

Theorising Men: The power of symbol in the symbol of power

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Abstract

This 40 minute talk carefully explores how notions of maleness are tied in to notions of power and of sovereignty. Using Foucault's concept of discourse I offer a picture of sovereignty as a discourse that equates maleness with social legitimacy. The concept of discourse enables a separation of the *outcome* of social legitimacy from the symbolic *contents* which are harnessed to produce that social legitimacy. In turn this enables us to distinguish between actual men and the immense symbolic significance of maleness as a core ingredient in social legitimacy. I argue that Connell's "hegemonic masculinity" fails to make this distinction, and hence does not assist in analysing the actual realities of privileged men.

3,935 words

The Problem

In April 2006 I gave a paper to UNESEX, in which I stated that I wished to address and develop theory for a limited group of men – straight white middle class men, those men most privileged by patriarchy and most closely aligned with Connell's idea of "hegemonic masculinity". I was challenged extensively and, at the time, convincingly, as to why I chose those criteria for defining my target audience, why I did not choose other criteria, how I defined the limits of each criterion, and so on. The argument underlying these questions is, of course, the poststructuralist critique of 'grand narratives' and the essentialist categories upon which they rely. The categories of identity I had chosen are themselves a function of modernist discourses; and when closely examined it becomes meaningless to locate such persons in the real world.

Having reflected on this criticism, I find I am forced to agree. Nevertheless I found myself continually caught by the relation between Connell's conceptual object "hegemonic masculinity" and actual men. When Connell's theory started appearing on the masculinity theory scene in the late 1980s, the idea that there is a kind of dominant form of masculinity by which all others are judged seemed to immediately appeal. We seem to "know," as it were, that there is some sort of masculinity which tends to predominate or hold sway, at the same time that we know there are large numbers of men whose lives do not fit this picture. Connell's perception that there are many masculinities which have a variety of relationships with the hegemonic one enabled a start to be made

on mapping some of the variety among men, and helped researchers move away from a simple picture that all men share some common characteristic called ‘masculinity’.

Nevertheless I’ve kept on running into a problem with the empirical connection from Connell’s theory to actual male persons: what is the connection between hegemonic masculinity and actual men? This problem was reflected to me by the audience at my April 2006 seminar: Who are these people I am talking about, and how does one define them?

The difficulty in finding empirical ground here suggested to me that, rather than hegemonic masculinity being a material presence in men’s lives, the idea of hegemonic masculinity plays a very significant **symbolic role**. I say that it plays a significant role because the publication of Connell’s ideas were hailed with great enthusiasm, which indicates to me that his ideas spoke to something, though as I have shown his idea of hegemonic masculinity did not point to actual men. But in saying that hegemonic masculinity plays a significant symbolic role, what might that role be?

1. A History of Sovereignty

In the early 70s, at about the same time that Connell was publishing his first Marxist analysis of culture, prior to focusing more on masculinity, Michel Foucault was undermining the theoretical foundation of ideas like hegemony by challenging the view that power flows in only one direction – that is, down from the top. He argued that power in fact flows up, down and across social sites and processes, and that power does not only produce oppression or hierarchy from the top. Foucault traces the history of the idea of “power from the top” back to the idea of the sovereign or monarch, who was the only fully authorised or legitimated person in a kingdom.

The modern era still uses the idea of sovereignty, but it is formulated in a more distributed way: every adult in Western democracies is assumed to enjoy “sovereignty in their own person”, as the phrase is. This means that our authority to use our abilities is linked to our status as a citizen of a national state. We are still subjects, though no longer subjects of a single king. Instead, our citizenship of a nation authorises our sovereignty, and this sovereignty, at least at the symbolic and legal level, has supposedly the same limits and benefits for every citizen. In other words, nations are not organised upon strictly hierarchical lines, as pre-modern monarchies once were. Because the nation itself is amorphous and does not reside in the body of a single person like a monarch, our relationship to the authorising effect of the nation is, in a sense, ‘flat’. Every citizen can be called to account for their actions, and – again I stress in principle – no citizen is exempt from this.

However in this arrangement there are more than a few echoes of pre-modern monarchy. The idea of sovereignty itself is still with us, in the idea that we have sovereignty in ourselves, and in the sovereignty of nations. There is also more than a smattering of hierarchy in the idea of sovereignty too. The hierarchy operates at both the personal level and at the level of nation, and at a metaphysical level. At the personal level, the so-called sovereignty in myself means more or less that I “own” my self – my body, and my body’s actions and abilities. In other words, “I” am the owner or boss of my “self.” At the national level, I am a subject of, or lesser than, the institutional machinery of the nation. At the metaphysical level, nations such as Australia and the USA still defer to divine authority – that is, some force beyond the human. In the American Declaration of Independence, “we the people” simply stand up and claim the authority as a group of people to create the American nation – but this group still does so “by the grace of God.”

