

Hegemonic Heterosexual Masculinity

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Some of us who think about issues of gender and sexuality know that they are not simply individual issues, but rather are fundamental social processes affecting every member of society. Gender and sexuality are not separated from other aspects of our lives.

Millions of women know that their sex lives are limited or dictated by financial dependence upon men. Millions of women have experienced the inadequacy of abortion facilities and know that this is the result of political choices. Millions of young people know that their sexuality has been restricted by living with their parents. And many people know that their sex lives have involved power

relationships and that these power relationships are in some way wrong and unnecessary. The link between sex and politics, the way in which sex is political, is not just a concern of left political activists; it is already an important question of the majority.¹

These issues need investigation, analysis, and theorization. They must be moved from the often conceptualized base of individuality where they are marginalized or "evaluated", to the political economic arena where they can be connected to other political struggles within a framework of political economy. Within a political economy framework, gender and sexuality will be moved outside of the "official" ideology of gender roles and relocated in the material and social conditions of their existence.

Political economy, with its quite recent "discovery" of gender, and its almost total omission of sexuality, is still seriously flawed. A male stream political economy, which continues to maintain a sexism that marginalizes women and renders sexuality invisible, does not live up to its claim to a study of society as an integrated whole. For example, Heather Jon Maroney and Meg Luxton comment with reference to women on the deficit theorizing found even in recent work in political economy.

As for the rising sons (and occasionally daughters) of the political economy revival, while they realized that "women" exist as a social category and political force, and supported on principle work on "women", they have not yet for the most part, incorporated this understanding into their work. While they increasingly include a discussion of women, they have yet to move beyond the stage of "adding women" to make a genuine attempt to theorize gender. . . the new generation of thinkers associated with the new Canadian political economy revival, has followed all too closely in the footsteps of the founding fathers.²

If political economy is to begin to expand theoretically to provide an analysis of society as a whole, then it must not only continue to shift its theoretical advances to include gender; it must also include sexuality and, in particular, heterosexuality and masculinity. Heterosexuality and masculinity are not neutral nor are they biological. They are social accomplishments of a political nature located within a larger set of political,

economic, and social relations. Gender obedience to heterosexuality and masculinity is a human activity, a social product embodied by individual men in their everyday, routine set of social relations. As a collective process, gender obedience by men expresses themes of competition with other men, the exploitation and subordination of women and other men, violence toward women and other men, and homophobia. Hegemonic heterosexual masculinity is socially constructed and socially imposed. Because it can be socially resisted, there exists the possibility of change.

In the context of this argument, this review focuses on fragments of the existing literature on gender and sexuality, and argues for the recognition of the social constitution of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity and its location in the larger set of social relations as a problematic for socialist thought and practice. In this sense, it is a radical review of radical lacunae in the literature, which uses these fragments to construct an argument against hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. If we accept this problematic as connected to other social processes of oppression such as militarism, racism and sexism, then this work has an agenda of major change. Institutionalized forms of racism, militarism, sexism and heterosexism are socially regulated acts of violence. Men's violence is often symbolized and embodied in the individual man. However, it is important to emphasize that patriarchal structures of heterosexist masculine authority, domination and control are diffused throughout society in its social, political, economic and ideological activities.

This essay reviews an approach that grounds heterosexual masculinity in the social practices of institutions and their agents where a gender regime is imposed, encouraging particular forms of masculinity while discouraging others. Political economy seldom has taken seriously the question of just how it is that heterosexuality and masculinity are connected to the production and maintenance of the present system of power. The literature of the men's movement seldom has taken seriously the differences in power between men. It has tended to produce an image of men that is white, middle class and heterosexual. As Ned Lytleton has pointed out: "an analysis of masculinity that does not deal with the contradictions of power imbalances that exist between men themselves will be

limited and biased, and its limits and biases will be concealed under the blanket of shared male privilege.”³ Gary Kinsman suggests that “a series of masculinities becomes sublimated under one form of masculinity that becomes ‘masculinity’. As a result, socially organized power relations among and between men based on sexuality, race, class, or age have been neglected.”⁴ Political economists and the men’s movement have not explored the ways in which heterosexuality and masculinity are connected to work, leisure, our everyday social relations, and our most intimate experiences and communication. Carol Vance’s review of the literature on female sexuality can still state that for most analysts and other people: “sexual behaviour is seen as an isolated private event, not connected to the distribution of resources and power, the gender system, the organization of production, or race and class.”⁵

