

Fostering change among men

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Abstract

This 40 minute talk (with diagrams) looks closely at the notion of hegemony. Connell's 'masculinities' theory relies on a definition of hegemony which is indistinguishable from ultimate control, leading him to theorise most men as an obstacle to progressive change. But Laclau and Mouffe argue that hegemony is more fully conceived as a force primarily arising at the level of meaning, so that hegemony is a key result of any discourse. I visually show the basics of Laclau and Mouffe's theory. Because the terrain of meaning is limitless, any existing hegemony can be challenged by other meanings, no single hegemony is able to shape all of social life, new discourses can be created, and social life is made up of multiple discourses with their associated hegemonies. Connell's account of masculinities is more usefully seen as one discourse of gender among many. Feminism is another very significant discourse of gender, in which men are subordinated to women – an example of how the legitimacy available to men via patriarchy occurs only in specific discourses. Thus academics can lead the creation of new discourses which legitimate men but not at the expense of women.

4,120 words

I started studying theories about gender and men 15 years ago, after being involved in quite a variety of men's movement activities in the 1980s and early 90s. And I got involved in men's movement stuff because it seemed to me when I was young that the prevailing conventions of masculinity are incredibly restrictive for men, even though it seemed men also got a lot of privileges as well. Masculinity is pretty violent, it's exhaustively competitive, you can't be affectionate without it leading to sex, men aren't trusted with kids, being a breadwinner sucks, and so on. Feminism seemed to be a two edged sword for men: it was incredibly critical of men, but at the same time it seemed to offer ways of viewing gender issues in a way that was potentially freeing for men as well as women. But the thing that really puzzled me was that most feminists saw men as inherently resisting change, and most men didn't seem much interested in change either. This was puzzling because I felt there were great benefits to men if we change because masculinity seemed so costly for men.

Towards the end of my undergrad degree I concluded that there are indeed great benefits to men from progressive change, but most men don't perceive these benefits because of how gender issues are portrayed and how we usually think

about masculinity and gender. In other words, men's resistance to change is not a problem with men but a problem with theory.

This means that what is needed is new theories about men, and this is what my PhD focuses on. If current theories portray men as being resistant to change, what are other ways can we theorise men and gender that position men differently in regard to change in gender relations?

Now this in presentation today I don't have a great deal of time, so I'll give you just an overview of the general direction of the thesis. This means I have to skip a great deal of the detail, but perhaps some of that will come out in the discussion afterwards. I'll start by examining the most widely known theory about men at the moment, which is the framework developed by RW Connell.

Connell observes there is a very powerful form of masculinity which he calls "hegemonic masculinity". This is the current idealised masculinity, the one that gets the most privilege, and is most strongly aligned with all the most powerful social institutions. Hegemonic masculinity is at the top of a hierarchy, and below this top position is a gradation of femininities down one side and a whole range of less exalted masculinities down the other.

