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## **Politics, Emotionality and Disruptive Men**

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### ***Abstract***

Connell argues that hegemonic men cannot be liberated. This view is based in modernist assumptions about subjecthood, politics and interests. Using Judith Butler's perspective on "the subject" and the representational nature of the category "gender", I argue that the subject is a representation, and it is represented as unemotional. Because of hegemonic men's deep implication in systems of power, such men are also represented as unemotional. In fact, both the subject and politics are full of emotion, but this emotion is represented in such a way that it can be written out. The position of 'the subject' relies upon fear, isolation and exposure, which exact a huge toll upon men. The articulation of this huge cost can be the source of personal AND political motivations for men to disrupt 'masculinity', 'the subject' and 'politics', to form unexpected alliances in this work, and to develop 'technologies of affectivity' that not only alter what can be said about men but also alter what can be called 'politics'.

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### ***Introduction***

I am a straight white middle class man, and my interest lies in articulating a political agenda for men like myself to be active in seeking relief from the oppressions of the current gender order. This may appear to be an impossible or inherently contradictory task; as Connell (1987, 236) points out, "the group with predominant social power cannot be liberated".

However, as Petersen (1998) suggests, the postmodern critique of the essentialism implicit in accepted categories like "sex", "identity" and "gender" allow new possibilities for understanding and critiquing the categories "men" and "masculinity". Within the paradigm in which Connell makes his comment above, his logic is irrefutable. But that paradigm relies upon essentialist conceptions of "men" and of what is understood to be the interests of "men" as political "subjects". In this essay, I use Butler's (1990) perspective on "the subject" and the representational nature of the category "gender" to explore some implications for the disruptive political possibilities for straight white men.

I make no claim to be theorising about a general category “men”. As shall be seen in the body of the essay, I argue straight white middle class men have a unique relationship with the modern subject, and it is only of these men that I speak. I mention ‘middle class’ as a significant descriptor because of the association of middle class-ness with white collar work and the privileging of intellectual as opposed to manual work. I suggest that this association and privileging gives middle class men a specific relationship to the normative subject which is different to the relationship pertaining to working class men. As such, I align myself with the middle class relationship.

Because the term “straight white middle class men” is cumbersome, in the essay I use the term “swhim” as a sort of acronym, for both the singular man and plural men.

### ***The Normative “Subject”***

The modern political subject – that famous entity – could be seen as the device by which individual people are acknowledged to exist within the political realm in Western culture, and have their interests articulated upon the political stage. The normative modern subject has various attributes, of which the following are some of the most significant.

Firstly, before we can enter discussion we must define a sex. The subject is clearly male: we refer to ‘him’. He is considered to be ‘free and equal’: free from interference in exercising his ‘rights’ (however they are defined), and equal with other such subjects. He is rational, exercises rationality in his considerations of others, and rationally discusses political issues. He owns his body; his body is his property. His relationship with his body is that of master to servant, so that ‘he’ is not his body. The subject is as disembodied as possible, but interestingly, the skin of his body is ideally white. In addition, he is considered the master of himself generally; he is self-governing. He has a public presence; he is recognised in public as a subject, and claims such a position as well. And of course he is strictly heterosexual, although this may only be demonstrated directly in public by the forms of his relations with men.

Through all of this runs the idea that the ideal subject is unitary: ‘He’ is a single unit, he is not an integral part of a family or kinship web, he is not a node in a community or tribe. Not only does he exist outside of human relationships, he also exists outside of time. Once he reaches adulthood he is considered to be the same entity until he dies, and even after death. Nor does his subjecthood change either as a result of life events or experiences; the subject remains always the same subject, and his individual identity is considered to be continuous.

To this list need only be added middle class and educated, and we have a reasonable description of what Connell (1995) labels ‘hegemonic masculinity’. This is no accident: the conjunction between maleness and the political subject is too widely recognised to be disputed.