The political economy of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity is an approach containing a vision: a vision that a qualitatively better society is possible without the restrictive and oppressive gender and sexuality that is so often enforced by our social institutions, as well as by everyday social terrorism. The vision, then, should not be merely to change people’s consciousness in regard to masculinity and the sex/gender system, or simply to reconstruct institutions along different ideologies and practices. Rather, at the core of the vision is the aim of changing a set of historically structured power relations—a change in the social, political, and economic structures that constitute the ground of domination and oppression in so many ways. Gery Kinsman comments on the necessity of changing hegemonic heterosexuality masculinity.

This redefining of masculinity and sexuality will also help destroy the anxieties and insecurities of many straight men who try so hard to be ‘real’ men. But the success of this understanding depends on the ability to develop alternative visions and experiences that will help all people understand how their lives could be organized without heterosexuality as the institutionalized social norm. Such a goal is a radical transformation of society in which everyone will be able to gain control over his or her own body, desires, and life.⁶

Bert Young suggests in his introduction to *Who’s On Top? The Politics of Heterosexuality*, that the political dimensions of

sexuality are often completely ignored, "including the division of labour along gender lines and a social class system that is predominately capitalist and patriarchal. Men do have more freedom to express their sexuality than women and heterosexuals have more freedom than gays; these privileges do provide a power base, in terms of social control."⁷ Heterosexual privilege is often not understood. Lesbian-feminist, Charlotte Bunch, once explained to heterosexual women that the best way to find out what heterosexual privilege is all about is to go about for a few days as a lesbian.

What makes heterosexuality work is heterosexual privilege—and if you don't have a sense of what heterosexual privilege is, I suggest that you go home and announce to everyone that you know—a roommate, your family, the people you work with, everywhere that you go—that you're a queer. Try being a queer for a week.⁸

The silence around heterosexism and heterosexual privilege must be broken. Feminism has begun to explore sexuality beyond simple theories of repression to show how gender/sexuality are relations of power in a male-dominated society. This, of course, allows us to see that issues of gender and sexuality are changeable and an intergral part of personal and social struggle. The human activity that produces sex relations as categorical and hierachical can be called into question in the making of a new social terrain around sexuality and gender. Gayle Rubin calls this the "Charmed Circle" of sexuality, which has heterosexual procreative masculinity at the top of the pyramid.

Modern Western societies appraise sex acts according to a hierachial system of sexual value. Marital, reproductive heterosexuals are alone at the top of the erotic pyramid. . . Individuals whose behavior stands high in this hierarchy are rewarded with certified mental health, respectability, legality, social and physical mobility, institutional support, and material benefits. As sexual behavior or occupations fall lower on the scale, the individuals who practice them are subjected to a presumption of mental illness, disrespectability, criminality, restricted physical and social mobility, loss of institutional support, and economic sanctions.⁹

These lived patterns of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity are patterns of power, and are a significant underpinning of

patriarchal culture. Yet these relations of power have received marginal, rather than central treatment.

In our society heterosexuality as an institutionalized norm has become an important means of social regulation, enforced by laws, police practices, family and social policies, school, and the mass media. In its historical development, heterosexuality is tied with the institution of masculinity, which gives social and cultural meaning to biological male anatomy, associating it with masculinity, aggressiveness, and an "active" sexuality.¹⁰

Michael Kaufman suggests that:

radical socioeconomic and political change is a requirement for the end of men's violence. . . the process of achieving these long-term goals contains many elements of economic, social, political, and psychological change, each of which requires a fundamental transformation of society. Such transformation will not be created by an amalgam of changed individuals; but there is a relationship between personal change and our ability to construct organizational, political and economic alternatives that will be able to mount a successful change to the status quo.¹¹

