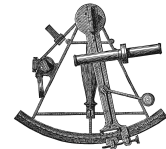


Between nature and nurture: Paradoxes of masculinity in times of turmoil

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Abstract

Given the current ambivalent links between the increased respectability of caring masculinities and the pervasive discourse of the crisis of masculinity, this article reflects on the paradoxes of masculinities when examined from the perspective of care and intimate life. First, it argues that it is in the private sphere that long-standing inequalities are reproduced. Secondly, it highlights how care and emotionality can be embodied as elements of complicity with the ideal of a respectable but still quite dominant masculinity. The main thesis emphasises how caring and nurturing masculinities have become central to contemporary backlashes against gender equality, as the feminisation of men is distorted to perpetuate a patriarchal gender order. The paradoxical nature of masculinity in the private sphere is clearly a sign of the times, requiring a critical eye alert to all the pitfalls of the status quo in protecting traditional male privilege.

Keywords

Caring masculinities; crisis of masculinity; patriarchy; public and private; gender power

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Introduction

In many ways, masculinity has been constructed and supported by the public/private divide. Men continue to dominate in the public sphere, while in the private sphere of the family (as partners, fathers, sons, partners) they are supposed to be more caring. The explosion of terms such as caring masculinities (Elliot, 2016; Scambor, Wojnicka and Bergmmann, 2013), inclusive masculinities (Anderson, 2009), hybrid masculinities (McDowell, 2003), the new father (Björnberg and Kollind, 1996; Lupton and Barclay, 1997; Hobson, 2002), the new man (Wilcox, 2004) or the new boy (Nixon, 2001) signal the growing concern with the transformation of men's lives in the context of the decline of the male breadwinner model in both the global North (Lewis, 2001) and the global South (Aboim, 2009; Shefer, 2014; Naguib, 2015). At the same time, the historically constructed categories of care (Fraser, 1994) and emotionality (de Boise and Hearn, 2017) have become paramount in gender equality and masculinity studies as the detrimental costs of hegemonic masculinity for both men and women have been exposed. The development of critical studies of men and masculinities (CMSS) and decades of research have highlighted not only the benefits of masculinity and male dominance, but also the costs associated with the 'patriarchal dividend' (Connell, 1995) and the confounding ways in which standards of competitiveness, toughness, invulnerability or success can be oppressive and frustratingly unattainable for the majority of men (Messner, 1997; Hearn, 2001; Connell, 2003; Kimmel, 2010). As a result, men's capacity to feel human can be blocked and replaced by a set of aspirational scripts.

A range of new masculine subjects are thus being produced, whether as a positive consequence of feminist movements and gender politics or, conversely, as a backlash against the erosion of the old patriarchal figure (Faludi 1999). Contemporary discourses increasingly reveal a desire to capture the new ways in which masculinities are culturally constructed and enacted. Although there are a number of factors - from family policies and feminist interventions to body and consumer culture - that sustain this discursive proliferation, many of these images locate men in the realm of private life. The caring father, the new romantic, or the companion, as opposed to the patriarch, the breadwinner, the authoritarian husband and father, or the public man, is a key symbolic dichotomy (Aboim, 2016). Despite this, women still bear the heaviest burden of domestic and care work (World Bank, 2012) and are the main victims of violence in intimate relationships (Hearn, 2012). Despite new

ideals, the subalternisation of women and femininity has not been replaced by gender equality or a truly progressive male care model.

Given the current ambivalent links between the increased respectability of caring masculinities and the pervasive discourse on the crisis of masculinity, I reflect on the paradoxes of masculinities when examined from the perspective of family and intimate life. First, I argue that it is in the private sphere that long-standing inequalities are reproduced. Secondly, it highlights the ways in which care and emotionality can be embodied as elements of complicity with the ideal of a respectable but still quite dominant masculinity. Finally, I argue that caring and nurturing masculinities, as an oxymoron, have become central to contemporary backlashes against gender equality, as the feminisation of men is distorted to perpetuate a patriarchal gender order. The paradoxical nature of masculinity in the private sphere is clearly a sign of the times, requiring a critical eye alert to all the pitfalls of the status quo in protecting traditional male privilege.