In addition to this close conjunction is the relationship of the subject to the political realm itself. Almost by definition, the political is made up from the interests and concerns of political subjects. The issues which can and cannot be discussed are determined by whether such issues are considered to affect the interests of subjects –

who are, ideally, male. Butler makes clear the circular nature of the relationship between subjecthood and political representation when she writes:

The domains of political and linguistic “representation” set out in advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject. (Butler 1990, 1)

Straight white men, especially men such as myself – middle class, rational and educated – are considered to be subjects by default. I embody the subject in crucial ways and, given my willingness to appear as a subject, my subjecthood need never be called into question. The political subject, being represented as straight white and male matches me to the extent that not only am I assumed without question to BE a subject. More crucially, it is also assumed that my interests are represented accurately and completely within the political realm. Such an assumption is not only inherent in the subject itself through the close link between maleness, subjecthood and the political. The same assumption underlies my opening quote from Connell, and is made again and again by marginalised groups with liberatory intent regarding those “in power”.

But the fact that I can even describe an ideal subject with a list of attributes is itself a representational fiction of what Foucault calls “juridical systems of power”. Butler makes clear that such systems of power create and recreate their subjects iteratively:

Foucault points out that juridical systems of power *produce* the subjects they subsequently come to represent. ...[T]he subjects regulated by such structures are, by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures. ... [J]uridical subjects are invariably produced through certain exclusionary practices that do not “show” once the juridical structure of politics has been established. In other words, the political construction of the subject proceeds with certain legitimating and exclusionary aims and these political operations are effectively concealed and naturalised by a political analysis that takes juridical structures as their foundation. Juridical power inevitably “produces” what it claims merely to represent. (Butler 1990, 2)

We are now familiar with the implications of (what I will call) iterative analysis for marginalised and excluded groups. Butler goes on to use her analysis to explain the extraordinarily resilient nature of resistance to inclusion of women as subjects, and to point out the essentialist shortcomings of much feminist analysis itself.

But what implications can we draw from iterative analysis for swhim? As I said above, I am assumed to BE a subject - the alignment of masculinity with subjecthood with politics with power is an almost overwhelmingly comprehensive alliance.

### ***Straight White Disruptions***

The comprehensive nature of this alliance, and of the equation of maleness with subjecthood, can be illustrated in the following examples. Men are represented as being unemotional and with poor skills in affective relationships and in parenting. Thus, one would expect that men whose lives disrupt this stereotype would be considered to be disrupting ‘masculinity’. This is not so. A close affective friendship between two men or a man being a baby’s primary caregiver is not seen as having political implications for men generally or changing the articulation of men’s interests. On the contrary, McMahon (1999) suggests that such relatively rare activities are deliberately sought out and manufactured into images which are used to further reinforce existing patriarchal structures by portraying men as adapting well to

feminism and recent social change, when in fact the reverse is true. The lived reality for the men in the images is that they remain isolated and not only have to struggle with unfamiliar activities for which they are unprepared, but also have to cope with social assumptions that things are easier for them or that they are better off than most men.

More significantly, there is an implication that such men are reacting to a situation which is not of their making. The affective relationship or the primary caregiving are read within a feminist context of men being competitive and not being involved in childcare. The critical issue here is not the negative assessment of men generally by feminism. The issue is a question of who 'owns' the political implications of those men's actions. McMahon points out that these days such activities are represented as deriving from feminism and as a response to feminism – not as activities which men undertake for their own reasons or as a matter of course. The activities are read in the light of feminist ideas, and seen to support those ideas, despite the existence of close affective relationships between men and men as primary caregivers throughout history. As a result, recent portrayals of caring men are deployed to REINFORCE our picture of men as unemotional and with poor skills in affective relationships and in parenting.

The same problem is encountered when performing other disruptions to masculinity. It is reasonably accepted now, in Sydney anyway, that men may kiss, may hold hands, may wear dresses, etc on the street. Although it is by no means common as street behaviour, the Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras has popularised such images of men. Thus, my friend and I walking down the street holding hands is read as a gay activity, and judged as acceptable or otherwise on the basis of the viewer's stance towards homosexuality, NOT their stance towards straight white men and the normative subject.

But I and other straight white men are not (necessarily) feminist and we are not gay. There is a strong temptation among swim with disruptive intent to portray ourselves as feminist, profeminist, gay or some other marginalised group. Such a tactic has the benefit of making clear our disruptive intent, and enables the use of the rhetoric and strategies of the relevant marginalised group(s). This tactic can be seen in many areas of the men's movement, especially the men's rights area which frequently appropriates feminist rhetoric to describe men's position (see e.g. Farrell 1994). But there are two problems with this tactic. Firstly, it runs the risk of denying the power accorded to straight white men and in practice often comes close to dishonestly denying that such power exists. Secondly, it has a disempowering effect, in that it seeks to portray men as marginalised or otherwise excluded from power. Moving from the centre to the margins is not only a bad strategic move; it is also practically impossible, since I have had the experience of being in the centre and I know I can return there at any moment.

