’s subordination. I will return to this point in section 3 below.

Macleod argues that masculinity becomes self-referential, referring never to “its absent trace – femininity”. And she adds, that the possibility of “undoing” masculinity recedes. Again this is a vague charge. Masculinity is always being done and undone in the sense that it is not fixed but fluid and so is constantly being rehearsed, moulded, and enacted. The struggle to protect a hegemonic masculinity that maintains the dominance of men is not predetermined. It has to be defended and reshaped to accommodate challenges. This process of contestation has already been analysed in the CMS tradition, though

much more needs to be done in order better to understand the success of reproductive strategies.

Macleod's abstract argument is not helpful. In this first instance it asserts rather than demonstrates that constructions of masculinity *are* self-referential or are analysed self-referentially by scholars like myself. Following virtually all scholars who could be described as contributing to CMS, I have made relations with women a key determinant of constructions of masculinity. All too frequently my research on constructions of masculinity has found evidence of misogyny (and homophobia).

Macleod's airy theoretical objections are followed by her advocacy of the concept "patriarchy". She argues that this concept is preferable to others, such as the "gender order" because it serves as a "reminder that men rather women are the dominant or privileged group". This is not a persuasive argument and amounts to a linguistic preference for one term over another. In fact Connell's development of the concept "gender order" (Connell, 1987) gives full weight to the dominance of men over women. Reluctance to use the term stems from the temptation to reduce the complexity of societal power relations to the power of men over women, from the limitations of the concept "patriarchy" to readily grip onto other axes of power (race, class), the temptation to see patriarchy ahistorically as a fixed and unchanging set of power relations and for the unhelpful suggestion that all men are somehow implicated in the domination of women.

### **3. CONCEPTUAL AND POLITICAL CHALLENGES.**

While I do not agree with Macleod's critique, it nonetheless contributes to the debate about the concepts we use, about what form feminist agendas take and the strategies we adopt to advance them. In this section I want to engage with what I think are some unanswered questions about gender and feminist politics in South Africa.

What is masculinity? This is a beguiling question because there seems to be fairly wide agreement, at least in the social sciences, that masculinity is a socially constructed gender identity, that it is the "possession" of men, that it is relational (it cannot exist without its "other" femininity) and that it changes over time, by context, and in response to various changes in the individual as well as in wider society. The emphasis on process and agency are strong, which is not to say that the concept is without controversy. Within CMS itself there are debates about whether we should talk about "men" or "masculinities" and objections that the term is imprecise and sometimes used in a circular fashion (Clatterbaugh, 1998).

A key question is: what is the relationship of masculinity to the body? There is the suggestion in Macleod's article that there is no necessary relationship between masculinity and the male body. "The "new man's" masculinity is never undone, but rather mutates into new kinds of masculinities. This elasticity ensures the longevity of the masculinity signifier, bolstering the masculinity/femininity binary." The suggestion seems to be that masculinity will always be phallogentric so long as it is linked to the male body. This is resonant of the radical feminist politics of Shulamith Firestone (1970) who argued that bodies in and of themselves supported unequal and oppressive gender relations and advocated surgical solutions to this social problem.

How relevant is the male body to constructions of masculinity? Opinion is divided. In CMS, the body is by and large regarded as socially constructed, bearing the imprint of society and not the mark of natural superiority or inferiority. The tendency, then, is not to give causal power to hormones and not to focus on testosterone. This is not a position that makes dialogue with adjacent disciplines and approaches easy. For example, in studies on fatherhood, there are suggestions that biology is important and can dictate (cause) the responses of men towards their biological children. This research however has largely been superceded by social constructionist approaches which run the risk that “possible’ biosocial dimensions” are neglected (Marsiglio & Pleck, 2005:262). Foregrounding masculine bodies and making them the starting point of research runs the risk of biological determinism and there is enough evidence to show that male bodies themselves are volatile and changing and that capacity cannot be read off from organs which, themselves, are not immutable.

There are other ways of regarding the relationship of masculinity to body. In pioneering work a number of African feminists (Ifi Amadiume, 1987; Oyeronke Oyeowumi, 1997; and Obioma Naemeka, 1998) have taken issue with various aspects of western feminism. Referring to precolonial west African histories, they have noted that gender roles were fluid, that there was no strict gender hierarchy (masculinity was not a signifier of superiority), that women frequently had public place and power and that the relationship between men and women was not unremittingly competitive but involved accommodation and support. So, while bodies were sexed, this did not map onto regimes of gender power. The world they describe is one of complementarity. This is not to say that it is without conflict or inequality but it is a world where the interests of community supercede those of the individual and where the interests of the individual are inconceivable outside a community, giving him/her a strong investment in communal harmony.

