

CONTRADICTIONARY MALE/MASCULINE/MEN'S "I'S: THE UNWRITING OF MEN, AND THE CONCEPT OF SEX

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ABSTRACT

May I start with two observations? First, men's relations to feminism are problematic—there is always a gap, a gap between men and feminism; second, the gendering of men and masculinities is now recognised. There are several challenges here. The *gender challenge* concerns how to move from the presumed "genderlessness" of men towards the gender-consciousness of being a man/men. Another challenge concerns the "public/private," the disruption of dominant narratives of "I" of men and the masculine "I." There is also a *temporal challenge*, of moving away from simple *linearity* of the "I." Together, these challenges can be seen as moving away from taken-for-granted "gender power-coherence" towards gender power-consciousness. To address these kinds of question means interrogating the uneven non-equivalences of what it means to be male, a man, masculine. This is not easily reduced to sex or gender. Rather gender/sex, or simply gex, helps to speak of such blurrings.

KEY WORDS: Contradictions, feminism, "the first person," gex, men, masculinities.

RESUMEN

¿Puedo empezar haciendo dos observaciones? La primera, que las relaciones que los hombres mantienen con el feminismo son problemáticas—siempre hay una brecha, una brecha entre los hombres y el feminismo; la segunda, que ya se reconoce a los hombres y las masculinidades dentro de los parámetros del género. Se presentan varios retos. El "reto de género" se ocupa de cómo pasar de la presunta "ausencia de género" de los hombres hacia la conciencia de género de ser hombre/s. Otro reto tiene que ver con lo "público/privado", la interferencia de las narrativas dominantes del "yo" de los hombres y del "yo" masculino. Además, existe un "reto temporal", que consiste en alejarse de la "linealidad" simple del "yo." En conjunto, estos retos parecen alejarse de la "coherencia del poder de género" que se da por supuesta y se acercan hacia una conciencia del poder de género. Hacer este tipo de preguntas implica interrogar las no-equivalencias dispares de lo que significa ser varón, hombre, masculino. Esto no es fácilmente reducible a sexo o género. Más bien viene a ser género/sexo, o simplemente gex, el término que ayuda a hablar de esas confusiones.

PALABRAS CLAVE: contradicciones, feminismo, "la primera persona," gex, hombres, masculinidades.



FEMINISM AND MEN

To talk of the male “I” can easily suggest a male essence; yet the “I” of men is diverse, with many different forms and meanings. I do not believe such notions as “*the* male voice” or “*the* male perspective” are useful, and certainly not in the singular. I feel suspicious of them, as I do of so-called “deep (psychological, even bodily) masculinity” that supposedly *only* men can know, and is presumed to be men’s or males’ special “property.” On the other hand, there is another meaning of “male”: that speaks to the specific social, political and bounded experience of men, the boundaries, leaky bodies, ambiguities, contradictions, lack of knowledges, and all embodied, material-discursive, socio-cultural. Though this makes more sense, I remain cautious of the word, “male”; it can so easily be misused out of context. This is partly why I often prefer the term, “men,” rather than “male.” The “I” of men can be seen in many ways: as sexed, gendered, (sex-)gendered, gender-sexed, simply as “gex.” This last word refers to post-constructionist material-discursive theorising, which does not assume to proceed from sex to gender, and that recognises the problematic “non-equivalence” of male/masculinity/the masculine/men.

Locally and globally, gender injustice is rife, a source and site of discrimination, violence and much more. “Men” are a social political matter, indeed often a problem, and have more significant material effects than just as outcomes of text. Men, and particular groups and versions of men, as the dominant social category in gender relations, were and are in many ways a major, though not the only, problem, in most societies, most of the time. This is intolerable. All this takes many forms: just think of who does most of the world’s killing, owns the most wealth, runs the international financial system, the military, and so on.

Gendering men is now established, critically (Kimmel et al.). Over the last thirty-five years there has been a major expansion of critical gender research on men and masculinities. Men are just as gendered as women. In this critical development a number of theoretical moves in studying men can be identified. Yet this may be more difficult than it appears—just as fish do not need to theorise water. Whilst the gendering of men and masculinities is recognised, men’s relations to feminism are problematic—there is always a gap, a gap between men and feminism.