Varda Burstyn moves issues of gender and sexuality into the political and economic area of analysis in "Political Precedents and Moral Crusades: Women, Sex and the State," citing numerous connections between sex and the state such as: the cross country travels of the Special Committee on Pornography and Prostitution (the Fraser Committee); the firebombing of Red Hot Video, a Vancouver porn outlet; the censoring of progressive artists' work in Toronto and Vancouver; the trial of Doctors Henry Morgentaler, Leslie Smoling and Robert Scott, physicians at a Toronto abortion clinic, for conspiring to procure an abortion; the injunction against Vancouver prostitutes forbidding them to work in the West End of Vancouver; the mass arrests of gay men in Montreal bars and baths; the extraordinary entrapment of gay men in Orillia, Ontario; the Alberta government's attempt to eliminate sex education; and the list goes on.¹² It is, partially, the "seeing" of gender and sexuality as individual and separate that has allowed the gender and sexual oppression of so many to continue within the social, political, and economic structure that constitutes the source of domination in so many ways.

Ian Lumsden, in "Sexuality and the State: The Politics of 'Normal' Sexuality," says:

The major institutions that affect collective sexual behaviour in our society are subordinate to the interests of the dominant economic class, which in turn is largely comprised of men imbued with heterosexual and patriarchal values. The institutions that I have in mind include the large corporations, which control not only the content of advertising and hence of consumption, as well as the mass media, which depend upon advertising revenue, and the entertainment industry. Schools, universities, and most non-profit foundations also fit into this category. These institutions promote and disseminate economic and political beliefs consistent with the interests of the dominant economic class. Moreover, they also further the heterosexist values, which legitimize the prerogatives of heterosexual males, encourage the sexual and emotional dependence of women upon men, and invalidate homosexuality. For neither radical feminists nor openly gay men are to be found at the pinnacle of power in our society. In addition to these institutions, which support the hegemony of heterosexual patriarchal values, there are state agencies that are specifically empowered to intervene and regulate our sexual lives, such as law courts, the police force, censor boards and welfare agencies.¹³

Hegemonic heterosexual masculinity, then, is "hooked" to more than sexual satisfaction in a society where male dominance is part of a rigidly structured hierarchy. Certainly by now, with the strength of the feminist movement, masculinity can no longer be assumed to be socially and historically unproblematic. The hegemonic pattern *is* dominant; however, because it is socially sustained, it can be resisted. This change will not be brought about by boys playing with dolls or by women having access to jobs that are traditionally men's employment. Centuries-old patriarchal orders are not easily eradicated. Domination by men of other men and women is based on, and perpetuated by, a wide range of social structures, from our intimate sexual relationships to the organization of economic and political life.¹⁴

Dorothy Smith suggests that the resurgence of the women's movement of the 1960s began to raise questions about the extent of men's control of the ideological apparatus of the state; and especially those processes highly controlled by men to produce and distribute knowledge—images, ideas, symbols, language, information, etc.—through which women and men

come to understand themselves, each other, and the world in which they live.¹⁵ The approach that we take to this analysis of the absence of research on men's influence, and specifically on masculinity, needs to be a rather unusual one. Many social scientists, including those on the left, have not often given much time or thought to the influence of the "male perspective" and its neglect in research and analysis. This lack of investigation is because of the enormous influence of hegemonic masculinity on every person who has lived in a patriarchal culture. While deeply immersed in "maleness", we have developed styles of thought, knowledge, and ways of doing centred around the values, concerns, and emphasis of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. Masculinity, according to Madeline Arnot in her work on the political economy of gender relations, needs to be seen not simply as what it is to the male (as identity), but rather as activity (as a set of social relations) as what males do, as practice.¹⁶

Oppression, exploitation, power and social control offer a more powerful account of the constraints that operate in personality and in social organization, and of the way in which the two levels are linked in the process of being reproduced. Varda Burstyn argues: "masculine dominance is not something that can be neatly removed, like a decrepit porch off an otherwise strong house. It is more like the frame of a building, shaping family life, the paid workforce, political institutions, education, art and science. Women and men working for equality are in effect asking for changes throughout every level of society."¹⁷

Most males consciously or unconsciously consent to this dominant version of masculinity. Most males can be seen to undergo a process of transforming various meanings and messages to produce a constellation of behavior, which we can call hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. Men become the embodiment of that socially created classification. They externalize this masculinity through their speech, their dress, their physical appearance and presence, and their relations with others.

