

Theorising men's power and vulnerability

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Abstract

Pro-feminism focuses on men's power while the mythopoetic men's movement is based on men's vulnerability. Both themes are useful but there is no theory which adequately bridges both schools of thought. I start with Connell's 'masculinities' theory, which posits the source of men's power arises in 'cultural processes' but leaves them untheorised. Laclau & Mouffe offer a theory of these cultural processes, which I briefly describe, leading to the conclusion that Connell describes only a part of the terrain of power in gender relations, the discourse of patriarchy. Men's patriarchal power only pertains within the relations specific to that discourse, and patriarchal relations are enacted when people occupy subject positions arising in that discourse. Social life emerges from multiple discourses, and individuals create our self-identity from an ensemble of subject positions across a range of discourses. In discourses such as feminism, and those relating to 'care' and 'health', men are marginalised. My theory thus enables us to see that any single man can be variously powerful and vulnerable in different areas of his life.

2,245 words

In my presentation today, I concentrate on theory, for a reason which will become clear in a minute. But to set the scene, to explain what I mean by men's power and men's vulnerability, I will draw an artificially simplified contrast between two broad schools of thought about men.

One is what is known as the mythopoetic men's movement – the movement which has arisen since the early 1990s in response to Robert Bly's Iron John. The other school of thought is the pro-feminist school, which is much more academically based and academically rigorous. Both schools have a theory about gender and men. The mythopoetic theory is that in recent history men have become vulnerable in significant ways, and as a result have lost some vitally important self-esteem.

The pro-feminist theory, on the other hand, is that gender involves a power imbalance between women and men - men hold power illegitimately and privileged men seek to perpetuate this power imbalance.

Now my problem is that I think BOTH schools of thought make accurate observations about men. Men DO illegitimately enjoy privileges over women. And men ARE significantly vulnerable to recent social changes, of which

feminism is one. BUT what frustrates me is that these schools of thought, despite each of them having useful things to say, don't get together and combine forces.

And as a result each school of thought's response to their own observations – their program of action for men - is inadequate because each school is only seeing part of the dynamic of what is going on with men.

The two schools can be summarised like this:

	Pro-feminists	Mythopoeists
Theory:	Power imbalance between women and men.	Recent changes (feminism) leave men vulnerable.
Material result:	Men's power is illegitimate.	Men have lost self-esteem.
Current state of men:	Men are powerful.	Men are vulnerable.
Conclusion:	Men are bad.	Men need to retreat.

Table 1 – Two schools of thought

Pro-feminism sees men as a 'problem', as an obstacle in the path of progressive change. It theorises men as bad – what I call 'bad man theory'. The pro-feminist program of action is that men should get out of the way, and stop being a problem. The drawback to this view is that it is not very appealing to most men, and so pro-feminism struggles to achieve traction as an activist movement.

But the mythopoetic program of action is just as limited. Mythopoeists turn their faces away from current society and away from issues of power, and ask men to retreat to pre-industrial forms of identity and of social organisation. Although this seems anachronistic, men do voluntarily get involved in mythopoetic activities, and they do so because they perceive benefits for themselves, which is a basic requirement for any grassroots movement.

There are of course great benefits and strengths in each school – but my interest has been at a more fundamental level than comparisons between approaches. My contention is that the shortcomings in each school arises because the theoretical framework each school uses to view social life is too limited. Pro-feminists are able to perceive men's power but are unable to perceive those same men's vulnerability. Mythopoeists are able to perceive men's vulnerabilities but are unable to perceive those same men's powers.

So my task is to develop a theory which enables us to see both men's power and men's vulnerability.

And in my postgraduate work I started with looking at the most widely known theory about men's power, that of Connell (1987, 1995).

Connell's view is that there is a hierarchy amongst men which is just as significant as the hierarchy between men and women. At the top of this hierarchy among men is hegemonic masculinity, with some other major positions in the hierarchy further down: complicit masculinity, marginalised masculinity and subordinated

masculinity. The recognition that there are multiple masculinities, that men are not necessarily an homogenous group and face a range of different issues, is possibly Connell's biggest contribution.