So no matter what actual men do that disrupts normative models of masculinity, subjecthood and the definition of the political effectively work together to define such activities as either not political issues, or as non-controversial issues, or as issues which do not belong to swim. Juridical structures of power reassert themselves and political analyses find exactly what they set out to find.

## ***Emotion and Politics***

While this helps to explain the ineffectiveness of the ‘men’s movement’ after a quarter of a century, it can also be extremely disheartening and overwhelming for particular swhim – myself included. However, I think that there are opportunities for change, but from a quite different direction to that usually associated with political activism and liberatory struggle.

While marginalised groups are, by definition, struggling to come “in” from the margins, swhim are already “in”. Marginalised groups use now-familiar liberatory rhetoric and tactics to challenge hegemonic control over who is “in” and who is “out”. Groups that have been successful in such challenges up till now have not deeply challenged the regulatory categories central to subjecthood and modern politics. This criticism is levelled at feminism itself by feminists such as bell hooks (1980), as well as Butler in the work I quote. hooks, for instance, shows that what she calls ‘white feminists’ actually had a vested interest in power and in existing political structures – and so did not seek to critique it too fundamentally. Within the logic of marginalisation and exclusion, it makes sense that, if groups seek representation within juridical systems of power, then it is important that those systems continue to exist.

But swhim are not excluded or marginalised. I think swhim are in a unique position in juridical systems of power because of the extent to which we are implicated in those systems. And I suggest that it is precisely our unique position of “being in the centre” which can provide a motivation to engage in radical change through a deconstruction of the representation of men as unemotional. The expression of emotion and the existence of ‘affective relationships’ as opposed to instrumental relationships are widely acknowledged to be lacking in the lives of most swhim. This acknowledgement goes back to early men’s liberationists, such as Nichols (1975) and Fasteau (1974), and continues today in many portraits of the ‘crisis of masculinity’, for example Biddulph (1994).

While I actually experience daily in my own life the lack of those things, I wish to show that this is not the result of my ‘masculinity’, nor is it because I am a ‘man’. I suggest it is a result of what I describe above as the comprehensive alliance of masculinity with subjecthood with politics with power. Going back to my list of attributes of the normative subject, above, I propose another reading of that list. The negative freedoms enshrined in the American Constitution implies a constant defensive stance rather than a stepping into possibilities. Equality entails the uniform treatment of subjects such that particular, personal and local issues are ignored or devalued. Rationality comes at the cost of emotionality. Property in one’s body must be clearly defined and defended, producing a physical distance from other bodies. Heterosexuality is underpinned by homophobia, reinforcing the physical distance. Self-government implies a level of responsibility for and control over many events and processes actually outside of the control of individuals. The public nature of the subject means he is on display; he must be seen to behave as male as well as BE male. The overall picture is one of fearful, radically isolated yet exposed individuals.

It becomes impossible – and therefore strategically irrelevant - to pick out what part of this picture could be defined as ‘masculinity’. For swhim, ‘masculinity’ with its origins in sex role theory and its relationship to both ‘femininity’ and ‘gender’, is not a helpful concept. The situation of swhim is so intimately bound up with the whole continuum

of juridical systems of power that discussion of 'gender' does not cover nearly enough ground. As Butler says (1990, 17), 'gender' can only apply to 'women'; for 'men' are 'persons'.

I will come back to this point later. At present, my 're-reading' of 'the subject' seeks to show that subjecthood is represented as being a state without emotion, but the representation effectively obscures a very real emotional content. Rather than being unemotional, to enact the position of subject requires a specific emotional stance, an emotionality of specific shape and structure that enables it to be written out by what 'the subject' and 'politics' are represented to be.