What is the connection to the larger set of social relations? Vance says that "scientific" knowledge suggesting that the dominant cultural arrangements are the result of biology—

and, therefore, intrinsic, external, and unchanging—are usually ideologies supporting prevailing power relations. Deeply felt personal identities—for example masculinity/femininity or heterosexual/homosexual—are not private or solely the product of biology, but are created through the intersection of political, social, and economic forces, which vary over time.¹⁸

It is the relations within institutions assisting in the maintenance of heterosexual masculinity that need to be situated within the larger nexus of relations, of which they are a constitutive part. The knowledge that is produced and the social relations that dominate these institutions act as a mechanism of cultural and economic preservation and distribution. These things need to be looked at with specific attention to masculinity, and to the way in which they help maintain a “gender regime” which benefits those in power. Marianna Valverde suggests that:

Sexuality is not something we ‘have’, our personal property that we might choose to ‘share’ with others, but rather is a process in which the powers of the state, of the scientific and moral establishments, and the sexist ideology of male defined pleasure, are constantly meeting resistance from individuals and groups. The experience of individuals give them a starting point to challenge the ideas and power of those who create oppression.¹⁹

Hegemonic heterosexual masculinity, in this sense, should be seen for what it is—a political issue—a form of social control, a central organizing principle that supports present power arrangements. Hegemonic heterosexual masculinity is articulated at many points within the economic, social and political structures of the material world. Hegemonic heterosexual masculinity is an obstacle to a truly socialist society; it supports the present system of capitalism.

Unraveling how present-day relations hold hegemonic heterosexual masculinity in place, begins the process of understanding how that dominant form of masculinity assists in the production of an unjust and unequal society where male power has been harnessed to work for political ends. The struggle to dispossess heterosexual males of their power while reconstructing the meaning of masculinity will, indeed, be a lengthy and difficult task.

Placing the concept of hegemony, rather than that of reproduction, at the core of an analysis of sex/gender and masculinity makes it easier to render visible the active process of “doing” gender and sexuality, the existence of power struggles and points of conflict, and the range of alternatives that do exist. Hegemony further allows us to remember that the power of the dominant interests is never total, nor entirely secure. Hegemony is a weapon which must be continuously struggled for, won, and maintained. In this analysis then, we can begin to see that heterosexual hegemonic masculinity—as well as other issues around gender and sexuality—is not simply a matter of reproduction.

Tim Carrigan, Pat Connell, and John Lee in, “Hard and Heavy: Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity,” suggest that:

this ‘hegemony’, then, always refers to a historical situation, a set of circumstances in which power is held and won. The construction of hegemony is not a matter of pushing and pulling between ready-formed groups, but is partly a matter of the formation of these groupings. To understand the different kinds of masculinity, demands above all, an examination of the practices in which hegemony is constituted and contested—in short, the political techniques of the patriarchal social order. There is no easy path to a major reconstruction of masculinity.²⁰

The British historian Jeffrey Weeks says:

Now we have the opportunity to construct an alternative vision based on a realistic hope for the end of sexual domination and subordination, for new sexual and social relations, for new and genuine opportunities for pleasure and choice. We have the chance to regain control of our bodies, to recognize their potentialities to the full, to take ourselves beyond the boundaries of sexuality as we know it. All we need is the political commitment, imagination, and vision. The future, now as ever, is in our hands.²¹

Contemporary theorists in political economy need to take the essential step forward to include an analysis of the sex/gender regime so that a full understanding of the complexities of society will be rendered visible. Then we can build a society where everyday social relations are constructed so that all human activity is given value, a society in which the material conditions for freedom and equality are available to everyone

on equal terms. Andrew Tolson states, "the challenge to socialist men is to understand masculinity as a social problem and thus to work together for a non-sexist socialist society."²²

