

Masculinities in Troubling Times: View from The South

Raewyn Connell*

University of Sydney, Australia

Life Member National Tertiary Education Union

This text is an edited transcription of a keynote address given by video to the 2nd International Symposium on Men and Masculinities, İstanbul, 12-14 September 2019

Greetings from Australia! Thank you for inviting me to your symposium. I am sorry that I cannot be with you personally, but I hope the magic of modern technology will work for us.

These are troubling times for research and activism around issues of masculinity, as in other areas of life. In this moment of history, public affairs in many parts of the world revolve around the defense of social privileges and the growth of inequality. That is a dominant feature of contemporary economies, and the defense of economic and social inequality has become a major feature of politics, ideology and culture.

In this generation, we have seen a rising number of authoritarian governments around the world. Governments which may themselves be violent - state violence is a major problem of our time - or if not directly violent, are enablers of violence by other groups. I am thinking here of the states with dictatorial regimes ranging from China to the Gulf States, and the new authoritarianism enabled by right-wing electoral success in the Philippines, in India, in Eastern Europe, and in Brazil.

* Professor Emerita

We have seen in this generation a surge of nationalist and racist political movements, which often underlie the new authoritarian governments. Though sometimes they remain as movements outside the state, they have given a flavor to the consolidation of power by neo-conservative regimes in countries like the United States and Italy. In Australia, my country, we have a neo-conservative government which is increasingly authoritarian, trying to criminalize dissent in order to defend fossil fuel industries.

We have also seen a growth of political violence outside governmental structures. ISIS/Daesh is the most publicized example in recent years but there are good many others. Non-state actors in the form of White racist groups account for much of the internal terrorism in the United States. In Latin America, paramilitary forces have been involved in internal struggles in a number of states. And there we see most visibly the violence associated with drug trafficking, now a major international industry in its own right, that involves the creation of private armies by the 'cartels'.

These are issues we are rightly concerned about, and rightly link to the politics of masculinity. That there is a link is obvious. How we understand the link is a crucial issue, for research and for activism towards gender equality.

The newly-powerful nationalist and racist movements are almost all led by men. They feature a construction of masculinity among their leaders that exaggerates the notion of a strong man who will intervene to "clean up" corruption or dysfunctional government, and set everything to right. This is a familiar rhetoric from new authoritarian regimes. Putin's regime in Russia offers a very distinctive version of hypermasculinity, strikingly symbolised by the leader's appearances on horseback. The Duterte regime in the Philippines, and the new Bolsanaro regime in Brazil, offer a more militarized version. The Trump regime in the United States celebrates a dominant, supposedly decisive, masculinity on the part of the leader, who came to power, ironically, promising to 'drain the swamp' of corruption in Washington.

So the celebration of a masculinized leadership is part of this new politics. There is also an ideology defining the kind of gender order that lies behind the masculine leadership. We see, in diverse forms, a reinvigoration of ideas of male supremacy, with woman's proper place being in the home and under the thumb of authoritative men. It is a kind of patriarchal nostalgia, that obviously has some electoral appeal. I think it indicates the depth to which gender orders have been disturbed in the last generation, in many parts of the world - both by women's movements and by economic and cultural change.

Forms of masculinity that don't fit with this neo-patriarchal ideology are likely to be targeted by right-wing movements and regimes. So, there is a striking rise of organized homophobia, as seen in the 'anti-gender' and anti-trans campaigns, organized through the Catholic church but also supported by Protestant groups in the USA and Latin America. In some parts of the world there is state harassment or repression of feminist movements, particularly visible in Iran, Saudi Arabia and China.

Right-wing social movements need their troops, they need activists. Regressive gender ideologies are at work in the recruitment of activists into these movements. Gender anxiety and masculinist ideology give them a reason for being angry and becoming militant. Some of the people become more than just activists, they become killers. If you probe into the mass murders committed by right-wing activists in recent years in Norway, in New Zealand (where the killer came from Australia) as well as in the United States, a neo-patriarchal as well as racist worldview is visible in the background. The effects bleed into individual, uncoordinated violence as well as the organized violence of the movements themselves.