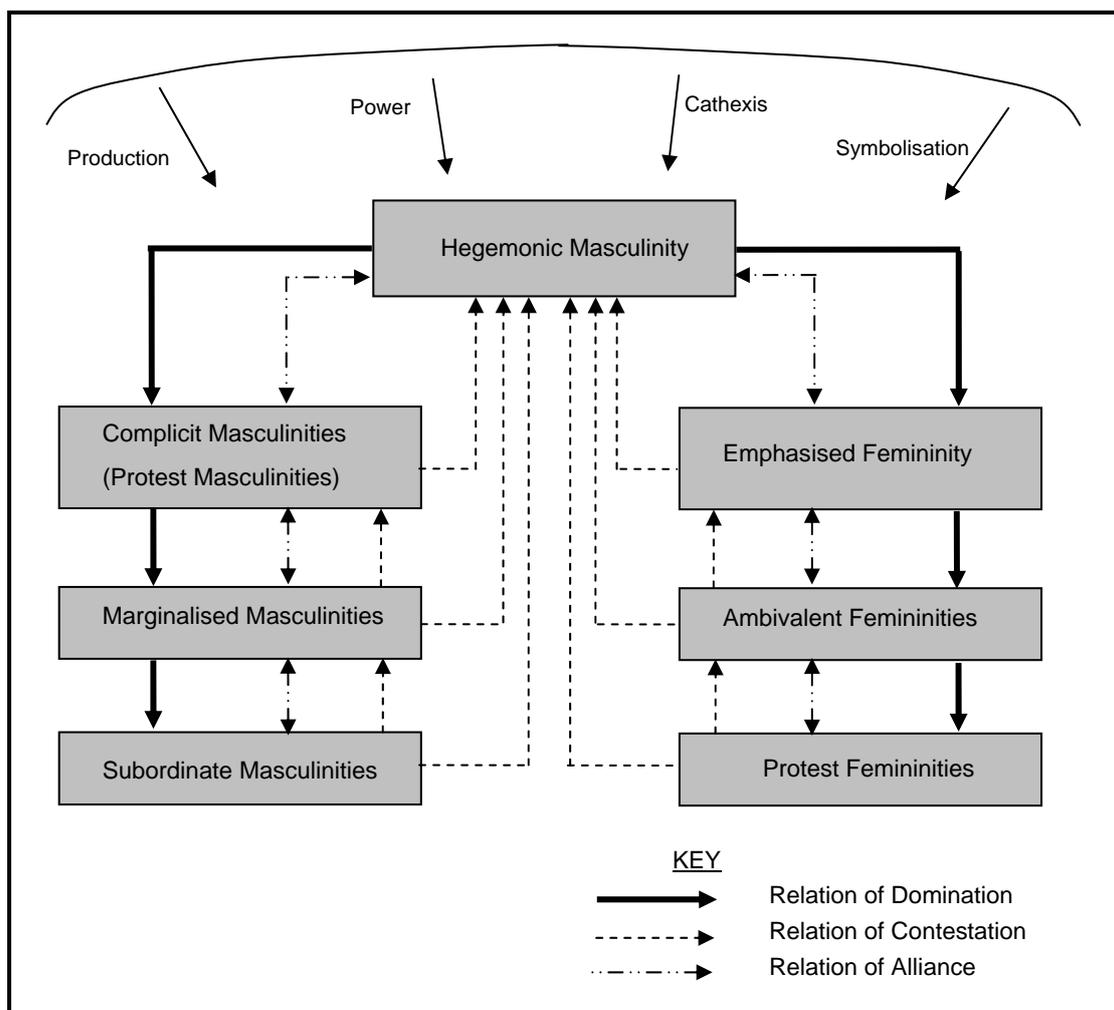


Fig 1. - The Masculinities Schema (Howson 2002: 107)

What hangs this whole structure together is the formation of interests, which arise in any situation in which there is an inequality of any sort. In the case of gender, the inequality arises from the global domination of women by men. This means men as a broad group have an interest in maintaining the inequality, while women as a broad group have an interest in change.

But although historically this sharp division between men and women was much more accentuated, and clearly there are many situations in which men do have greater power than women, modern society is more complex than this simple broad division. Connell's greatest addition to the field is to point out that not only is there a hierarchy between men and women, there is also hierarchies amongst men as well. Not all men benefit equally from what he calls 'the patriarchal dividend'. Indeed, some men such as old men or homosexual men have little access to social resources or are forcibly marginalised from acceptable social life. At each of these locations, however, men find ways to live coherent lives within the constraints they find there, and Connell calls this coherent package a distinct masculinity, so that overall in society there are multiple masculinities.

This is an elegant description of men and power overall, because it enables a more complex understanding of the variations among men, and hence has triggered a great deal of new research into men in the last 15 years.

But there's some major problems with it. The biggest problem is the implications for change for most men in gender relations. Connell portrays men's global domination of women as an incontrovertible and unalterable fact. This is extremely significant because the entire hierarchical structure of his framework holds together around his notion of interests: men's interest is that this domination continues while women's interest is in change. Although Connell does concede that some individual men do take progressive action he firmly negates the possibility of this occurring at a wide scale.

I certainly acknowledge that it does seem true at present that only a small number of men appear to engage with issues of gender equality, and very few deliberately take progressive action. But the significant thing about Connell's view is that he theorises this current situation not as the current situation, not as the way things are now, but as structurally inevitable, that it is structurally impossible in society for men at a collective level to come to have interests in change. And this is so because gender inequality exists and men's collective interests flow unproblematically from that gender inequality.

So Connell casts what one feminist describes as a "depressing pall" over the possibilities for change in the future: even though he wants things to change he views the world in such a way that change appears impossible.

How does Connell put together this view? He doesn't simply say that social power is fixed, or men keep women violently suppressed. Once again, he recognises social complexity, and uses the Marxist idea of hegemony to explain how powerful social groups retain power. Connell defines hegemony as the social arrangement in which powerful groups maintain their power not primarily by

violence but by controlling a large range of ‘cultural processes’. Mostly this control happens at social sites where significant discussions take place so that powerful groups are powerful because they are able to shape how things are discussed, and shape the agenda of what is and isn’t discussed. This control of cultural processes means that hegemonic groups manage to rule largely by consent, that is, most people agree that things should keep going roughly the way they are already going. In terms of gender the most significant product of these cultural processes is what Connell calls the general association between authority and masculinity – i.e. the idea that certain sorts of men properly have authority while women are just kind of hung out to dry.

Now I should say here that I agree that social resources are certainly distributed unevenly between men and women, and that this is unfair. My core difficulty with Connell is his claim to have described the *entire terrain* of gender relations, that this one cultural linkage between authority and masculinity is able to act as the core point from which *all* social formations to do with gender unfold.

So Connell relies on this concept of hegemony quite extensively in his framework. So I dug a bit deeper into the concept. In the late 1930s Antonio Gramsci was trying to explain some events in social life which seemed to contradict Karl Marx’s views about class. Marx thought that capitalism would inevitably give way before the triumph of the working class revolution. But early in 20th century Europe two alarming things emerged: the working class seemed to be not only resigned to capitalism but increasingly seemed to like it, and some left wing governments were rapidly becoming brutally totalitarian and repressive.