What drives the entire gender hierarchy, Connell argues, is the existence of gender inequality or more precisely men's domination of women. And the existence of inequality gives rise to what Connell calls "interests": men as an overall group have an interest in gender inequality continuing because they benefit from it, while women as an overall group have the opposite interest in dismantling that inequality.

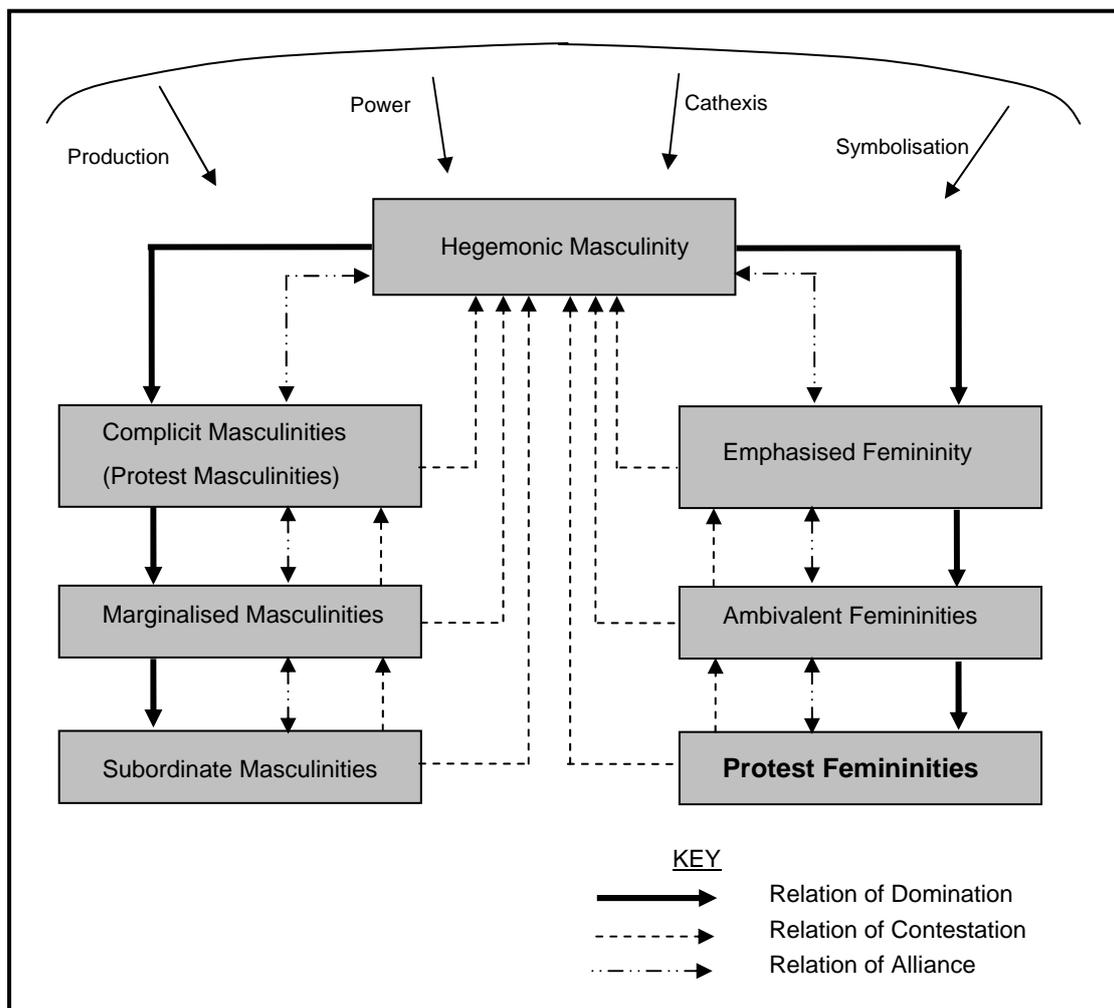


Fig 1. - The Masculinities Schema (Howson 2006: 107)

This view leads to the idea that men don't want to change, that men resist change towards gender equality, that most men want the status quo. And this is where we get what I call bad man theory: men are getting in the way of progressive change.