Evelyn Fox Keller (1983) uses psychoanalytic theory to suggest a dynamic iterative account of how science comes to be gendered and why some men are attracted to science. She draws out links between emotional stances and stances towards objectivity: the stereotypical scientist being 'masculine' but asexual. She shows how the notion of "objectivity" is related quite clearly to a strong desire for subjective distance from objects under study. Thus the practice of science calls for and in fact relies upon an habitual emotional stance of distance and coolness in the scientist. Most importantly, without this particular emotionality, 'science' as we know it cannot be practiced.

While Keller puts forward a good case for the emotional underpinnings of 'science', Michael Kaufman (1994) goes even further, suggesting that the exercising of all juridical power associated with 'masculinity' is always an inherently painful experience.

...[T]he acquisition of hegemonic (and most subordinate) masculinities is a process through which men come to suppress a range of emotions, needs and possibilities, such as nurturing, receptivity, empathy, and compassion, which are experienced as inconsistent with the power of manhood. ... [ but ] we all continue to experience a range of needs and feelings that are deemed inconsistent with manhood. Such experiences become the source of enormous fear. ... men exercise patriarchal power not only because we reap tangible benefits from it. The assertion of power is also a response to fear and to the wounds we have experienced in the quest for power. Paradoxically, men are wounded by the very way we have learned to embody and exercise our power. ... (Kaufman 1994, 148)

Perhaps then, the comprehensive alliance I suggest above of masculinity with subjecthood with politics with power relies upon a specific emotionality which is represented as 'unemotional', but can also be read as fear and isolation. Kaufman suggests that the conjunction of these two readings is paradoxical but not contradictory; the wielding of power requires such fear and isolation, and power is wielded in such a way as to inevitably produce fear and isolation. This iterative model is very similar to Butler's iterative analysis.

The picture I am trying to build is that what is considered to be 'political' and the experience of subjecthood are actually NOT spaces in which emotion does not exist. "The subject" is not 'unemotional', as in 'lacking emotion'. On the contrary, politics and "the subject" are spaces FULL OF emotion: my re-reading suggests not only fear and isolation, but exposure as well. The emotion of fear is merely the simplest. The emotional experience of isolation involves fear, but also can involve grief and shame. The emotional experience of exposure can include shame, fear, humiliation and anger.

The fact that we do not notice these emotions in politics reflects Butler's suggestion I quote above, that "[J]uridical subjects are invariably produced through certain exclusionary practices that do not "show" once the juridical structure of politics has been established." Exactly how the emotions of subjecthood and politics become hidden must remain the subject of other essays. My point here is that "politics" itself appears to be yet another regulatory category, in that what is represented as 'political' is a discursive operation. As such, what may be defined as 'politics' is open to all the usual postmodern disruptions. This point is critical for swhim in any coherent attempts at social change.

This brings me back to the point I made earlier; that discussions of 'masculinity' are not very helpful for swhim. I hope it can be seen from my argument above that the issues for swhim are not especially to do with 'masculinity', or even 'gender'. Such regulatory categories are only parts of Foucault's juridical systems of power, or what I call the comprehensive alliance of masculinity with the subject with politics with power. I said above that it is pointless to try to cleave off a part of this alliance and call it 'masculinity'. Such an exercise inevitably excludes the centrality of power in the lives of swhim – not merely the instrumental benefits of power, but much more importantly the subjective and emotional experiences of power. I suggest that it is precisely these emotional records of fear, isolation and pain which can be represented vibrantly and passionately as strong personal motivations for swhim to not only articulate our experiences but to find ways to make representation of those experiences integral to politics and to representations of society generally.

What I imagine is a politics in which emotion is used as a limit to power. If it can be understood widely that power inevitably comes with an emotional price, public morality comes down to the question of "how much pain are we prepared to bear in exchange for power?" This approach is in stark contrast to public morality in the modern period, which centres on the question "how much power can we wield?", with no consideration of the cost – either to individuals, our society, 'other' peoples or non-humans.