We can see in the new authoritarian movements a kind of masculinity cult, organized around a patriarchal ideology and an image of hypermasculinity. And that is something that, a generation ago, we did not expect to happen. When the new research and debates about masculinity developed, from the 1970s to the 1990s, in the wake of the Women's Liberation movements, most people expected that the

historical trend would be towards more gender equality and looser patterns of masculinity. We celebrated the discovery of multiple forms of masculinity, and we thought that would lead to greater diversity in men's lives and outlooks. Some of this has happened. But the new authoritarian politics is a movement in a very different direction, towards stronger and narrower definitions of masculinity. It becomes important to think how to interpret this new configuration of masculinity.

In the public debates about these developments, at least two significant mistakes are being made. One is to equate the models of masculinity celebrated in these movements with hegemonic masculinity. This is often done through the phrase "toxic masculinity", much used in media commentary about the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment, and in comments about the prevalence of rape or the growth of authoritarian politics.

I think the discourse of "toxic masculinity" points to important issues. But it mistakes the situation we are in, by identifying hegemony with violence and abuse. Masculinity is a terrain of politics as well as a gender form. When that terrain is tipped towards violence, we have evidence not of hegemony but of the *breakdown* of hegemony. If hegemony is working well, the dominant social groups have no need to resort to force on a large scale. Hegemony implies a degree of consent, of participation in the system, on the part of the dominated.

Hegemony and violence *can* work together; even established dictatorships maintain large police forces. But generally speaking, hegemonic masculinity is a masculinity that is widely accepted in the society and has little need for organized violence to consolidate its position. So when we see a rise in state and social violence, we are seeing gender as a field of struggle rather than an established pattern of domination. That is why the displays of masculinity in the new authoritarian politics are so exaggerated, with loud threats, aggressive postures, and claims of divine favour. They are not expressing a secure position of power.

Indeed, they are in some sense compensatory, reflecting the loss of hegemony in the face of women's movements, gay movements, and gender-equality reforms. To me, the repetitive tone of exaggerated complaint in the voice of a leader like Donald Trump is a sign of a compensatory process. It is difficult to see a masculinity protest being turned into a secure hegemony.

The second error is to see current right-wing politics as an assertion of 'tradition'. In this view there is a traditional pattern of masculinity, traditional patriarchal norms, and a traditional pattern of the family, and what we are seeing now is just a backlash against change. This is ironic, as the new right-wing movements, though often calling themselves 'conservative', are actually implementing radical changes in states and societies - dismantling civil society institutions, empowering market forces, increasing levels of violence, consolidating privilege and increasing material inequality.

Authoritarian movements often present themselves as defenders of tradition, claiming to re-establish the way things used to be in the Good Old Days. But this is wrong, historically wrong. There were no good old days when everything fitted together, when there were no tensions, no contradictions in the gender order and everyone knew their place. This has never been true!

The South African psychologist Kopano Ratele, one of the most interesting contemporary thinkers about masculinity, makes this point very forcibly. He argues that traditions are multiple. There are indeed patriarchal traditions in masculinity, but there were also dissident and non-patriarchal forms of masculinity in the past. There are alternative traditions, sometimes just as powerful. So, tradition can be a resource for *democratic* movements in gender relations, as well as for authoritarian movements.

We are simply being sold a lie if we are told that traditional forms of gender were all about hierarchy and that everyone accepted their place. That is historical nonsense. There is a great deal of detailed research that shows histories of struggle, of invention, of diversity and

multiplicity in gender relations. Feminist historians and ethnographers have documented many patterns in women's lives, many forms of femininity, and the point applies in the history of masculinities too. We can draw on progressive traditions about masculinity, as we can draw on democratic traditions in other areas of life.

Though we can avoid these false interpretations, we still have to think hard about how to understand the situation we are in, how to explain what has been happening, and what we are going to do about it. I don't pretend to have a complete analysis of the current situation. But I can suggest some conditions for what has been happening.