Gramsci’s insight here was to realise that social life is significantly shaped not only by economic factors like production of goods and by formal state power, but also by what he called moral and intellectual forces. So important are these forces, according to Gramsci, that if a currently subordinated group seeks social power its first task must be to achieve moral and intellectual leadership, that is it must find ways to shape morality and ideas about social life to suit its own goals. And the group already in power can only really maintain its power by being able to maintain control of the moral and intellectual agenda.

This, then, is how Connell uses the idea: hegemonic men are in a position in economic and political systems to be able to control the social agenda – to control what is talked about and how it is talked about in regard to gender issues. This hegemonic group is only a small minority of men, but most men and a substantial minority of women go along with the cultural agenda set by the hegemonic group. Bringing about change, in this view, seems to be a matter of unseating this hegemonic group so that other groups can reshape the cultural agenda.

Even though obviously this formulation of hegemony has considerable traction with social reality, it also has a fatal flaw: it portrays the entire terrain of social relations, institutions and the details of social life as all emerging from only one relationship: the relationship between the hegemonic group and all the other groups who contest its power.

This fatal flaw of seeing social life emerging from only one relationship drastically over-estimates the power available to the hegemonic group and under-estimates the power available to other groups. It focuses attention on how the hegemonic group is getting in the way of change, and it draws attention away from other processes of change which are actually occurring. As a result it maximises attention to how difficult it is to bring about change in a specific area, and doesn't attend to a whole lot of other changes occurring around that area which can be used as resources to support the changes desired. This is the 'depressing pall' about change in gender relations which emerges from Connell.

How can we think about things in a new way? Principally, how can we theorise social life and especially these very important cultural processes in a way that is able to take up the realities Connell usefully records but doesn't lead to the depressing pall over the future? Post-structuralist writers Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have closely considered the well-established Marxist idea of hegemony, and come up with some very creative results.

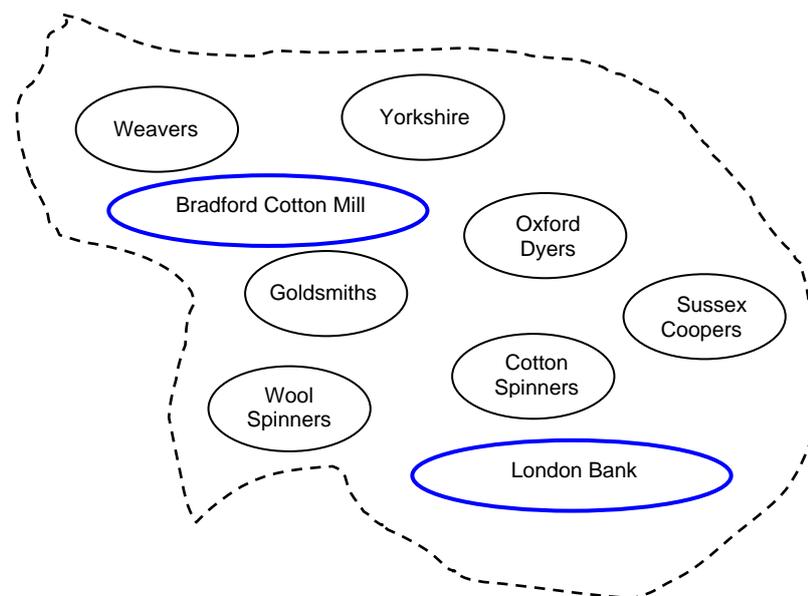


Fig 2. - Prior to Marxism

They point out that early in the 19th century the Marxist idea of 'class' as in working class and ruling class didn't exist. Workers certainly existed, but to the extent they identified as groups at all those groups were often trade groups or guilds, or as geographic communities. Marxist intellectuals and activists had to disseminate the idea that all workers in England had something in common – that they worked for a living – and that this was distinct from the capitalists who owned stuff and could live off the profits from the stuff they owned.