I suggest that hierarchy still continues to play an important role today primarily at the symbolic level in terms of the source of authorisation for people's actions. The symbolic hierarchy, operating as I suggested at three levels of the personal, the national and the metaphysical, has the very desirable impact of tying individuals into an overarching social order loosely grounded in 'the nation', which in turn is tied into an international social landscape that spans the globe. Indeed, hierarchy is to some extent implicit in the idea of authorisation or legitimation itself: I carry out action X, which can of course be challenged by anyone. But my claim that X is OK is based in an appeal to some larger force or entity than simply myself or my action.

That this hierarchical linking largely operates at the symbolic level enables the vast material freedom enjoyed by modern Western individuals. Much of Foucault's work was devoted to showing how modern freedoms are built upon our willingness and our ability to govern ourselves, down to the most minute and private of personal actions. Thus Foucault was able to show that at the material level, at the level of effects, power flows in multiple directions and even into the capillaries of our most intimate selves. At the same time, he complained that many sociologists still conceptualise power as deriving from 'the top' and flowing down, producing domination as it flows.

It is extraordinarily hard to think of power in any other way, and this, I suggest, is the problem that Connell faces in theorising masculinity: despite his obvious awareness that actual men's lives are complex and multi-faceted, he was not able to conceptualise in any other way the relationships between the various forms and flavours of masculinity he points to. So how else might we conceptualise the apparent power associated with some patterns of men's actions?

2. The Discourse of Sovereignty

I suggest that the symbolic role hegemonic masculinity plays is, like the idea of sovereignty, essentially a role of authorisation or legitimation. Sociological discussions of power often make a distinction between power as simple capacity – which is relatively straightforward – and the much more complex question of the legitimation of power and legitimate forms of power's distribution in social systems. Foucault rejected that well-established approach to power because he saw that legitimation is itself only an effect of power, for example the discourse of medicine which grants authority to doctors under certain conditions. Theorists of power prior to Foucault tended to use the question of legitimation as a source of power itself, rather than a contingent justification or rationale which forms part of a discursive deployment of power.

Foucault develops an explanatory framework which encompasses law and sovereign and takes them up as elements in his framework rather than as sources of explanation in themselves. But what I am arguing above is that the idea of sovereignty nevertheless still has a very fundamental function in modern and even postmodern conceptions of society and of self. It is the idea of sovereignty, I suggest, which legitimises the ideas of self, of nation, and indeed of the fledgling international order. This is not to say that the idea of sovereignty is fixed, or that it is prior to social process. Rather, the idea of sovereignty and its continual process of transformation over the last millennium or so enables us to think and participate in relationships and connections which are not directly and immediately material, and keeps us all more or less aligned in some way that enables us to make sense to each other. That is, sovereignty is a symbolic story which now enables hundreds of millions of people to interact in a loose but orderly way over vast distances and through complex social systems. The fact that this story is now primarily symbolic, rather than

material, enables the incredible freedoms Westerners enjoy in that we are focused less on what each other does and more on what our actions signify.

In a sense, then, I am sketching a discourse of sovereignty – sovereignty being a kind of symbolic object that is encapsulated in stories, which is closely implicated in the issue of legitimation of power. This discourse of sovereignty also intersects closely with discourses of self, of nation, and of global order because all these elements of social process need authority or legitimacy as a crucial enabling resource. The discourse of sovereignty is largely concerned with the legitimation of power, and the basic form of the discourse is a story which grants legitimacy to certain human actions under certain conditions.

This story, as I sketched above, has changed both its details and also the breadth of its availability over the centuries, but nevertheless still fulfils the functions of conditionally granting legitimacy. The grantor of legitimacy, that is, the narrative figure that does the granting, changes across time and context – sometimes God, sometimes the King, sometimes the nation, sometimes the law, sometimes a conflict, sometimes self-identity, sometimes an official functionary position, and so on.

3. Sovereignty and Men

Now with respect to men, I suggest it is very significant that for a great deal of the historical period the grantor of legitimacy has been a single figure or group of figures whose gender is male. Obviously there is nothing essential about this factor, that is, the maleness of the authorising figures is a discursive function. This is now clearly seen in the last half century with the substantial expansion of women's participation in what was formerly called the public arena, and with the increasing legitimation of many other groups who were or are marginalised to a greater or lesser degree. I suggest that, at the discursive level of sovereignty, what has happened here is that the story of sovereignty has become available to more and more groups, and in the process the details of how to enact recognisable sovereignty has also changed.