It is, then, not enough for male stream political economists to offer support to women's struggles. We must also build a theoretical base which speaks to men in particular. But the very structure of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity stands in the way. This structure needs to be addressed by male political economists and others within the context of a political movement. And, as Howard Buchbinder, in "Male Heterosexuality: The Socialized Penis Revisited" suggests: "it is clear that the struggle must be both personal and political, or it will be neither. As long as there is the possibility of a collective strategy for men, it must be linked to our daily lives with women, lovers, companions, friends, and comrades. Therein lies our hope."²³ A political economy that claims to study society as an integrated whole, without an investigation and analysis of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity and its place in a hierarchical gender/sexuality set of relations, is failing to respond to its claim.

Notes

I would like to thank my colleague Jim Sacouman for his many helpful comments during the writing of this review essay.

1. Jamie Gough and Mike MacNair, *Gay Liberation In the Eighties* (London, 1985), p.3
2. Heather Jon Maroney and Meg Luxton, "From Feminism and Political Economy to Feminist Political Economy," in *Feminism and Political Economy: Women's Work, Women's Struggles* (Toronto, 1987), pp. 9, 11.
3. Ned Lyttleton, "Men's Liberation, Men Against Sexism and Major Dividing Lines," *Resources For Feminist Research* 12:4 (December/January 1983/84), p. 33.
4. Gary Kinsman, "Men Loving Men: The Challenge of Gay Liberation," in *Beyond Patriarchy: Essays By Men On Pleasure, Power, and Change*, ed., Michael Kaufman (Toronto, 1987), p. 104.
5. Carol Vance, "Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (London, 1984), p.8.
6. Kinsman, "Men's Liberation," p. 116. (See n. 4, above.)
7. Bert Young, *Who's on Top? The Politics of Heterosexuality*, eds. Howard Buchbinder et al. (Toronto, 1987), p.7.
8. As quoted in Kinsman's article, p. 105. Kinsman goes on to suggest that the same is true of "straight" men. That is, for heterosexual men to understand the oppression and violence displayed toward men who do not produce

- themselves as heterosexual men, "straight" men should tell people that they are gay and, thus, see the treatment they get. For further reading on this notion of institutionalized heterosexuality, see Charlotte Bunch, "Not for Lesbians Only," *Ouest* 11: 2 (Fall 1975). Also see Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds., Snitow, Stansell and Thompson, (New York, 1983), pp. 127-205.
9. Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed., Carol Vance (Boston, 1984), p. 278.
 10. Kinsman, "Men's Liberation," p. 104
 11. Michael Kaufman, pp. 24, 25.
 12. See *Women Against Censorship*, (Toronto 1985), pp. 22, 23.
 13. Unpublished article.
 14. For a fuller discussion, see "Construction of Masculinity and The Triad of Men's Violence" in *Beyond Patriarchy*, ed., Michael Kaufman, (Toronto, 1987).
 15. See "Women's Class and Family," in D. Smith and V. Burstyn, *Women, Class, Family and State* (Toronto, 1985) for a more extensive discussion of patriarchy and class in the capitalist mode of production.
 16. See "School and the Reproduction of Class and Gender Relations" in *Schooling, Ideology and the Curriculum*, eds., L. Barton et al. (Brighton, 1980).
 17. See the "Introduction" in *Women Against Censorship*, (Toronto, 1985), p. 1.
 18. Vance, *Pleasure and Danger*, p.8 (See n.5 above.)
 19. Marianna Valverde, *Sex, Power and Pleasure* (Toronto, 1985), p. 17.
 20. In *Beyond Patriarchy* p. 181. (See n. 4, above.)
 21. Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents* (Boston, 1985), p. 260.
 22. Andrew Tolson, *The Limits of Masculinity* (London, 1977), p. 146.
 23. Buchbinder et al, eds., *Who's On Top?*, p. 82. (See n. 7, above.)