There are many places of departure and many aspects to these problematics, yet they have one element in common—the intertwining of personal, working, political, historical, spatial, and theoretical elements (Hearn, “The Personal Is”). Researching, analysing, working on, and theorizing men are similarly contradictory experiences. I have been continually stirred by the personal-political sense that current ways in which gender relations are organised is deeply disturbing materially; their unfairness is personally painful to me, even if, by virtue of “being a man,” I benefit. These political concerns are in some ways clear and simple—male-dominated gender oppression continues; in other ways, they are of course extremely complex. There are also all sorts of ambiguities, ambivalences, contradictions, and paradoxes in the politics of men and on men (as in other politics): men’s gender class combining with multiple practices of power interests. Such matters, silences and challenges are



part of unwriting men: moving from “pervasive taken-for-granted gender power” towards “gender power-consciousness and deconstruction.”

However, these positions are still often not recognised by many researchers, especially men researchers. They raise special complexities, contradictions and challenges for the gendering of the “I” of me(n) and the masculine “I.” Feminists, even with a clear focus on women’s situations, have almost always been analysing men, implicitly or explicitly; they have had to do so, operating in a patriarchal world. There has always been a question of what to do with men. For men, one of the problems, and paradoxes, is how is it possible to speak differently, in relation to women and feminism, bearing in mind that men’s voices have not been at all quiet, historically, politically, culturally. How to name men and critique men, without that making space for men to make more noise? To explore this further, for the remainder of this writing, I approach male/masculine/men’s “I”s through the challenges of writing, unwriting, in (auto)biography.¹

UNWRITING THE I

Personal biography, historical social structure, and their interrelations have long been recognised as at the centre of social critique (Mills). This connection has been part of critical scholarship on men and masculinities, even if often implicitly. For men to write accurately about men demands at least *some* reflexivity. Some relatively early reflective political writings on men (Bradley et al.; Snodgrass; Jackson *Unmasking*) emphasised the importance of autobiography, and in some national contexts biographical research has been a significant tradition for studying men’s lives. Reflexive writing by men on academia has also been developed in some instances (Morgan; Connell). Others have explored the biographies of anti-sexist men (Christian), memory work with profeminist men (Pease), and ageing, autobiography and writing (Jackson, “Masculinity”; “Beyond”).

Over many years I have periodically wanted or needed to write in a gendered, autobiographical way—on birth, children, childcare (Hearn, *Birth*), mothers and grandmothers (“Grans”), sexuality and sexual violence (“The Personal, the Political”), academia (Hearn, “Organization,” “Personal Resistance”), nation and post-colonialism (Hearn, “Autobiography”), transnationalisation and emotions (Hearn, “Feeling”), political influences (Hearn, “The Personal Is”), and gender injustice and anger (Hearn, “Men”). In this, I have used memories, biography, critical life history, autoethnography, structured memory work, and more conventional methods. Some earlier debates on “unwriting” men include *Unbecoming Men* (Bradley et al.), *Refusing to Be a Man* (Stoltenberg), effeminism (Dansky et al.), subversion of men and gender traitorship (Hearn, *Men*). Men can be both the writers/subjects and objects

¹ For further discussion of male/masculine/men’s (un)writing, see Hearn, “(Un)writing”; “Writing.”



of writing, of (auto)biography, exemplifying wider questions of men theorising men (Hearn, "Theorizing").

I approach the challenges of (un)writing the "I" of men in three ways. First, there is the basic "gender challenge"—of gendering, of moving from the presumed "genderlessness" of men and towards the gender-consciousness of being a man/men. Specifically, this involves rethinking the genderlessness of dominant approaches; avoiding seeing men at the centre of things, as the centre of (auto) biography—deconstructing the dominant, making the One the Other(s) (Hearn, "Deconstructing"). Second is the "public/private challenge," of the disruption of dominant narratives, of men's (auto)biography. This lies in moving from heroic public achievement-orientation narrative, usually with a public domain focus, and often including marginalisation and avoiding the invisibilising of women, children and "the feminine," and towards the private and blurred public/private boundaries. Third, I address the "temporal challenge" in men's autobiography: of moving away from simple "linearity," avoiding a simplified linear approach. Together, these challenges can be seen as moving from taken-for-granted "gender power-coherence" towards gender power-consciousness and male/men/masculine non-equivalence. To name men in (auto)biography means explicit gendering, but in such a way that does not glorify men or place men at the centre of society and discourse.