A basic condition is the worldwide legacy of empire from the last five hundred years. A violent process of conquest and colonization impacted almost all societies, in many different forms. Colonialism disrupted and transformed gender orders around the world - including societies in the Global North, the colonizing powers, though this is often forgotten. We must remember that gender is dynamic in all global contexts. There is not a fixed 'Western' pattern of gender, any more than there is a single pattern of gender in the colonized world.

One of the legacies of colonizing violence was a pattern of global inequality where resources were concentrated in the hands of a minority of the world's population, especially though not only in the global North. The bulk of the world's population were left in poverty or in marginal economic and cultural situations. That inequality has continued, despite all the efforts of development, and is one of the key drivers of social conflict - which are bound up with the emergence of the new masculinity politics.

The old empires no longer exist. They have been replaced by a transnational economy where the dominant economic forms are transnational corporations and global markets. This world economic order is not markedly more equal than the old imperial order, but it is organized differently, and impacts gender orders in new ways. Transnational corporations, for instance, are organizations with complicated and highly unequal gender regimes, mostly controlled from

rich countries but employing workforces in poor countries, with ramifying effects in the lives of developing countries. The international garment industry and the electronics industry are well-documented examples. New types of institutions work together in creating a loosely articulated global economy with very high levels of inequality.

This global capitalist order is not secure. I do not call it a 'system' because it is *not* tightly-knit and self-reproducing - that is another myth that the social sciences need to forget. What we see in the world today is not only a highly unequal economy, but a highly irregular, erratic, diverse, un-homogeneous economic order, that links together many different forms of exploitation, wealth and power.

In this messy and incoherent world, power-holders, including the transnational corporate managers and the state elites of the strongest countries, are constantly trying to *impose* order. They are trying to make the global economy work in their interests. That is a fragile project, and it is far from being completely successful. It is constantly being undertaken against resistance from a wide variety of popular groups of disadvantaged groups in different parts of the world. Therefore it must constantly be renewed. I think the new authoritarian masculinity politics must be seen as part of that project of renewal. Its driving force comes, not from below, but from above, from the privileged. But as I have said, it needs to recruit supporters, and the politics of fear, resentment, 'border protection' and oppression of minorities, are potent techniques for doing this.

The global power-holders attempting to establish social orders that support their privilege, are working against the interests of the majority of the world's population. Their regimes have produced levels of inequality that understandably produce a great deal of social anger. They *create* insecurity, precarious economic situations, for very large parts of the world's population. In most countries, half the workforce are in insecure employment, if they are employed at all. The global powers that are attempting to impose order must work constantly through local elites, whether civilian or military, and their interests often diverge.

Those are some reasons why the situation is more open, more tension-ridden, and potentially more open to struggle and change, than we might otherwise think.

That means there is important work to be done by social movements. There are also important tasks for knowledge workers, such as the researchers in this conference. I want to finish with a few remarks about directions for our intellectual work.

I think it is valuable to study examples of what we might call constructive masculinities. By this I mean models of masculinity drawing on the many traditions that offer peaceable patterns of life for men, pro-social or cooperative forms of masculinity, potential models for the future. I think it is important for us as intellectual workers to be involved in utopian thinking: defining and circulating ideas about possible alternatives to the current world order.

To give that idea bite, we need to do more than simply describe gender inequalities and the patterns of masculinity that are complicit in gender inequality. We need also to study the conditions under which these versions of masculinity have arisen, and develop arguments about the way those conditions can be contested and can change.

When I say that we need utopian thinking, I don't mean that we must argue for *perfect* masculinities, as if they were an immediate prospect in everyday life. What we need for an immediate agenda is to define, encourage and work towards *survivable* masculinities, good-enough masculinities. This means forms of masculinity which enable solidarity between men and women and between different groups of men; which support sustainable economies rather than destructive and extractive industries; and which offer the prospect of gender relations that are sustainable over the long term because they are mutually beneficial.

I think we can develop positive models of masculinity while also being plural. There is not one unique solution to life's problems! We do not have to be perfect. We simply have to be good enough, in the ideas

about gender relations and ways of life for men that we offer as alternatives to the disruptive and violent masculinity politics that have become so common.

That is my agenda. I hope it connects with your discussions in the symposium. My best wishes for your meeting and for the practical and research work in the future.