Hard and soft: understanding patriarchy

An important part of the history of masculinity has been, and continues to be, constructed in family life and the private sphere of relationships and emotions. So these are not exactly 'soft institutions' in terms of the patriarchal core complex of gender, as Connell suggested in 1987. On the contrary, it is in the historically privatised contexts of reproduction and sexuality that key processes of domination take place, both materially and discursively. The gendered self is shaped to a large extent in the space that modernity has mistakenly constructed as private, and also through the tensions between private and public that have grown exponentially in recent decades as women have entered the labour market and men have had to come to terms with new models of companionship and equality.

The making of the 'modern family' has been a dominant sociological concern from the time of Émile Durkheim through to Talcott Parsons' theorisations of the link between modernisation and the institutionalisation of a gendered heterosexual family. First and foremost, it was a history of gender relations, that is, a history of heteronormative patriarchy itself (Barrett and McIntosh, 1982), which had a decisive impact on gendered institutions, norms and practices. When patriarchy was transferred to the public sphere of the economy and politics (Hearn, 1992), men had the power to control their women and children. The separation of the spheres of production and reproduction, together with the development of the

romantic couple and new bonds of affection towards children (Shorter, 1975), gave new meanings to gender differentiation, facilitating the institutionalisation of the role model of the 'familialised man'. Men were expected to take responsibility for providing for the family and to be the main authority figures. An ethic of responsibility and self-control was the basis of this 'respectable masculinity' (Collier, 1995).

In contrast, women, as dependent beings, would be responsible for reproduction and emotional labour (Badinter, 1981). The modern gender order was largely the product of these family-based gender roles, which pitted the 'public provider' - the responsible male adult - against the naturalised childlike figure of women as mothers. In sum, the development of men as providers and authority figures was largely dependent on family dynamics. It presented dominant masculinity as a social construct resulting from efforts to tame sexual urges, always a violent 'nature', to be managed by men in the pursuit of domination over women and other men (Kimmel, 1987). The workings of male hegemony emerged from this tension between 'nature' and 'society', compulsion and responsibility. The literary myth of Don Juan as the seductive sexual conqueror (Mandrell, 1992) appears in sharp contrast to familialised masculinities. Jane Austen's figures of masculinity in early nineteenth-century Britain are exemplary of the latter. Men (think of characters like Darcy or Knightley) were heroically portrayed as domesticated by courtesy, honour and a family ethic that found support in true love, the crucial foundation of male discipline (Kramp, 2007). Undeniably, romanticism and, more recently, the emphasis on care and emotion gave new ideological meanings to the patriarchal organisation of the family. Men became 'soft patriarchs' (Wilcox, 2004), disciplined by affection in a family construed as a refuge. The threads of men's familialisation and emotionalisation were steadily woven together as intimacy became a keyword in westernised cultures (Giddens 1992, Jamieson 1998). Indeed, the composite character of masculinity – as well as its plurality, hybridism and conflicting models – is to a great extent the development of contradictory forces contained in traditional archetypes. Evidently, new trends are also arising. In this scenario, partnership and fatherhood gained a new value and instrumentality, as they have become as central as the old patriarchal control was. However, the new male engagement in private life is pervaded by the very same tensions between the predator and the provider, the dangerous and the familial, the citizen and the father, thus engendering ambivalence in the structures of domination. Stemming from old contradictions, feminized dualisms like

nature and nurturing became key axes to understand men's troubled inroads to change in the present-day.

The paradoxes of care: heroes and villains

Over the last few decades, profound changes have emerged that underpin massive transformations at the core of the gender order, posing major challenges for men. At the same time, feminist critique has struggled to deconstruct patriarchy, focusing on the oppressive side of family life. In contemporary Western societies, changes to the earlier 'modern family' have had serious implications for masculinity, as new models of 'being a man' have emerged beyond the traditional authoritarian provider. As partners and fathers, men have to cope with the new expectations created by the widespread acceptance of communal and egalitarian ideals (Morgan 1996). In addition, the model of the male caregiver, a nurturing figure capable of the expressiveness and intimate involvement that were stereotypical features of femininity, has gained strength. It is also true, however, that rather than establishing a dominant model, gender developments have multiple, sometimes contradictory, aspects that introduce a degree of uncertainty into the formation of masculinities. The fact is that new ideals of masculine respectability and responsibility are being constructed against old models, but not without the tensions that arise from the ideological corpus of hegemonic masculinity.