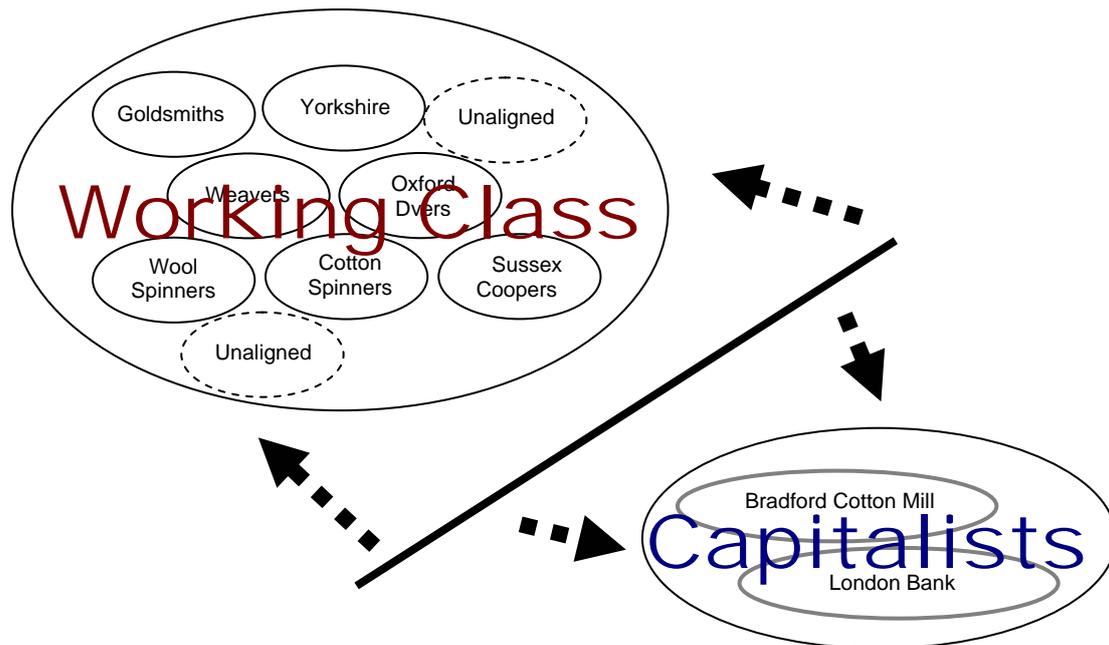


Fig. 3 - The Effect of Marxism

In other words, Marxists found ways to draw together immensely diverse collectivities into a new group, the working class, and a defining act in creating this new group was that the working class was in opposition to the ruling class. Laclau & Mouffe argue that this ‘drawing together’ of the new working class came about through moral and intellectual leadership exercised by the Marxist activists, that is, according to Gramsci’s definition, the Marxist creation of class as a defining social dividing line was an act of hegemony.

But Laclau & Mouffe point out that theorising this division of the social space into only two camps with only one relationship between them is why the Marxists ran into trouble in the early 20th century: they were unable to imagine any other formative social relations than the one they were intent upon, and in consequence they misread a great deal of what was actually going on.

Laclau & Mouffe argue that the Marxists didn’t notice that they were in fact relying on an earlier creation in social life, which was the enormous turning point of the French Revolution with its immensely influential idea of equality. The Marxists were able to harness this general principle of equality so as to make it appear that workers also had a claim to equality, and that capitalists were oppressing workers.

Now equality is not an actual physical thing. It is a general principle, an idea which has moral value attached to it: the idea that we are all equal is considered a good idea. The significance of equality not being a physical thing is that it is available from anywhere in the terrain of social life. And because it is a general principle it can be applied in many different ways. These aspects of the principle of equality underpin the proliferation of increasingly diverse claims for social inclusion especially in the last half of the 20th century.

So equality is what Laclau & Mouffe call a *nodal point*, a constellation of meaning from which an open-ended number of social effects may be generated. They argue the principle of equality is a nodal point of the entire social terrain in a democracy – it is an idea which is being employed in more and more areas of social life to shape more and more social relations. A nodal point is able to have its open-ended effect because the nodal point is the point where the relationship between two groups *articulates*. i.e. the nodal point is like an elbow joint or a wrist joint, which links two limbs together but also allows the two limbs to move in relation to each other.

So we have a general pattern emerging here, a pattern of how meanings are created.

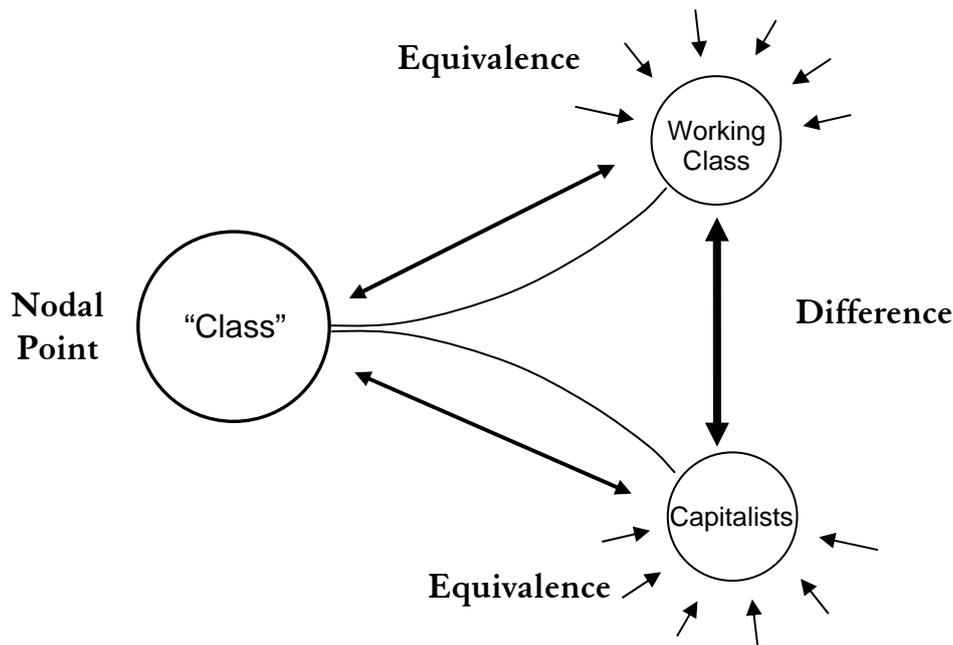


Fig. 4 - Key elements of a Discourse

Identifying the *equivalence* amongst workers enables the identification of the group doing the hegemonising – in this case, the working class. There’s a bifurcation between two groups or positions, which is brought about by identifying the *difference* between them. And at the same time the two groups or positions are brought into a relationship with each other via their connection through the nodal point. Laclau & Mouffe call the two groups *subject positions*, since they are in effect subject to the whole meaning arrangement, and clearly occupy a specific position in relation to each other.

