

Men: Still getting it wrong

Book review

Hearn, J & Morgan, D (Eds) (1990) **Men, masculinities and social theory**. London: Unwin Hyman. ISBN: 0 04 445657 3 pbk.

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This edited volume provides an overview of the newly developing "critical study of men and masculinities" (also referred to as "the new men's studies" or "men's studies"), a field that is mushrooming in Britain and the United States. The book arises out of the 1988 Bradford conference entitled "Men, Masculinity and Social Theory" and held under the auspices of the British Sociological Association. Hearn and Morgan's worthwhile but problematic book charts the shaky beginnings of this fledgling academic field, its proponents often stumbling blindly into a minefield of contradictions, against the background of scathing critique from onlooking feminists.

The book is divided into four parts, and covers a broad range of issues. The first, entitled "Power and Domination", includes papers on men's exploitation of women (Hamner), patriarchy and fraternity (Remy), racism and black masculinity (Westwood), and men in organisations (Cockburn). Part two, entitled "Sexuality" contains papers on sexual dysfunctions, pornography and AIDS (Kimmel), as well as papers on homosexuality (Edwards) and

pornography (Brod). The third part is centred on the theme of "Identity and Perception", including chapters on gender identity (Thomas), psychoanalysis (Richards), perception (Duroche) and ethnomethodology (Coleman). The final part of the book contains three short responses to issues raised at the conference (Hearn and Morgan; Canaan and Griffin; and Siedler).

The field of men's studies appears at first glance to have a number of potential advantages, which are referred to by the editors on several occasions in the volume. Not the least of these is the possible contribution men's studies could make in extending the feminist project of theorising the operation of patriarchy both within social sciences (sociology in particular) and within the wider social order, and working towards the transformation of unequal social relations. The editors suggest that men's studies should serve as an ally of the women's movement. In principle, this makes a lot of sense. Men have to be drawn into the task of challenging and redefining oppressive gender relationships. In the long term this is not a task that can be achieved by women working on their own. In this sense the field has an important potential political agenda. Another possible advantage could be the important role that work on the social construction of masculinity might play in relation to a range of particular social problems, such as Aids, personal and political violence, resistance to attempts to challenge sexism in the workplace, and so on.

To what extent does the work represented in this book begin to realise the potentials hinted at above? This review will suggest that while most of the individual chapters are of intrinsic interest the volume as a whole lacks political coherence. Despite the author's skilful editorial contributions at various stages of the book, the volume as a whole shows little sign of leading to a coherent political project extending beyond the confines of academic social science.

On the whole, the purely theoretical chapters are neither particularly innovative or exciting. Barry Richards' application of Freudian theory to the current political cultures of the United States and Britain can only be described as disappointing for the reader who looks in vain for some suggestion of the way in which Richards' highly individualistic analysis relates to the broader social context. For example Richards' account of Ronald Reagan's preoccupation with nuclear warheads in terms of Reagan's personal experience of castration anxiety and Oedipal guilt is unsatisfyingly simplistic and psychologistic. Harry Brod's chapter on the other hand does attempt to theorise the interconnections between intimate personal experiences and large-scale historical and social structures. However his application of Marx's theory of alienation to men and pornography is also fairly mechanical and uninteresting.

The book is at its strongest in those contributions based on concrete case studies (eg. Cockburn, Westwood) or linked to clearly specified social issues (eg. Kimmel, Edwards). The most compelling case study is probably Cynthia Cockburn's account of the reproduction of male power within capitalist organisations. She provides an insightful account of the way in which a white male power system reproduces itself in a large British retail company, resisting interruption by Equal Opportunities Programmes. On the basis of the failure of many such programmes to achieve their aims, she cogently argues that it is not enough just to change the structures of power within organisations, but that Equal Opportunities activists have to devote far more attention to the parallel process of changing consciousness. Sallie Westwood's paper is also based on a case study - of black inner-city youth in a provincial English city. She presents detailed ethnographic evidence for the close interconnectedness of masculinity and ethnicity, arguing against the folly of postulating an essentialist category of "the masculine" that does not take the particularities of race and class into account.