One such example is the concept of caring masculinities, which has gained momentum since the early 2000s (Scambor *et al.*, 2013) as an ally in the struggle against the harms of hegemonic masculinity. Combining contributions from CSMM and feminist care theory, Elliot defined caring masculinities as:

(...) masculine identities that exclude domination and embrace the affective, relational, emotional, and interdependent qualities of care (...); [and as] a critical form of men's engagement in gender equality because doing care work requires men to resist hegemonic masculinity' (Elliot, 2016: 252-254).

Thus, caring masculinities require, alongside a commitment to care work and gender equality, a rejection of the 'dividends' of masculinity (privilege, domination and power). Furthermore, an inclusive perspective highlights the multiple dimensions of the transformative process involved in caring masculinities, from care work in family life to care work in professional life, from caring for others to caring for oneself. As Scambor

and colleagues (2013, p. 2) argue, caring masculinities 'emerge in men's everyday lives when they take on caring practices, especially within families or when they work in 'feminine' caring occupations'. The authors also argue that it is essential to 'broaden the concept of care to include self-care (awareness of health or emotional issues, deeper friendships, less risk-taking behaviour, etc.)'. This perspective strongly emphasises the costs of masculinity for all men, as opposed to a view that sets a dominant elite or group against women and marginalised or subaltern men (particularly men of colour, migrants, gay or transgender men, among others). However, despite the growing emphasis on caring, nurturing or inclusive masculinities in Western and non-Western contexts (author, 2009; Shefer, 2014; Naguib, 2015), the caring turn is far from complete, as evidenced by the persistence of gender inequalities and the devaluation of disempowered men.

On the other hand, if care becomes a normative trait of respectable masculinity, it may be in danger of losing its progressive and rebellious potential, inasmuch as forms of complicity with respectability become visible and the discrepancy between discourse and practice is exposed. More seriously, interpreting this movement as the feminisation of men paves the way for feeding the ideological apparatus that sustains the alleged crisis of masculinity. When it comes to the intimate and nurturing, men often navigate the paradoxes of masculinity as villains (if they do not care and are too hyper-masculine, or if they care too much and are weak) and often as heroes (if they challenge the old role models or perpetuate male power). Fathers' rights movements - one of the main branches of men's rights movements - can interpret care in quite conservative ways (Messner, 1997). While the importance of the father is emphasised and family law is usually seen as a weapon against men who provide care, the notion of care is often used to blame women and victimize men. Such an example of a conservative notion of fatherhood, far removed from feminist agendas, exemplifies a particular conception of involvement and care that may well perpetuate ideals of the soft patriarch with a degree of resentment and harm to women, children and men themselves (Flood, 2004).

The male breadwinner and the discourse on the crisis of masculinity

Men and masculinities have been in the spotlight for various and often seemingly paradoxical reasons. Bombastic titles about the crisis of

masculinity, or even the end of men, hit the news at a rapid pace. In recent years, the explosion of bestselling books and magazine articles on masculinity and men, the emergence of experts on TV shows and tabloids, the confessional writing by men about their difficulties and struggles cannot be ignored or simply swept under the carpet. It seems - if we take all these storylines as real - that men, whether heroes or villains, have finally lost their grip on the game, and a kind of narrative of decline is feeding the anxieties of the day. As a result of nostalgia for the old days, it seems that a man is no longer - or cannot be - a real man. This is one of the main paradoxes of our time, which encapsulates the many facets of gender change and the resistance to it. Such a paradox between the affirmation of men's continuing power and their portrayal as helpless victims of a kind of conspiracy to subordinate men deserves further reflection.