But very significantly, although this moment of creation occurs at the level of meaning, at the same time it can also come to have enormously significant concrete effects. Meanings can have such a profound impact at such a deep level that some people are prepared to die to support specific meanings. This can be a very personal or individual thing, however: individuals can pursue their own meanings and values and shape their lives accordingly. But some meanings gain extensive traction in social life, and can come to motivate very large numbers of

people to act. This is how the material effects in social life come about, when the new meaning landscape, the new terms ‘working class’ and ‘capitalists’ becomes tied to concrete social resources: organisations which are able to collect money, get the ear of the press, garner votes and mobilise bodies at demonstrations, and so on. As a result laws can be changed, industries or neighbourhoods can emerge or disappear. Social formations are shaped.

When a pattern of meaning becomes linked to social life and material resources in this way Laclau & Mouffe call this a *discourse*, along the lines of Foucault’s idea of discourse.

It struck me that this way of thinking about particular patterns in social life can very readily be applied to Connell’s account of gender relations. We can draw a picture of his framework which slightly adapts the schematic I showed earlier, and describe the whole thing as a discourse of gender. Connell proposes that at the meaning level, the whole show is held together by the general association of authority and masculinity. So that’s the nodal point, which is something like the statement “authority and masculinity are related in social life.”

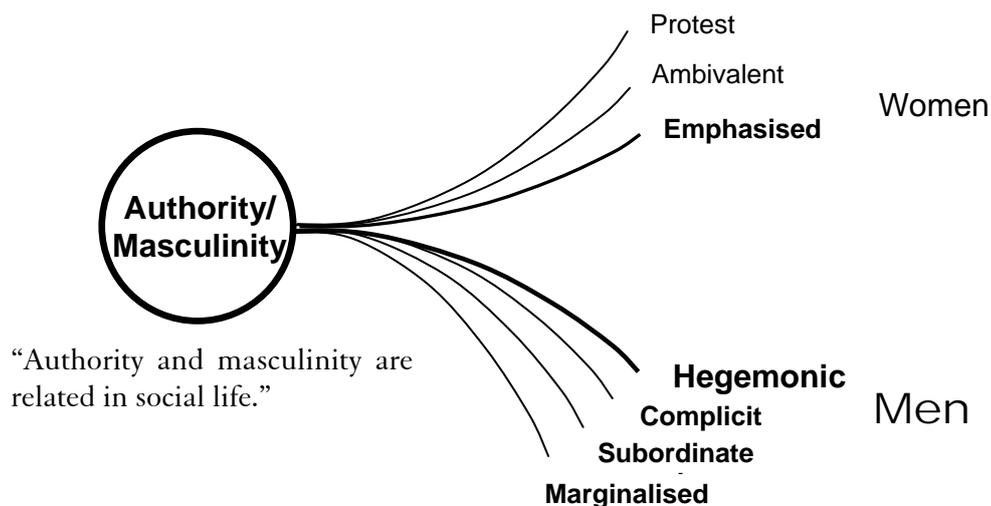
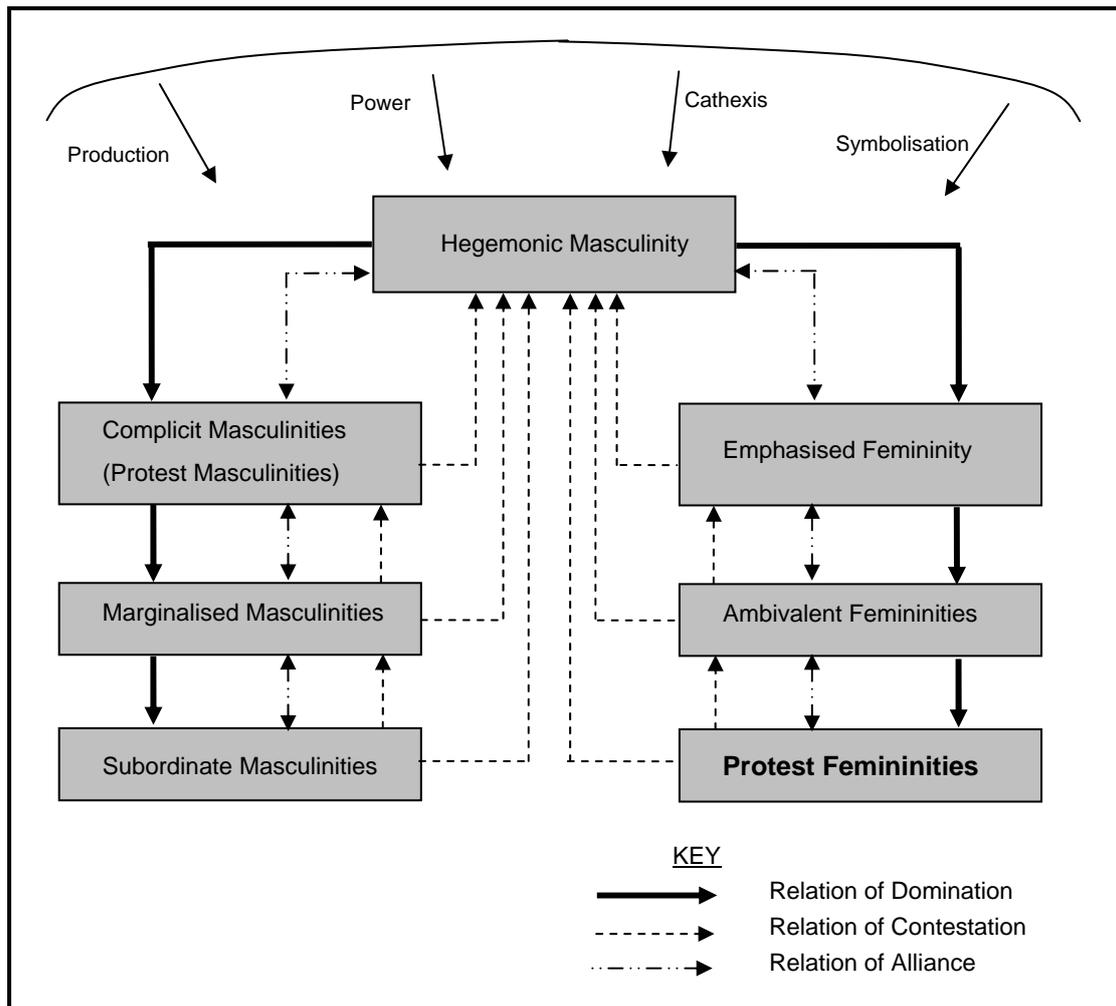