THE GENDER CHALLENGE: FROM "GENDERLESSNESS" TO GENDER-CONSCIOUSNESS

The "gender challenge" concerns how to move from the presumed "genderlessness" of men towards the gender-consciousness of being a man/men—how simply to write the "I" of men explicitly about "being a man/men": to gender men, critically; how to have a clear consciousness of the "I" of the male/man, without reifying or glorifying that I.

My approach here argues for interdisciplinary Critical Studies on Men (Hearn, "Implications"), that is, "historical, cultural, relational, materialist, deconstructive, anti-essentialist" studies on men. There is no one formula for gendering men; rather there are many perspectives and methods. Gendering men is an aspiration, a project. Writing, rewriting, unwriting men's (auto)biography is not only a question of substantive gendering, but also a revaluation of experience and epistemology. (Auto)biographies are drenched in epistemology, in asserting knowledge from experience. Different epistemologies suggest different status for men's experience. For rationalists, innate ideas are not found in experience, but exist independently, from the structure of the mind or independently of mind, as in the "essence" of "deep masculinity," as promoted by the mythopoetics. It is difficult to prove or disprove such knowledge. In this, men, or women, "know" what men are like, even if evidence appears otherwise. In contrast, for empiricists, knowledge arises from learning based on perception. Here, men need to be studied by sense-perceptions, either one's own or systematic study of others'.



There are problems with both these epistemologies, certainly in any “pure” form. Many critical thinkers have developed syntheses between these positions. Many have developed forms of knowledge mixing elements of rationalism, empiricism and critical reflection, through emphasis on interpretation, or more socially grounded analysis of knowledge, as in the Hegelian-Marxist, feminist and other standpoint theories. Standpoint traditions inform (pro)feminist Critical Studies on Men. A contentious issue is whether men can develop a standpoint that is both non-profeminist and not contrary to feminist interests; I am unconvinced of the viability of a non-profeminist standpoint for men in producing scientific studies of men. Standpoint positions have in turn been challenged by postmodernist approaches, including postmodernist feminist positions. “Post”-approaches can themselves be more or less anti-foundational, producing multiple accounts and realities of and about men. After all, man/Man/men is a social category, just as is woman/women.

To understand, analyse, critique these category/ies, they have to be thoroughly de-naturalised and deconstructed, just as postcolonial theory deconstructs and de-naturalises the white subject. There is a danger, however, that in focusing primarily on masculinities that “we” de-naturalise masculinities, and yet in so doing re-naturalise “men.” The category of men is used and operates in many different ways: as individual men, groups, all men, the gender of men, in state, medical, religious discourse, and other discursive or conversational ploys, as hegemonic (Hearn, “Hegemonic”). Challenges to men from feminism—the “Man Question”—have taken various shapes, immediately contradicting the genderlessness of “men,” even in writing that is self-consciously socialist, Marxist or derived from Critical Theory.

Genderlessness of men, and genderlessness in writing men, can function contradictorily by way of either the “assertion” of the unproblematic, gender-absent I, a taken-for-granted male ego (Craib), or the “abstracted absence” of the I, in denial, an absent presence, through gender-absent discursive practices (Hearn, “Theorizing”). Gender can be often done by not doing gender, at least only implicitly, invisibly. In the first case, the male I is (over-)insistent, in the second absent.