A number of popular books aimed at a wide audience feed on notions of the lost past - with its natural and proper gender order - and bring the crisis of masculinity to the forefront of the discussion, often offering an amalgam of rudimentary common sense combined with supposed scientific facts and theories and, not infrequently, unconvincing anecdotalism. In 2012, Hanna Rosin's *The End of Men and the Rise of Women* attracted an audience intimidated by the pop idea of male decline, while loudly proclaiming the death of patriarchy, a social system in which power and authority are primarily held by men (Pilcher and Whelehan, 2004, pp. 93-96). Rosin insists that women have won the gender war and are now ahead of men in all areas of society as a result of the crisis in the US economy and the Western world in general. For Rosin, the economic recession and the decline of traditional male employment sectors have left men unemployed and precarious, a trend reinforced by women's academic success and rapid entry into fields such as politics and business. The gender world is upside down, Rosin gleefully asserts, reversing Simone de Beauvoir's classic proclamation of women as the second sex. The problem with Rosin (and many others), however, is that she interprets a few valid findings on women's education and employment into a broad narrative of success that is gratingly dissonant with reality. Similarly, David Benatar argues that men have become the new victims, damaged by decades of feminism and pro-women policies. Benatar (2012, p.10) also takes up de Beauvoir's seminal work, writing that 'we might call discrimination against men the 'second sexism', to borrow Simone de Beauvoir's famous phrase'. It is striking that, almost seventy years after the publication of *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir's challenge

to the hierarchical opposition between the masculine principle - which she denounced as always the preferred norm - and the feminine principle is still a common war in this ongoing gender struggle over the shape of gender differences. If, as she famously argued, "one is not born a woman, but becomes a woman" (de Beauvoir, 1972[1949], p. 295), why do (some) men - and some women - struggle to accept and adapt to changes in the gender order of societies? And why are discourses about the supposed crisis of masculinity so popular and invasive?

The examples of additions to the ever-growing body of literature lamenting the decline of male dominance are difficult to summarise. However, the key issue to keep in mind is the expansion of what has already been termed a theory of 'masculinity in crisis'. Men are now portrayed as the 'weaker sex', the title of a journalistic piece published by *The Economist* in March 2015. Drawing on data from a range of countries in the global North and South, it argues that 'boys are being outperformed by girls at school and university, and the gap is widening'. The discussion is no longer a Western problem, but a global conversation. Amanullah De Soudy (2014) breaks relatively new ground by highlighting the link between religion - and the rigid codes of Islamic masculinity as articulated in the Qur'an - and the ways in which men feel deprived of ideal forms of masculinity or incapable of achieving such narrow models of perfection. As the author argues, God does not lend itself to the organisation of society, making it difficult to replicate such sophisticated models of gendered action in Muslim communities. Whether the focus is on economic and market changes or religious codes, men's weakness has become an increasingly global feature of contemporary times.

Many of these books and articles do not bring anything new to the field. Rather, they build on old claims that attracted attention in the 1980s and 1990s. But even before the twentieth century, discourses about the crisis of masculinity were not uncommon and can easily be traced back to the seventeenth century, when the term 'masculinity' began to be used to qualify the 'appropriate qualities of the male sex as manly, virile, powerful'. If we take an example from the end of the nineteenth century, pointed out by the historian Christopher E. Forth (2008), we can see how the archetypes of the 'wild savage' and the 'civilised man' clashed. Encouraged by the colonial encounters of the time, the civilizing mission of Western empires raised concerns about the progressive softening and emasculation of the civilised European colonisers against the savage masculinity of the colonised. In this particular moment of crisis, born out of the confrontation with other 'uncivilised' forms of masculinity, there was

a fear of degeneration and, as Forth (2008, p. 141) writes, 'the feeling that the path to remasculinisation led away from the comforts and conveniences of the city to more dangerous places where death lurked at every step'. The solution was then to turn the colonised into effeminate subjects and to promote the value of pain, violence and hardship in preserving masculinity. The key lesson in this example is that notions of the crisis of masculinity have emerged at different moments in history for different reasons, and we keep returning to the same fundamental problem.