Fig. 5 - The Discourse of Authority/Masculinity

From there we get the fundamental bifurcation between women and men Connell observes, with the hierarchy there also: men are more important than women. And within each of the two main subject positions, men and women, there’s a whole collection of smaller subject positions, just like in the discourse of class the working class is made up of disparate groups who still continue to exist but now as part of the overall group “working class”.

And the configuration certainly operates as a discourse in that it isn’t just a pattern of meanings. As Connell points out social resources are also distributed according to this pattern, so that men as a general group enjoy certain benefits, and some men enjoy more benefits than others.

But if we go back to the original diagram you may notice there is a striking omission.



Connell's claim is that his framework describes all of gender relations in social life. But in his framework there is no feminism. He's got the position of 'protest femininities' in the bottom right there, but on his account these are always lesser than hegemonic masculinity. By not including feminism he's saying that feminism just doesn't impact upon men or upon gender relations. This is clearly nonsense. So, using Laclau & Mouffe as a model, let's sketch the process by which feminism became a new discourse.

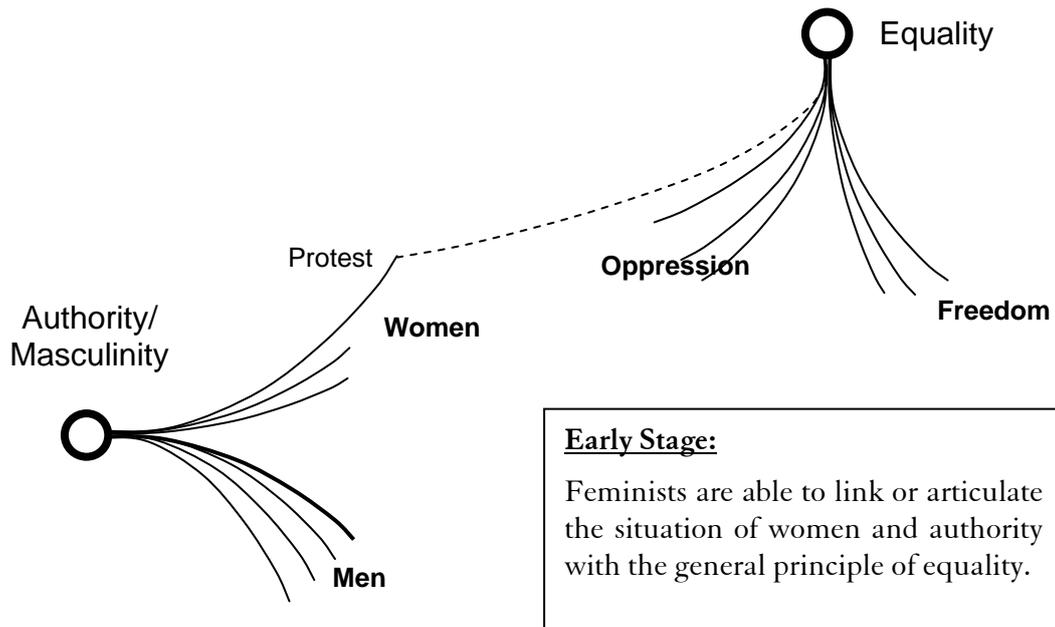


Fig. 6 - Hegemony #1

At this stage very few women are involved, and feminists face uphill battles on almost every front to get better access to social resources.