Now Connell uses Gramsci's idea of hegemony to describe why gender inequality is so tenacious. He says that hegemony is the ability to achieve ascendancy in a play of social forces, and he reckons that hegemonic masculinity achieves this ascendancy through what he calls "cultural processes".

The key cultural process Connell sees in gender relations is the process that creates a general association between masculinity and authority, that is, millions of people habitually associate social authority with a specific sort of masculinity, and as a result the people who are able to enact that masculinity enjoy social authority.

This is good – an excellent insight. Hegemony in cultural processes enables us to understand how those men who don't enact the hegemonic masculinity get marginalised or subordinated.

But Connell doesn't theorise these cultural processes which he reckons enable hegemony. He doesn't describe them or their workings in any detail – he just says they occur. And as a result, Connell makes a fundamental conceptual mistake.

True to his Marxist roots, he imagines that the entire field of gender in society arises from one relation – that is, from men's domination over women. He believes that this one relation, deriving from the cultural association of masculinity with authority, gives rise to the interests which in turn shape every single aspect of gender as we know it.

As a result of this conceptual mistake, Connell is unable explain areas of social life where women have authority or where privileged men are vulnerable. He acknowledges such things occur, but dismisses them as being irrelevant. Women's authority is a mere local reversal which doesn't threaten men's global domination.

And when men act to deal with their own vulnerabilities, all they are doing is shoring up their patriarchal privileges. These are classic tricks of downplaying data which don't fit one's conceptual framework.

So – how can we do this better?

The post-structuralist neo-Marxist theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) examine this conceptual error at length, going back to Gramsci's initial work on the significance of cultural processes in shaping social life. They argue that hegemony is not a position in a hierarchy but rather it's enabled by very general processes of meaning-creation which occur in language, and the way in which these processes of meaning-creation have become incorporated in the politics of democracies and in democratic social organisation.

Laclau & Mouffe point out that a variety of meanings can be applied to a single social event. An example in relation to gender is the current situation where women receive unequal pay. A patriarchal meaning is that this situation is legitimate since it reflects the cultural norm that men's work is more important and more valued than women's. An economic meaning is that women have a more complex relationship with the workplace which is difficult and more costly for employers. A feminist meaning is that unequal pay is not legitimate because it expresses gender inequality, and gender inequality is not legitimate. Exactly the same social phenomenon can be seen in different ways. And each different meaning implies a different pattern of actions in response.

So in this example these patriarchal, economic and feminist meanings currently exist side by side in society, and the patterns of actions connected with each meaning also exists: women continue to receive unequal pay, and in some circles

this is supported, in other places it's contested, and sometimes it's not an issue at all.

Laclau & Mouffe propose that each of these meanings and their related patterns of action forms a system called a discourse.

Now this is how I visualise a discourse, and I'll walk you through its main elements.