Indeed, in recent decades, assemblages have been formed and books have been printed to protect the 'masculine essence', an ideal construed as a kind of 'macho mystique' of the lost savage warrior. An inescapable illustration is Robert Bly's bestseller *Iron John* (1990). A leader of the mythopoetic men's movement since the early 1980s, Bly glorifies the emblematic figure of John Wayne, who appears as the protagonist of an ideal masculinity, essentially mobilised by conservative groups (Lienesch, 2004). Above all, the movement sought to restore the 'deep masculinity' that had been buried under the demands of the modern lifestyle, a lifestyle that had led to the feminisation of men (Messner, 1997). In the USA, Bly's dramatic impact on the conservative backlash against women's empowerment, gender equality and feminism encouraged journalist Susan Faludi (1991) to investigate this 'war' on feminism and women. She describes Bly's activism and aggressive stance against women in the following terms:

A woman in the audience asks if he's saying that the women's movement is to blame. 'The men's movement is not a response to the women's movement,' he says. A few moments later, though, he is back warning men in the audience to beware of 'the force-field of women.' When another woman in the crowd points out the contradiction, he gets mad. He picks up the microphone and marches over to the troublemaker, a frail elderly woman clutching a flowered tote bag. He sticks his face in hers and yells into the microphone, 'It's women like you who are turning men into yoghurt-eaters (Faludi, 1991: 311).

The recurrent crises of masculinities seem to have haunted the reflection on men for a very long time. In this sense, 'crises' - deliberately used in the plural - have been constantly constructed and deconstructed as a subject (Hearn, 1999). From the 1970s to the present day, we have witnessed an ongoing struggle between 'anti-sexist men', 'feminist' or

'pro-feminist' men on the one hand, and 'wild men', 'mythopoetic men', 'new men', 'new lads' and anti-feminist men in general on the other. In the US, the Coalition of Free Men (men's rights), the Million Man March (Nation of Islam) and the Promise Keepers (Christian) became reference groups for a conservative politics of masculinity. At the same time, perhaps at the opposite pole of the spectrum, other men identify with very different labels, designed to fit in with, and often embrace, changes in gender relations. The 'caring father' exemplifies the shift in masculine duties and expectations in the private sphere. Another extreme example, shaping the ideal of the 'new modern man', whose masculinity has been softened (i.e. feminised) by the demands of consumerism and beautification, is the invention of the 'metrosexual'. Coined in 1994 by the journalist Mark Simpson, 'metrosexual' is a catch-all term used to describe men's preoccupation with physical beauty. For a number of authors (Faludi, 1999; Bordo, 1999), many men are simply responding to - or conforming to - the invitation to identify with images of sexualised objects. Resistance to this trend has more recently led to the popularisation of opposing labels such as the 'retrosexual', a man who spends as little time and money as possible on his appearance. Icons such as Richard Gere or the Marlboro Man would represent - against emasculation - the charm of 'real masculinity': men with muscles, hair, a masculine attitude, above all virility, even if with a touch of dandyism. The retrosexual conveys traditional notions of masculinity (such as fixing cars, drinking beer, watching football or 'bringing home the bacon') and is essentially a reaction to the meteoric rise of the 'spoiled' metrosexual or the caring partner and parent.

Who then represents 'real masculinity' in the influential media wars? Of course, there is no real answer to this question unless we believe that there is a 'real masculinity' hidden beneath the social and cultural constructs of masculinity. Such a common sense truth has been the privileged object of theorising and researching men and masculinities with particular force since the 1970s. As a result, plurality has been established as a central feature of gender relations, no longer conforming to the monolithic models of masculinity (Carrigan, Connell and Lee, 1985) that seem to satisfy pop versions of the issue. In short, the key challenge is that men are wrestling with feminine archetypes associated with emotionality and nurturance, which reignite the nature/nurture debate. It is the seeming naturalness of male power that is being challenged, as if it is increasingly difficult to accept that gender is also a historical construct for men. In the realm of family and intimate life, this pervasive tension is

perhaps more visible than in other areas. Perhaps the notion of caring, when linked to masculinity, is simply too malleable and open to very different interpretations (Gerstel and Gallagher, 2001). For this reason, promoting caring masculinities requires constant vigilance and critical work from feminism and critical masculinity studies.