Similarly, gender-consciousness can function, again contradictorily. It can be enacted by the claiming of the responsible gendered, gender-explicit I, or alternatively the deconstruction of such a (responsible) gendered I. It can function as the claiming of the responsible, gendered I, a self made explicit, upfront, or it may mean the deconstruction of the I, taking apart the (responsible) I as another fiction. Either way, this is not to make claims “as men,” not to use this as the basis of “naming and claiming” knowledge and more privilege, when speaking “as a man.” Stoltenberg has shown how reference to “as a man” is usually a means of reasserting male privilege. For men to (un)write men (auto)biographically differently, in different gendered ways, involves, on one hand, “naming men as men” (Hanmer; Collinson and Hearn), and/or, on the other, “deconstructing “men.” How to write on being a man/men in a gender-conscious way, whilst not marginalising women and children, is a key challenge.

In seeking to understand possible moves towards deconstruction, even abolition, of men, there are many possibilities. Many texts show the limitations of



a view of gender as overly dichotomised or in a fixed relation to sex. These include historical and cross-societal analyses of “multiple gender ideologies” (Meigs) and “third sex/third gender” (Herdt), and approaches derived from historical dialectical transformation of men as a gender class. Another route derives from genderqueer, transgenderism, undoing gender, gender ambiguity (Epstein and Straub), gender pluralism (Monro), and non-hegemonic queer heterosexualities (Heasley).

Importantly, gender-consciousness can mean very many things: it can emphasise questioning male privilege or highlighting the costs of masculinity or making differences between men most central (Messner). Perhaps more confusingly, even with commitment to (pro)feminism amongst men, whether in academia or activism, there is still much room for divergence and disagreement. In analysing the question of men’s gender-consciousness (Egeberg Holmgren and Hearn), I have found Judith Lorber’s (*Gender*) way of analysing feminist political positions very helpful. She sets out three broad frameworks.

First, in gender reform feminism, gender equality might be seen as a matter of realising the potential of women and men equally, albeit within contexts of the gender order and social structures. The implication for men is that men can contribute positively towards, or can position themselves against, the “abolition of gender imbalance.”

Second, Lorber continues with gender resistance feminists, who argue that the gender order cannot be made equal through “balance”: men’s dominance is too great. Gender equality *per se* is not feasible; it is likely to mean women becoming like men. More radical transformation is necessary, with women’s voices and perspectives fundamentally reshaping the gendered social order, including the “abolition of patriarchy.” Men’s positionings here are less certain; men need to position themselves in relation to the project of abolishing patriarchy and patriarchal relations.

Third, gender rebellious feminists go further still, seeking to take apart the gendered social order, multiplying genders or doing away with them. Connections with social divisions, differences and oppressions are central, as are deconstructions of sex, sexuality, gender, and associated dualities. “Men” become an unstable, perhaps outdated, category. This seems the most radical conceptualisation. Men’s relations to this project range from dismissal as irrelevant to immense uncertainty or humility, to a certain social paralysis for some men or renewed optimism of queer futures where gender is degendered, with the “abolition of the category of men.”²

² For further discussion of abolition of the social category of men, see Hearn, “Materiality”; “Male.”

THE PUBLIC/PRIVATE CHALLENGE: FROM PUBLIC HEROICS TO PUBLIC/PRIVATE CONTRADICTIONS

A second challenge concerns the “public/private,” and the disruption of dominant narratives of “I” of men and the masculine “I.” This entails moving from “heroic public achievement-orientation narrative,” usually with a public domain focus, and specifically a public heroic narrative, of men’s (auto)biography, often marginalising women, children and “the feminine,” and towards blurred public/private boundaries. This challenge may lead to the deconstruction of the taken-for-granted dominance of men, public domain(s), and the unified male self. At the macro-level, the collective (male) subject, often assumed in socialist discourse, needs to be deconstructed.

Dominant forms of men’s (auto)biography have traditionally focused on public heroic achievement-oriented narratives. This issue is explicitly addressed by David Jackson (*Unmasking*) in his “critical autobiography.” In contrast to the autobiographies of the sportsman Geoff Boycott, the writer Roald Dahl, and the politician David Owen, Jackson uses his own life as a resource to theorise male selfhood and gendered constructions of boys and men. Rather than conventional public heroics, his key themes include “refusing the search for the true self,” “the myth of unified identity,” “refusing a split between the personal and the social.” A major challenge is how to move from a public heroic focus towards the private and public/private boundary, from the marginalisation of women, children, “the feminine,” towards their non-avoidance and recognition. In focusing on men’s private/personal lives, and giving weight to the effects of men on women and children and to women’s and children’s own material actions, tensions are likely.