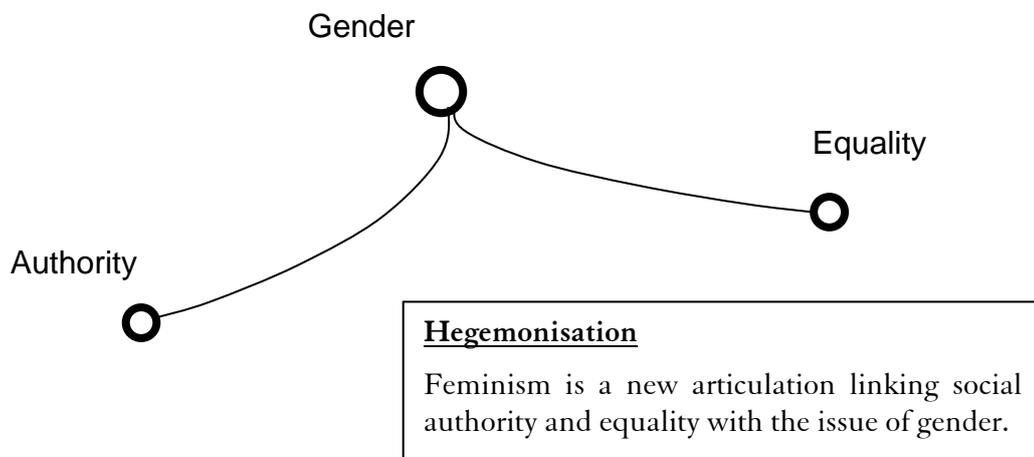


Fig. 7 - Hegemony #2

Authority and equality are the meaning resources, the ideas and concepts feminists draw upon to stabilise the new nodal point. This is excellent. It's when feminists start to achieve real formal gains for women – changes in the law, and changes in many systemic practices. But inevitably, as is the way with the process of creating meaning ...

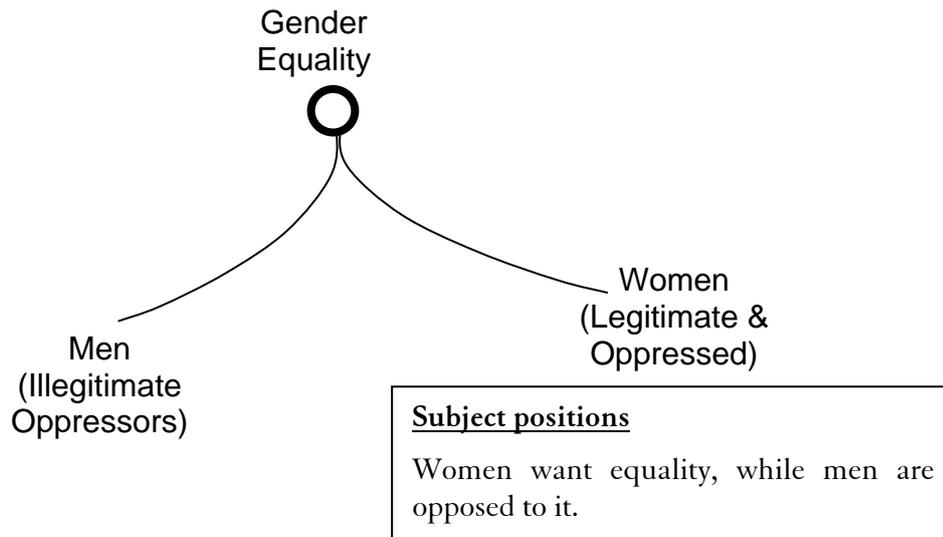


Fig. 8 - Hegemony #3

... the discourse bifurcates in order to create its meaning, and in this case it bifurcates around gender again, but in a very different way to the existing discourse of authority and gender.

And this is exactly how Connell sees the situation with respect to men and change.

So what Connell has done is to take a subject position within the discourse of gender equality and from there critically observe the older discourse of authority and gender. This is of course an immensely productive thing to do, and something that has only become possible with the advent of the new feminist discourse.

But what Connell *claims* is that he is describing the entire terrain of gender. Clearly this claim cannot be substantiated. For a start he has left out this other extremely significant discourse of gender, the feminist discourse about gender equality. And he left out this discourse because he has also not included a crucial possibility that Laclau & Mouffe argue is present in democracies – the possibility of new hegemonisations, the possibility of creating entirely new discourses.

Now how is this possibility of new discourses relevant for men? Because the association between authority and masculinity is generated in a discourse, and that discourse portrays men as crazy if they seek to do things which might reduce their authority. There are definite costs related to this authority, but those costs at present simply aren't articulated with other social issues in a way that fosters progressive change amongst men. The most readily accessible way in to the costs of men's authority is via extremely widely available statistics about men's life-span and health, technically called men's mortality and morbidity rates. Men die younger than women in all age groups, and have poorer health outcomes than women. Men are many more times likely to kill themselves than women, and single or divorced men have worse morbidity and suicide rates than married men. Even though these are literally life and death issues with men, they have no meaning in terms of gender politics. They are increasingly taken up in discourses

about health and suicide prevention, but they don't yet mean anything in terms of how men might get benefits from being different. And especially they are not a nodal point for collective action amongst men about gender.