While none of the papers deal with Aids in any detail, some chapters contain interesting starting points for the discussion of the role of socially constructed masculine sexual behaviour in the spread of the disease. For example, Michael Kimmel gives an interesting analysis of the "male sexual script" and its relationship to Aids (as well as pornography and so-called male "sexual dysfunction"). Surveys in the US indicate that despite campaigns and education programmes around Aids, relatively few men have changed their sexual practices. Kimmel comments that the notion of "safe sex" (involving a reduced number of sexual partners, the avoidance of casual sexual encounters, the use of condoms) runs counter to male socialisation: "In short, safe sex programmes encourage men to stop having sex like men" (p106). The task of educating men about safer sex cannot avoid confronting the issue of masculinity. For Kimmel, many Aids patients have simply been "over-conformists to destructive norms of male behaviour" (p109).

In another interesting paper Tim Edwards points to the limitations of existing attempts to theorise homosexuality. His paper consists of an investigation of the relationship between homosexuality and masculinity, based on his account of the history of the male gay movement in the past 20 years. He traces the way in which dichotomies such as sex/gender, nature/culture, psychology/sociology and biology/history have limited the understanding of male experience, and calls for renewed attempts to develop theories that do not fall into the trap of "dualistic discourse".

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the book as a whole is the critique of the field of men's studies by feminists at the conference. Are the proponents

of men's studies interested in challenging oppressive and destructive social relationships? Or are they simply yet another sub-field of apolitical "malestream" academic sociology?

In a hard-hitting paper Julna Hamner is pessimistic about the potential of the field of men's studies. She identifies this field of study as one more example of "how men gain, maintain and use power to subordinate women" (p37). She claims that in its present state, men's studies merely provides a forum for men to write self-serving apologia, framed within inadequate theoretical perspectives, and addressing a restricted range of questions. Through their failure to adequately attack and expose the roots of male power and domination these questions are ultimately conservative in nature.

Joyce Canaan and Christine Griffin voice skepticism about the sudden growth of this field of study in Britain, suggesting that perhaps this new field is nothing more than an "easy option" for academic men. They comment that men were conspicuous by their absence in the early years of bitter struggle as feminist academics laid themselves (and often their careers) on the line in challenging the hetero-patriarchal social science establishment. They are suspicious of the timing of the emergence of this field of study at a time in Britain where academic jobs and research funding are scarce, and where university researchers are desperately casting around for new sources of potential research, publishing deals and jobs.

Furthermore, Canaan and Griffin point to the coincidence of the rise of men's studies at a time when the women's movement is (more than ever before) developing international links and momentum, as well as a more sophisticated analysis of the relationship between gender and capitalism, racism, imperialism and so on. They worry that men's studies' narrow focus on masculinity could serve to once again restrict the political gender agenda in a retrogressive way. With the fierce competition for research funding in Britain in the current atmosphere of cutbacks and political conservatism, they fear that funding agencies may prefer to fund the less challenging area of "men's studies" under the guise of supporting research on gender oppression - at the expense of feminist researchers whose work is more radical.

The lack of political consciousness of certain of the contributors at the conference also comes under fire from feminists. In a scathingly delivered anecdote Canaan and Griffin quote one of the conference's workshop convenors who allegedly informed conference participants that politics and sociology should not mix. It would be unfair in the extreme to generalise this embarrassing lack of political sense to all the conference contributors, many of whom clearly have a sophisticated understanding of the political nature of

the social sciences. The very possibility of such a statement being made at a conference of this nature, however, points to the huge amount of homework the founding fathers of the new field need to do in conscientising its proponents and clarifying its political objectives before it can live up to its aim to serve as an ally of feminism.

As several feminist contributors to the book point out, feminism is primarily a political movement, one whose ultimate concern is the transformation of oppressive power relationships. The precise relevance of the field of men's studies as represented in this volume to this ultimate practical political concern remains unclear. This volume serves as an exciting starting point in that it highlights the wide range of challenges facing the field of men's studies. However much work remains to be done if its proponents are genuine in their concern to establish a field that breaks away from the apolitical, conservative and overwhelmingly hetero-patriarchal nature of the academic establishment.