In the short, partly autobiographical, book, *Birth and Afterbirth*, I deliberately emphasised my (sexual) difference from women in writing about babies, childbirth and taking care of children (“childwork”). I wrote, with self-conscious irony, in the opening of the book:

I never guessed babies would be this important. For a long time I thought they were things boring people had, that made women motherly and dim, that we [my then partner and I] wouldn’t have or at least have for a while yet. (9)

...and after being at the birth of my third child...

Next morning I found myself, lying in bed, knees up, getting rid of some wind by pushing down in the same way I had seen the previous night; then on the loo I had the very strange experience of momentarily believing/fantasising that the slime sticking to my anal hair was a “show.” (15)

These were not meant as advocacy of biologism, rather commentary on (patriarchal) social relations of reproduction (O’Brien; Hearn, *Gender*) that prioritise public actions over those in private domains. On the other hand, this could be seen as a strategy for how I had “got it wrong” in the past “as a man,” and how by implication I had now “got it right” in the (then) present. The focus on the private has implications for others, including ethical issues in relation to others.



When the UK anti-sexist magazine *Achilles Heel* did a special issue on mothers I found it was too difficult to write about my own mother, and decided instead to write on my grandmothers and one greatgrandmother—all long dead: to say the obvious, grandmothers are mothers too. I tried to focus on my relationship to them rather than them as separate people (Hearn, “Grans”). In so doing, I was concerned that my mother might be annoyed or hurt when I wrote that visiting her mother was sometimes boring for a young child; in the event she seemed surprisingly pleased, even delighted, with the writing. Another device in gendering me(n) is gendered use of the father, often by distancing, so establishing a hierarchical relation of superiority, either way.

Then there is sexuality. Hélène Cixous has written: “Men still have everything to say about their own sexuality” (qtd. Jardine 61). In *Birth and Afterbirth* I wrote about being “effeminate”—not a very good word. Later I wrote on my own complex sexualities, for example, sexual non-intercourse, relations of heterosexuality and gayness (“The Personal, the Political”). This can be located in coming out genres, without wishing to colonise specifically gay outs.

Moves to the private and personal, and blurring of the private/public are also matters of knowledge, as in the relation of the bodily to what is “known”—the epistemological. This approach is taken up by Jackson (*Unmasking*; “Masculinity”; “Beyond”), in terms of loss of bodily control and fragmentation of knowledge and narrative. Embodied knowledge is one form of knowledge. Accordingly, he writes of the need to re-integrate “my expelled selves with my present identities, particularly my fantasized feminine selves, my anti-homophobic selves, my softer and more tender, masculine selves” (“Masculinity” 115). He advocates: “Self-caring—gaining a more precise knowledge of my bodily limits and boundaries. Learning to recognise my body’s specific, warning signs when I’ve been pushing myself too hard. An urgent need for gentleness towards my self” (“Masculinity” 115). In different ways these represent examples of deconstructing (auto)biography, the taken-for-granted dominance of the public domain(s) and the unified, rational male I-subject, and even men.

THE TEMPORAL CHALLENGE: FROM LINEARITY TO...

Gendering men, and blurring the private/public boundary, prompts a third challenge: to rethink “time,” “the relationship between past and present,” “challenging chronological, linear sequence” (Jackson, *Unmasking*). This “temporal challenge” involves moving away from the simple “linearity” of the narrated “I.” The rationale for looking at the past lies in the present, specifically here the need to understand men’s problematic power, identities and relations to the private/public...