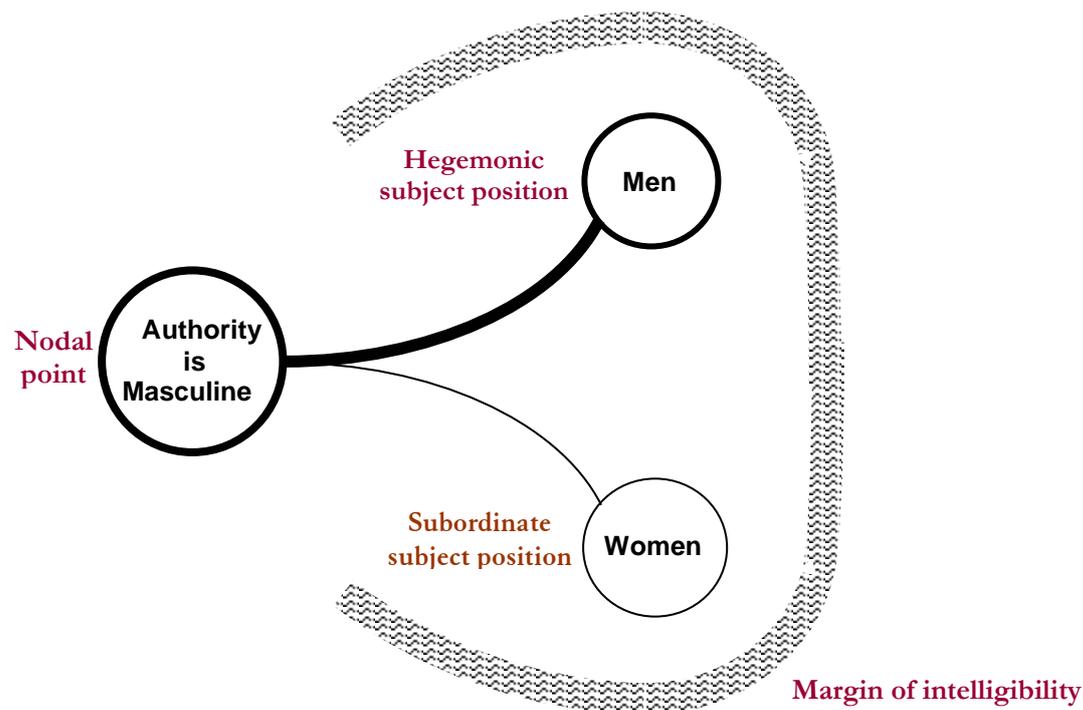


Fig.2 – The discourse of masculine authority

Every discourse has a nodal point, which is a proposition or statement about the world. So in Connell's discourse the nodal proposition is that social authority is masculine. This proposition only makes sense, it only comes to be meaningful, against that which it is not. So if we say authority is masculine, we only know what that means because it implies that something else isn't masculine and doesn't have authority.

And the way this whole meaning system gets enacted in social life is that there then has to be at least two patterns of action: one that expresses what the meaning is, and the other that expresses what the meaning isn't. And that way we can know what is meant because it is in contrast to what is not meant.

These patterns of action become stabilised into what Laclau & Mouffe call subject positions. In this case there's a subject position called 'men' and another subject position called 'women'. Now clearly the subject position 'men' has got a huge advantage over the other subject position 'women', because that particular pattern denoted as 'men' enacts the nodal proposition, and as a result, it's able to access all

the social resources attached to the discourse. So we can say that, while everyone subscribes to that nodal proposition, the subject position 'men' will enjoy hegemony.

But this is the key thing about Laclau & Mouffe's view of hegemony: the hegemony that men benefit from only coheres while enough people subscribe to the nodal proposition that social authority is masculine. And as we have seen in the example about unequal pay for women, that nodal proposition about masculine authority doesn't hold sway all the time.

And this is exactly what Laclau & Mouffe argue in regard to democracies – the key thing that classical Marxists don't get: that in democracies no single discourse is able to reach across and shape all aspects of social life. Because discourses rely so much on processes of meaning and there is no limit to the meanings which can be created, in democracies the space of social life is not limited within a boundary.

And if social life is not a defined space, then there is nothing - no structure, no principle, no relation, that can fully pervade the space. Something else can always be created. This is Foucault's claim about power as well: it no longer makes sense to think that social power comes from only one source.

So we have to think of social life as multiple discourses - multiple hegemonies - which occur side-by-side in social action, and each hegemony arises from its own nodal point of meaning, it's own proposition about the world in which the discourse's enacted subject positions makes sense.