### ***Disjunctions and Conjunctions***

My argument here suggests that swhim, who collectively have the most power, also pay the highest emotional cost. It is therefore in swhim's interests, more than the interests of others, to find ways to articulate this cost. Not only can intense personal pain motivate this articulation. Swhim can find allies in surprising places for this project. One of Butler's conclusions from her iterative analysis is that each iteration of the representation of/in politics provides opportunities for unexpected disjunctions and conjunctions. One potential conjunction may be with feminism. Black lesbian feminist bell hooks wrote in 1981:

"To me feminism is not simply a struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure that women will have equal rights with men; it is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels – sex, race, and class, to name a few – and a commitment to reorganising ... society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires." (hooks 1981, 194-195)

What she calls the "ideology of domination" is very similar to my suggestion that public morality is based upon the question "how much power can we wield?" I could

read her “imperialism, economic expansion and material desires” as the alliance of masculinity with the subject with politics with power. My goals and those of hooks look potentially very similar, yet my life as a straight white male could not be more different from that of a black lesbian feminist. Nevertheless, our similar goals suggest an unexpected conjunction

An instance of unexpected disjunction lies in my claim that politics as we know it does NOT represent my interests as a swhim. Such a claim, if recognised by multiple swhim, leads to an alliance which seeks to disrupt politics, not because we are marginalised, but precisely BECAUSE we are in the centre and we wield power. This proposal is so counter-intuitive that it is almost impossible for me to imagine what this would look like on the ground. Certainly language is a key to enable articulation of any sort. For example, formalising a language of emotion and a language of relationship may become significant projects for disruptive swhim.

While this may sound very theoretical and utopian, practical applications abound. An example current in my life is the issue of men as carers or teachers of young children. It is currently impossible for me (or any person) to show convincingly and in a formal manner that I will not molest children in my care. The NSW State Government’s response to this situation is to prohibit teachers in government schools from touching children in any way, and from being one-to-one with a child. While the government is clearly doing its best with the options available to it, such a ludicrous and painful situation could never be seen as anything other than a temporary emergency measure.

With an understanding that subjecthood involves fear and isolation, it is possible to see pedophilia (and indeed many sexual ‘perversions’) as being a contextual response to the experiencing and writing-out of fear and isolation amongst men. The best way to disrupt pedophilia, then, is to disrupt fear and isolation, which can be best done by creating and maintaining meaningful, supportive and affective relationships. To put it simply, the more emotionally connected a man is (both with himself and with others) the less likely he is to molest children.

But, assuming this model is accepted, how could a body like the NSW Government measure such relationships? It is not simply a matter of counting a man’s ‘friends’. We are talking here about qualities in relationship – the extent to which a man experiences interactions with friends as “supportive” or “meaningful”. Juridical systems of power rely upon definitions of physical events, and upon observable phenomena which can be repeated. Emotionality is seen as a world too airy-fairy and intangible to admit to the world of politics. Yet to me it is a matter of urgency that Western societies develop what I may call ‘technologies of affectivity’. I suggest above we need languages of emotion and of relationship. I think we also need to develop ways in which the force of legislation, but not its form, can be incorporated into what we do with emotions in the polity. This radical suggestion is possible if we accept that emotionality may require some formalising and defining, at the same time as our concept of ‘law’ may require some softening so that what is considered to be ‘evidence’ is to some extent subjective.

## ***Conclusion***

In conclusion I will briefly restate my argument. The subject is a representation, and it is represented as unemotional. Because of swhim’s deep implication in systems of

power, swhim are also represented as unemotional. In fact, both the subject and politics are full of emotion, but this emotion is represented in such a way that it can be written out.

The position of 'the subject' relies upon fear, isolation and exposure, which exact a huge toll upon swhim. The articulation of this huge cost can be the source of personal AND political motivations for swhim to disrupt 'masculinity', 'the subject' and 'politics', to form unexpected alliances in this work, and to develop 'technologies of affectivity' that not only alter what can be said about men but also alter what can be called 'politics'.

In this essay I have covered a lot of ground, and some of it is decidedly shaky. My list of attributes of "the subject" is an unreferenced collection of themes which have repeatedly appeared in my reading over the last few years. My re-reading of those attributes is again unreferenced, and comes from a mixture of recent readings, my own experience and logical restatements. The terms "emotion" and 'emotionality' are not defined. I make some rather large unsupported statements, such as "swhim have the most power and therefore experience the greatest emotional cost". And the essay degenerates into rather utopian speculation at the end.

My only excuse is that, as Petersen (1998) points out, little work of this sort is done, as such it is a vast unexplored field - and this is a very brief essay. However, I hope this does not prevent the solid parts of my argument being used, and also hope that the holes are dealt with in further work both by myself and others.

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