I have explored the implications of this approach to gender and masculinity elsewhere (Morrell & Swart, 2005). For the purposes of this paper, there are two important implications. Firstly, Macleod seems to want to make masculinity an effect of discourse which is why she bemoans the persistence of a gender binary. I don't think that masculinity should be treated primarily or exclusively as a subject of discourse, as something created by discourse. It is embodied, historically constructed and has an existence in emotion, labour and work relations, family and other organisational structures, in disease and health.

Secondly, it permits us to think about an approach to the study of gender and to gender politics that is not invariably confrontational, but rather is inclusive. This possibility has not always readily been appreciated: “For a long time, and especially in women's studies, power has been considered as repressive only. Women were claimed to be victims of the exercise of power by men. ... However, the fact that women often agree with practices that subordinate them, that they resist the exercise of power, and that there often exist friendly relations between women and men, cannot be understood in terms of the exclusively repressive view on power” (Stolen & Vaa, 1991:9). Such a position allows us to get beyond the *oppositional* binary in analysis and politics.

One of the consequences of noting the mutual dependence of people across social categories is that the relentless concern with gender power differences confronts perspectives that emphasize competing dynamics and rival value systems. Gender

power differences may translate into inequalities, injustices, violence and so on, but equally they may not do so. And even when inequalities occur, they may need to be understood in a wider context and set off against other, greater, injustices or dangers (Sardar, 1998).

Such an approach does not absolve feminists from thinking about the constraints on agency and action. As Connell and Messerschmidt put it: "One is not free to adopt any gender position in interaction simply as a discursive or reflexive move. The possibilities are constrained massively by embodiment, by institutional histories, by economic forces, and by personal and family relationships" (2005:842-3).

There are already examples of gender studies which show how gender is enacted that is not driven by a single-minded determination to find power inequalities working to the detriment of females. Barry Thorne's marvellously sensitive *Gender Play* (1993) shows how gender is constructed in a variety of ways that expresses difference, inequality (sometimes) but mutual accommodation and fluidity as well. In a study of primary school gender relations, Jon Swain (2005:75) comes to the following finding: "most boys categorized girls as different rather than oppositional, and the most common reaction was one of detachment and disinterest. Rather than maintaining that there are two separate worlds, I argue that there are two complementary gendered cultures, sharing the one overall school world, which are further more nuanced by social class and race/ethnicity. Although there was a tendency of boys to dominate space and girls were often excluded from playground games, many girls refused to be dominated by boys, and some were able to deliberately exercise power over them."

Where research is sensitive to difference and to power inequalities but does not presume that these inequalities will determine gender relations and allows for the possibility that men and boys, women and girls will use accommodation, collaboration, compromise and negotiation in a process of power-sharing then the possibilities of working meaningfully for gender equity are greatly strengthened.

## **CONCLUSION.**

In its origins feminism was an analytical approach that sought to change the world. In engaging with Macleod's article I have focused on gender politics as a consideration of how this best can be done. I have argued that masculinity/ies is a concept which enables the theorization of one element of gender relations that has hitherto been ignored or neglected. This theorization is informed by the goal gender equity and seeks to provide a place for men to contribute to gender change. Pro-feminism seeks to go beyond a binaried conception that holds men and women in a fixed dance and leaves gender work to women. The introduction of a masculinities dimension into gender research has profound implications for gender politics. It enables men to see themselves as part of a gendered world in which they have an investment in seeking gender equity. New theoretical developments (cf African feminism) are reorienting work. While issues of gender inequality remain salient, they are being complemented with perspectives that show how men and women relate to one another in non-exploitative, mutually dependent ways. New approaches to gender politics, however, take place against the backdrop of material realities that are now global.

"There are gigantic issues of justice on a world scale in the maldistribution of material resources and the impact of the global economy on non-metropolitan bodies. We must

not forget the persistence of hunger, the unequal expectation of life, the impact of pollution, the impact of epidemic disease” (Connell, 2001:24). While we need to be cognisant of gender inequalities at a local level, an acknowledgement of and an engagement with global inequalities needs to frame the feminist endeavour.

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