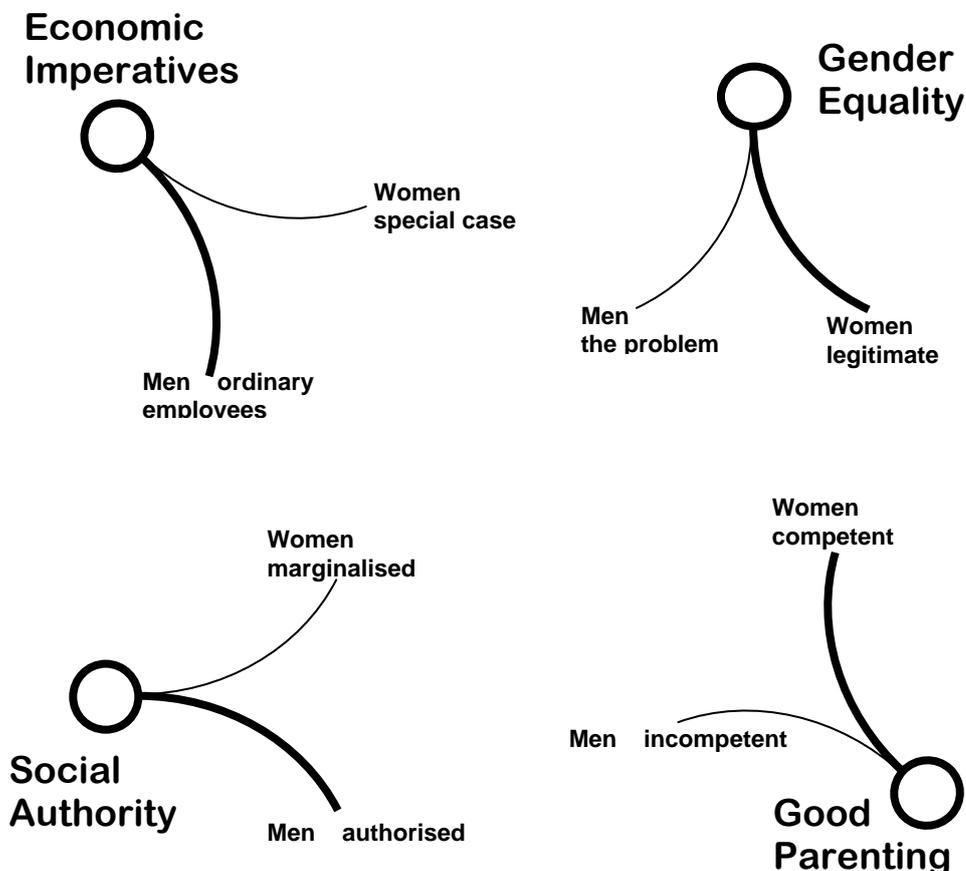


Fig. 3 – Multiple discourses in social life

Connell's discourse of masculine authority certainly describes real social phenomena. But the point is that it is only one discourse among many, concerning gender in Western social life. Connell's theory about men operates in situations where the nodal proposition about masculinity and authority holds sway. And that proposition certainly holds sway a lot in social life – men as a group are privileged and gender inequality certainly exists. But masculine authority does not hold sway everywhere. For example in the 19th century middle class women gained hegemony in discourses about temperance and hygiene, which were then morphed into 20th century discourses of health that cast women as active and responsible carers of self, children and men, and men as reluctant subjects of health. Another example is discourses of childcare which cast women as knowledgeable, responsible and capable, and men as intruding, clumsy or dangerous. These discourses exist alongside the discourse of masculine authority – and no one discourse is able to entirely halt the operation of the others. So we can get privileged men who have wealth, high status and community respect just completely ineffectual when it comes to looking after their health or their children.

So coming back to theorising men's power and vulnerability, this approach of multiple discourses enables us to conceptualise how men may live lives which in many respects look like hegemonic masculinity or complicit masculinities, and at the same time those same men may be vulnerable in all sorts of ways, and can be disadvantaged in some ways. This enables us to see the men who benefit in the masculine authority discourse not simply as one-dimensional but as complex human beings whose lives occur in a variety of power relations, and who may enjoy privileges in some areas but not in others.

This approach opens a way to working with activist men to help articulate a gender politics which actually starts with what gender looks like from these men's own perspective. We can highlight the disadvantages for privileged men in the current formulations of masculinity – and the advantages for men in getting more actively involved in changing these formulations. This can then lead to pathways for action which are integrated with progressive gender politics and which utilise the energy of struggle and experimentation already circulating among men. In this way academic researchers of men can become co-leaders in progressive change among men.

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