Nevertheless, historically there is a very long association between sovereignty and maleness. Because of this men are imagined in the discourse of sovereignty in a very different way to women. This means that men stand in a different relation than women in respect to the issue of legitimation as sovereign subjects. Spectacular examples from history are that, until relatively recently maleness was a necessary (though not always sufficient) condition for admission to a range of major social institutions; and in the 19th century patriarchal family the father was considered to be the family's local agent for social authority. The characteristic of maleness was thus closely entwined with the issues of authorisation, of legitimate identity, and of social order.

The way in which maleness is now implicated in the discourse of sovereignty is rather different to previous times, for example there are new resources that enable challenges to men's violence and men's relationships with children, as well as substantial changes in men's engagement with the institution of work. Nor is maleness any longer a formal defining characteristic for participation in political, educational or economic institutions. These and other changes in the last 50 years do not replace the prior discourse of sovereignty. Rather, they are yet further elaborations of the existing discourse, further layers of complexity if you will, or further possible permutations. The slow unfolding of the path of the discourse proceeds as an incremental building up of layers, which has gradually enabled sovereignty to morph from a quality associated with one person to a quality associated with all adults in a nation, and may continue developing further than this.

At the same time, the history of the discourse is still present to some extent, as I pointed out above, in the continuing purchase that the ideas of sovereignty and hierarchy still have for us. One example here is Connell's idea of hegemonic masculinity. Another aspect of the history of the discourse of sovereignty which is still present is this business of maleness. Like our attachment to the ideas of hegemony, a unitary source, and hierarchy, the idea that men are somehow more legitimate than women, or automatically legitimate, still persists. Clearly this situation is no longer uniform across all social sites or systems. There are indeed now sites at which women are considered more legitimate than men, for example in the areas of childcare, or intimate relationships.

Now how does my view here impact upon our understanding of and thinking about men? I will try to tease out two implications which are relevant to my seminar topic today, but there may well be more. Firstly, the discourse of sovereignty operates effectively by offering a set of symbols expressed in actions, gestures, speech and so on, that betoken legitimacy or authorisation. Given the highly significant place of maleness in this discourse, this means that there is a symbolic aspect to maleness in that the presentation of self as a male connotes a close connection with sovereignty. That is, our social context includes chains of associations operating at the symbolic level by which we associate maleness with sovereignty. It is not too much to say here that when we are faced with a man we tend to assume that he is responsible for himself unless shown otherwise – in other words, we assume the presence of his sovereignty, in the sense that he “owns” his self, so that he can be held accountable for the actions of that self. In contrast, we do not always assume this with women. Some dramatic examples arise in the differing treatments of male and female murderers, especially child murderers, by the media and the judicial system.

Secondly, the discourse of sovereignty, being centrally concerned with social legitimisation, is closely entwined with the maintenance of the social order, that is, with the resilience and continuation of major social systems. Because of the significance of maleness as a token of legitimisation in the discourse of sovereignty, there is a very close symbolic link between a male form of self presentation and social order as a whole. Disruption of our expectations regarding maleness and its presentation thus tend to have a much greater emotional impact on us than unexpected permutations in expressions of femaleness. One example of this is that men are far more likely to be assaulted or killed than women. Certainly men are predominantly assaulted or killed by other men – but then that fits perfectly well with the view of men as the keepers or legitimators of the social order, that is, some men believe it is legitimate that they maintain social order. But the point here is that men's transgressions of social order are seen as much more dangerous than women's. This is because men are seen as related to the social whole in a different way to women. Of course, materially this is often not so – but remember we are talking at the symbolic level and about the issue of legitimisation, rather than about the material level of effects and actions.

So I am suggesting here that the historical form of the discourse of sovereignty, with its longstanding implication of maleness with the legitimisation of self and of the social whole, has a very large impact on how we see men today. Specifically, alongside the actions of actual men, maleness as a quality expressed in self presentation has very significant symbolic meanings for us. This leads us to scrutinise men very closely, and we may tend to read much greater significance into men's actions than perhaps are really warranted in the circumstances. Of course scrutiny of the powerful makes a lot of sense, for several important reasons. But what I want to suggest is that we tend to attach much greater significance to many men's actions only because of the symbolic connection we

maintain in imagination between maleness and the legitimacy of social systems. An excellent example of this propensity occurs in a lead article in a recent *Sydney Morning Herald* (12 May 07) announcing a new view of domestic violence which observes a variety of patterns in the way violence proceeds, noting that not all violence is ongoing or leads to serious injury. Critics of the research are reported to be ‘outraged’, since they fear that such a view must inevitably silence or discredit women.