But they could be. New discourses hold out the possibility of articulating these life and death issues in entirely new ways, and the extent of how differently they can be articulated can be seen in this summary of the subject positions in the two discourses we have been looking at.

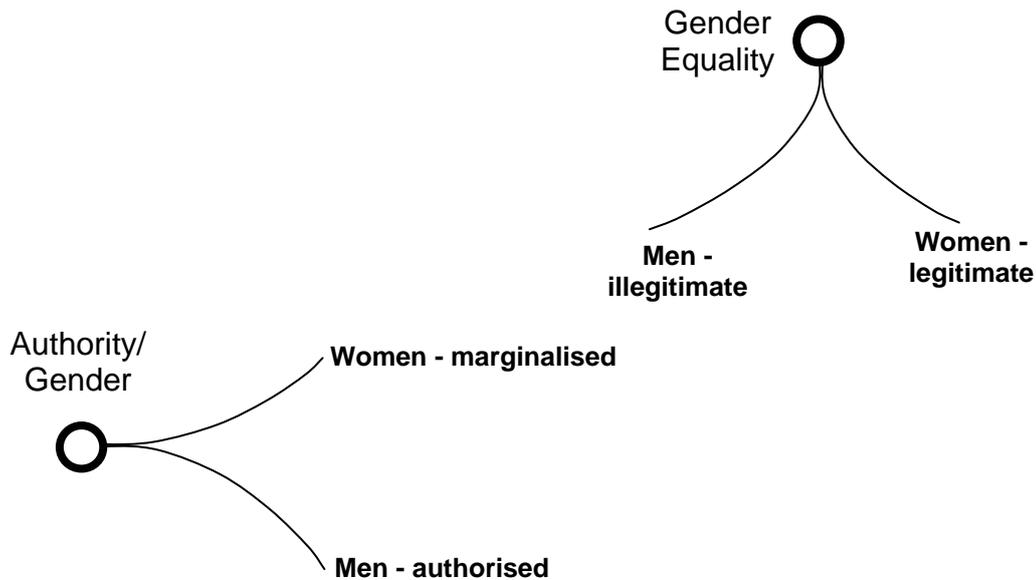


Fig. 9 - Subject Positions and Meaning

You can see in the older authority discourse men get a lot of points, whereas in the newer feminist discourse men get canned. Likewise, in the old discourse women don't get many points, whereas they get a guernsey in the new one. So you can see that in a new discourse meanings can be turned on their head. This capacity of discourses to completely reframe exactly the same social phenomena is precisely the freedom which Laclau & Mouffe argue is available to everyone in democracies, and is precisely what motivates people to take action to hegemonise new discourses. What today might be seen as crazy for men to do can be reframed to be eminently sensible, self-caring for men, and constructive for everyone.

Importantly, new discourses also mean new subject positions – that is, new patterns of action become available because they mean positive things for men. This is an enormously important aspect. A huge problem for men is that feminism doesn't offer new pathways to action for men. Feminism has generated many new pathways and practices for women, which is wonderful for women. But as we have seen, feminism by and large sees men as resisting change rather than enacting it. This means that, alongside all the huge changes in gender relations over the last few decades, men have nowhere new to go. Very obviously, it is up to men to respond to these social events and to create for ourselves new

pathways for new actions, and we are only really going to want to do this if those new pathways pay off for us in some way.

This question of the pay-off for men in change brings us back to the issue of meaning. I'll give you an example. A substantial group of men have felt unjustly treated by feminism or by social changes which appear to have benefited women more than men – a prime example being issues around child custody and the family court. With nowhere else to go these men often want a conservative retreat to how things were before. But increasingly over the last 10 years, as attitudes towards fathering are starting to change, more men are getting more actively involved in fathering. One of the key influencing factors here is that fathering is being re-framed: men increasingly see and feel there are personal benefits to themselves as involved fathers, even though in terms of the conventions of hegemonic masculinity this seems like madness: limiting their career prospects, reducing their freedom, undermining their dignity, etc. This shift in fathering attitudes is still a minority move, but it is becoming increasingly hegemonised with government, community, and media resources.

The depressing pall from writers such as Connell can frame this move as a cynical ploy by already privileged men which inevitably reasserts their privilege. And I agree that this outcome is a possibility. A great deal of the funding for recent fathering programs came from John Howard because he supported very conservative “family values”. After all, we live in a democracy, and the exercise of hegemony is not inherently progressive. But nor is it inherently conservative. The social changes already going on amongst men can be hegemonised as progressive or conservative, as well as a mixture of both, or even something else entirely.

And finally, to bring this all the way home back to us here now...

Social scientists, with the special skills, with the resources, and the authority available to us, can be very influential in what happens around change in gender relations. In my thesis I'm offering another way to think about processes of meaning creation and hegemonisation so that our analyses can be more extensive and more inclusive of what is already happening amongst men. Better analysis along these lines can reveal many more already existing resources for change, which in turn can make us more effective in influencing processes of hegemony in order to encourage progressive outcomes. In this way social researchers can take a more active role in fostering progressive change amongst men in gender relations.