I became consciously interested in feminism, gender equality and sexuality politics in the 1970s. I usually begin this story in 1978; living with my then partner and three young children, I was very concerned about the many messages of feminism, particularly conscious of most men’s avoidance of care for children. Indeed then



most men sympathetic to feminism seemed unconcerned about the labour of childcare. From this, I became involved in founding two groups centred on social change around gender power relations: a mixed-group campaigning for more provision for children under-five, their mothers and carers; and a men's group, broadly anti-sexist, focusing on consciousness-raising. These and similar personal-political initiatives became my political home; I have been involved in numerous anti-sexist, profeminist campaigns, groups and activities since.

In the 1980s I was very influenced, and still am, by radical feminisms and materialist feminisms. Annie Leclerc wrote "One must not wage war on men. That is his way of attaining value. Deny in order to affirm. Kill to love. One must simply deflate his values with the needle of ridicule"; Amanda Sebestyen wrote "I see men as my political enemies. I don't want to kill them, that's too conservative a solution. I want them to stop being men any more"; and Alice Jardine "we [feminists] do not want you [men] to mimic us ... What we want, I would say what we need, is your work." These statements are all still highly relevant to men's relations to feminism. ...all my childhood I lived in Charlton, then a working class area, known for its football team at The Valley, which in the 50s had the largest capacity outside Wembley, about 75,000? Seeing the men walking, converging, on the ground was truly exciting. The feeling doubled when I learnt Greenwich was home to the Meantime. My house was in-between these two landmarks.

I am three and I am being dressed as a girl by my sister.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s I realised my profeminist personal-political interests were very close to my (profeminist) academic and theoretical interests—except they were using different jargon.

In 1995 I met my partner, and soon after moved to Finland. I have since began working in Sweden, adding a third main country, with which I have major relations. All this makes for some fragmentation of experience, my biography, my self. Sweden figures as future (what is in store?), as present (partly where I work), and as past (the imagery is intense—for example, contradictorily the "fount" and "leader" of gender equality, and its 1960s "sexual" reputation).

...the apparent beginning point is perhaps a little arbitrary; I could begin the story when I was five or six or seven. At five I went to a mixed primary school; my best friends there were three girls—Judith, Gillian and Mavis. Two years later I left that school and went, as was usual then, to the local all-boys junior school; that's the last I saw or heard of them. I wasn't keen on the way the "big boys" played. Or I could begin by talking about my admiration for my Victorian-style great-grandmother, or doing my final degree exams in May '68 or reading the SCUM Manifesto on holiday in Wales in the early 1970s, or...

These non-chronological reflections, though personal, resonate with more general challenges and constructions of men, and the need to disrupt and deconstruct dominant, often taken-for-granted, mythic linear temporalities. Brian Roberts has discussed the complexities of variations in forms of time: how past, present and future are in multiple permutations in people's speaking about themselves, others and their "community" (for example, "PAST-past" ["Those days have gone"], PAST-present ["It was just the same then"], and FUTURE-past ["The lessons from the past will be needed"]). Individual memories are told in contexts of and interrelations with collective memories and forgettings (Connerton), with paradigm transformations in



political/interpretive approaches to memory, subjectivity and (oral) history. (Auto) biography does not inevitably build on simple past-to-present narratives; they can move back and forth, with inner contradictions; they can be unwritten in terms of changing work, domesticity, sexuality, violence, and so on.

GEX AND GENDER POWER

Put together, these challenges can be seen as moving the I away from taken-for-granted “gender power-coherence” towards “gender power-consciousness and deconstruction.” Conventional men’s (auto)biography has typically ignored men’s gendering, and instead often reproduced patriarchal social relations in its own practices. There is a characteristic silence on the gendered reflexivity of the author and constitution of that writing. Changing this involves problematising silences that have persisted on both the category of men and men’s practices in (auto)biography. How can the silences that there are about men’s reflexive gendered presence be countered, including silence on itself? How to reconstitute the silences around the relation of men and such writing?

To address these kinds of question means interrogating how contradictory male/masculine/men’s “I”s are constructed. This is not easily reduced to sex or gender. Rather, gex helps to speak of such blurrings. The notion of gex takes seriously the complex intersections of gender, sex and sexuality, rather than assuming that gender is a cultural construction of pre-existing sex, in this context the male sex: an unfinished non-equivalence of male/masculinity/the masculine/men.

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