While certainly the struggle to name and reject domestic violence has been long and painful for many women, the reaction to this recent research arises, I suggest, from this excessive scrutiny which derives from the symbolic linkage of maleness with legitimation – and in this case with the implication that women are perforce de-legitimated.

This very understandable bias also has implications which flow back the other way: given the association between maleness and legitimation of social order, it is easy to imagine that men actually create the social order in the first place. It is extraordinarily easy to assume that, because men have authority in certain situations, in addition they have the ability or the power to set the conditions in which that authority is granted, as well as to set the limits of the authority itself. The mix of a person acting as if male, and acting with authority or in an authoritative manner, draws on the discourse of sovereignty in order to ‘carry off’ the imputed authority. This situation in turn implicates the much larger function of the discourse of sovereignty, which is to legitimate the social order as a whole and the operation of individuals as elements within it. By this means, men can act with authority and that authority appears to be sanctioned by the massive weight of the entire society – selfs, nation, and increasingly, the international order.

It is this evocation of the legitimating power of the entire social order which easily leads us into the error that not only can men act with authority, but in addition men have the power to set the conditions which enable that authority in the first place.

In short, it is very difficult to unpick the distinction between the form of the social order and the legitimation or authorisation of that specific form as being a socially ordering form. This situation is, in effect, another take on that famous quote from Marx, that people make history, but not in conditions of their own making. Certainly, men take actions, and certainly men predominate amongst the most powerful individuals in the world, but the conditions in which men enjoy and exercise this power, and the limits of that power, are only partially under their control.

4. Sovereignty and Masculinity Theory

In this light the idea that men choose to maintain hegemony looks something very like a massive over-ascription of agency. This over-ascription of agency arises, I suggest, precisely because it is not very easy to clearly delineate the differences between actual male persons in lived experience and the significant symbolic role maleness plays in the discourse of sovereignty with its symbolic power to authorise. As a result, the actual agency which individual men bring to bear in specific concrete situations becomes confused with the massive authorising potency which is one of the socially produced outcomes and functions of the discourse of sovereignty.

When studying marginalised or complicit masculinities, this problem is not so apparent because the analytic focus is upon groups who have, if you like, a client relationship with power. Such studies can call on well-established Marxist-derived social analyses of power, which is in effect what Connell’s theory is based in. But in coming to investigate so-called hegemonic masculinities the analyst must address the issue of power head on. That is, in Connell’s theory power is considered a core aspect of hegemonic masculinity –

and I am trying to show that his formulation proves unhelpful in coming to grips with the relationship between actual men, their actions and the legitimation or delegitimation of those actions as a function of social process.

Conclusion

So as far as supporting men to change, I suggest that the “Connellian” school of masculinity theory, of which a central idea is hegemonic masculinity, makes a fundamental mistake in believing that men are much less constrained and more powerful than they actually are. I have tried to show that this mistake arises because of the difficulty in distinguishing between actual male persons and the historical symbolic significance of maleness in the legitimation of social process. Thus I suggest that the notion of hegemonic masculinity is uncritically taken up to play a rather archaic role in masculinity theory, providing what is basically a structuralist account of the process of societal legitimation – a process I am suggesting is more usefully conceptualised in discursive terms. To this extent, hegemonic masculinity in effect plays the same symbolic role as the notion of the sovereign – that is as a symbolic authorising source of social order rather than a facet of the lives of actual male persons.

While clearly men do have the freedom at an individual level to be substantially different, and a very small number of men are exploring that freedom, all men live in a web of freedom and constraint which has so far been either comprehensively ignored at worst, or inadequately theorised at best. Without a more adequate theoretical view which addresses more bluntly this web of freedom and constraint, masculinity theory in effect lacks traction for the vast majority of men. That is, current masculinity theory is not helpful as a resource to support men to change because of the inadequate assessment of the realities most men actually live with. A key step, I am suggesting in this seminar, is to identify the chain which links the importance of symbolic legitimation for social process, men’s historically close association with the function of legitimation, and our very understandable over-ascription of agency to men as a result. In short, I am wanting to alert us to the power of symbol in the symbol of power, in order that we can more easily engage with the grounded reality of actual men in their actual lives. I hope that my attempt here to elucidate one aspect of that reality can contribute something useful in this regard.