

Conference report: Political Masculinities as Agents of Change, Anglia Ruskin University, 9th-11th December 2016

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I arrived in Cambridge with much excitement for the Political Masculinities as Agents of Change conference, which took place from the 9th-11th of December 2016 at Anglia Ruskin University in the UK. The conference had brought together a wide range of scholars who are contributing to studies on men and masculinities in innovative and insightful ways, and often with a critical lens. The core theme running through the conference was that of how political, social and structural change can be advanced, nurtured and achieved, in particular in relation to men and masculinities, in order to bring about more equal and just societies, free from patriarchal oppression. It was perhaps not a coincidence then that the atmosphere throughout the weekend was so friendly, welcoming and supportive, with the sense that we were all working towards shared collective goals both within and beyond the academic world. The relatively small size of the conference further enhanced this intimate and inclusive feel, which made it easy to engage in interesting and enlightening conversations with many fellow attendees. Furthermore, the conference was attended by researchers and practitioners from around the globe (in some cases delivering their presentations on Skype), which gave it a crucial internationalist feel.

A central question that arose again and again during the conference, and which was the topic for example of the keynote presentation by Jemma Stringer from Oxfam GB on 'Beyond the Theory: The Politics of Men and Masculinities in Practice', was that of how men can be encouraged to become agents of change, invested in transforming masculinities, challenging patriarchy, and preventing men's violence. While there was some consensus about the importance of efforts to this end, there was also considerable awareness and critique of the potential problems and risks associated with men's involvement in the struggle against patriarchy, both among presenters and audience members. For example, Stringer's presentation generated a great deal of fascinating and challenging discussion around the practicalities, complexities and tensions involved in organised efforts to engage men and boys in taking on a stake in the struggle for gender equality, at a time when resources for women's movement organisations are so constrained in many contexts.

As the need to 'engage men' becomes increasingly recognised and emphasised internationally, those involved in critical studies on men and masculinities can be placed in the contradictory position of being both encouraging and suspicious of moves in this direction. In several different presentations, from Iris van Huis and Cliff Leek on 'The Masculinisation of Gender Equality', to Tal Peretz on 'Ally Tensions: Male Anti-Violence Allies Navigating Critical Scrutiny and Unearned Praise', to Michael Flood on 'The Turn to Men in Gender Politics', it was highlighted that we have to be wary of the possibility of work involving men and boys 'taking over' the struggles of the women's movement - of what van Huis and Leek described as 'mission drift' - and the potential for the reproduction of the same kinds of male dominance that such work seeks to eradicate. This left profound thoughts to

reflect on about how we can advocate for more men to become more impactful agents of change, whilst ensuring that that does not detract the focus of movements for gender equality away from women's liberation. In this respect, it was inspiring to see many of the presenters engaging critically and reflexively with these issues and with the inherent political complexities and contradictions involved in the study of men and masculinities itself.

The conference also helped to open up fascinating questions about the politics of men and masculinities. Masculinities can be seen as always being political, with their social construction having an ongoing relationship to power, social structures and gender relations. So if that is the case, then what are political masculinities? This is a question I grappled with throughout the conference. Indeed, one of the exciting things about the weekend was seeing the range of different applications of this concept in the variety of presentations that were given, demonstrating the diversity of ways in which the idea of political masculinities can be used. For instance, the range of topics from the fascinating presentations I attended included Joanna Tidy discussing 'Fatherhood Masculinities and Anti-war Politics: The Possibilities of Paternal Peace', Chan Lih-Shing considering the 'HeHe Revolution: The Construction of Homoerotic Relationships among Young Male Political Activists in the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong', and Bob Pease exploring 'Masculinism, Global Warming and 'Man-Made' Disasters: Political Masculinities and Profeminist Environmentalism'.

I came to the conclusion that if all masculinities are political, then political masculinities are perhaps forms of masculinity that are more openly and consciously involved in politics, broadly conceived. Whether that's with regards to the fact that the majority of political representatives across the globe continue to be men, or groups of men seeking to challenge or indeed overthrow masculinities through anti-sexist, pro-feminist political activism. However, the distinction here is still blurry, not least because of what feminists have taught us; that the personal is political, and the enacting of politics in our everyday lives is just as important as it is in the arena of formal politics. With that in mind, the concept of political masculinities helps to draw attention to the different political dynamics imbued in the social construction of manhood, and to the ways in which there is always gender in politics, and politics in gender.

Jeff Hearn helped to shed further light on these issues with his enlightening keynote presentation, 'The Politics of Absent Men OR Political Masculinities Without the Polis'. The focus of Hearn's talk was on how political masculinities of different kinds have been affected by wider societal changes, such as in technology and in transnational networks - an area which has not received a great deal of attention from men and masculinities theorists. He argued that whilst power remains concentrated in the hands of men, political masculinities have in many ways become more privatised, individualised, dispersed, and hidden, despite everything now increasingly being within the 'public eye' through technology. Political masculinities are thus often now formed through absence, without the 'polis' as Hearn described it, and this equally applies to pro-feminist men's politics, where there are also some signs of hope, in that technological developments have enabled greater transnational connections and collaborations, for example in the growth of MenEngage, a global network of pro-feminist groups, that has developed most of all in the Global South.

Hearn also made the point that agents of change are not only progressive, and that change can of course move in different directions. In this respect, the timing of the conference was particularly prescient, given the results of the US presidential election only one month previously. The identity of the new US President was an ominous and foreboding undercurrent felt throughout the weekend. It also made the topic of the conference, and the study of political masculinities, feel all the more important and urgent. With that in mind, the next edition of the conference, on Political Masculinities and Populism (from 1st-3rd December 2017 at Landau University), is not to be missed. Donald Trump's election victory illustrated the relevance of an event on the topic of agents of change - and underlined the need to be, to support, and to encourage agents of change in order to resist the abusive, misogynistic, and racist masculinity that is represented and promoted by the new President. At the same time, it raised troubling and challenging questions about the capacities of agents of change, and what the most effective ways of advocating for change may now be, in the context of a Trump presidency.

This served to heighten the sense of solidarity among those present at the conference, in recognition of the importance of engaging in critical studies on men and masculinities, and of connecting and collaborating with those taking part in this work across the world. This atmosphere made the conference all the more valuable and meaningful, and I and I'm sure many other attendees left Cambridge feeling freshly motivated, both to be and to mobilise agents of change who advocate for social transformations in our own lives, in our work, and in the world around us. At the same time, the conference offered a number of critical perspectives about how to engage in such efforts reflectively, and in ways which support rather than supersede the movement for women's liberation.