Conclusion: reassessing the gendering of men

A common thread provided a framework for interpreting developments towards new ideals of masculinity from the perspective of private life. Such processes of inclusion in traditionally feminised spaces are a key part of the gendering of men, that is, the ways in which men have been included in the field of gender studies. It is not untrue to say that in the twentieth century, the seemingly eternal architecture of patriarchal masculinity began to crumble, initiating a process that would inexorably and powerfully accelerate over time and would inevitably mark the twenty-first century. It is not, however, a teleological process without setbacks or resistance. In a word, without paradoxes. The alleged crisis of masculinity, whether it be due to economic recession (the *mancession* documented by Rosin and sharply deconstructed by Michael Kimmel), consumerism, care and emotion, or simply the inability to cope with new codes of masculinity, can be seen as the cornerstone of the key dilemmas to be addressed in the present and future. At the same time, such a crisis - and the range of discourses for and against it - encapsulates advances and resistances that are central to understanding how masculinity and men can be paradoxical. The processes by which paradoxes and (unresolved) oppositions have become intrinsic to masculinities, and their ramifications and repercussions, have been the subject of our critical reflection.

In the past, it was 'a man's world', as many truthfully say, but although it has gone, it has been replaced by a new world of plural masculinities that are often difficult to grasp, let alone identify and characterise. In reality, the strategies for dealing with men and masculinities in different social arenas can be seen as complex, if not complicated, sometimes due to a lack of conceptual clarity or the intrusion of labels disseminated by the media and popular literature. Sometimes even research findings end up promoting an empirical explosion of labels - veritable collections of masculine archetypes - rather than further theoretically and empirically informed discussion, which can be a serious difficulty.

Indeed, over the past few decades, the subject of men and masculinities has been a fertile ground for academic theorisation and research, as well as social and political debate. The vast amount of literature that has been written on men and masculinities - from a variety of theoretical perspectives and empirical frameworks - has created a new body of knowledge at the heart of the wider field of gender and feminist theorising. In this day and age, the centrality of men and masculinities cannot be ignored. Anyone interested in issues as diverse as gender relations and social change, power and violence, globalisation and transnationalism, the politics of equality and difference, sexuality and embodiment, identities and the pluralisation of lifestyles, and so on, will have few doubts about this. Those interested in the (so-called) crisis of masculinities will also have few doubts. Research has also shown that the old days are not exactly the same, but power and privilege are still masculine, even if global images of respectable masculinity tend to soften the architecture of patriarchy.

This softening has not been without contradictions, many of which come from the realm of family, intimacy and emotionality. While some men embrace new mottos of respectable masculinity (as those who care), many others remain indifferent or resist what is often seen as a feminisation of masculinity, holding on to traditional models of respectability. Today, some men are reacting to the threat of losing the power they once held, a power critically denounced by decades of struggles for the rights of women and marginalised minorities. Paradoxically, the privileged claim a right to the status of the oppressed. As the world has become globalised and some of the world's southern geographies have played a key role in the chains of capitalist production and even cultural visibility, the iconic image of a white, successful and predatory masculinity in the US has gained ascendancy.

However, a central aspect of current struggles lies precisely in the heart of the private, for it is above all femininity that is denied by the conservative reaction. This is why affirmations of caring and nurturing virtues can sometimes conceal harmful ideologies and practices. For some men, caring may be a way out of the hegemonic, but for others it may be all about fathers and sons playing with guns (Messner, 2011). As historical lessons warn us, processes of remasculinisation would not be a novelty, but rather a recurring trend. For this reason, defending caring masculinities and the transformations they propose means being alert to potential appropriations and misuses of the concept. The feminist project of critical studies of men and masculinities is necessary to ensure the

ongoing scrutiny of such paradoxes and socio-political dangers. Only through this work can caring masculinities ever be achieved.

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