

Missing from Masculinity Studies: Aesthetics, Erotics, Existence

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Abstract:

During recent years, the intersectionalist paradigm has become prominent in gender studies. No doubt this has led to new and important insights on hierarchical and dichotomous relations between masculinity and femininity; as well as on the connections between gender hierarchies/dichotomies and racial, ethnical, religious, sexual and other hierarchies/dichotomies. However, the time has come to ask whether analysing masculinity in terms of hierarchies and dichotomies is turning into a bit of an automatic machinery, repeating itself without due respect for the diversities and nuances of the phenomena it wants to study. It must further be asked if the intersectionalist paradigm should be complemented by introducing other analytic frameworks that may help sharpen attention to other relevant aspects. In particular, I want to discuss the possible inspirations that might be taken from existential and aesthetic thinking, as represented for instance in the work of Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault (after 1971), Roland Barthes (after 1971) and Michel Maffesoli, as well as including some aspects of my own work in the field over 30 years.

Key words: Gender, intersectionalism, aesthetics, erotics, existence

Erkeklik Çalışmalarının Eksik Boyutu: Estetik, Erotik ve Varoluş

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Özet:

Son yıllarda kesişimsel paradigma toplumsal cinsiyet çalışmaları alanında öne çıkmaya başladı. Şüphesiz bu durum hem kadınlık ve erkeklik arasındaki hiyerarşik ve ikili ilişkileri hem de bu ilişkilerin ırksal, etnik, dini, cinsel ve diğer hiyerarşi ve ikiliklerle olan bağı kavramaya yönelik önemli açılımlara sebep oldu. Buna rağmen, erkekliği hiyerarşiler ve ikilikler üzerinden analiz etmenin durumu kendini tekrar eden, otomatikleşmiş ve asıl sorunsalı olan farklılıklara ve nuanslara gerekli hassasiyeti gösteremeyen bir makineye dönüşüp dönüşmediğini sorgulamanın vakti gelmiştir. Bu doğrultuda, kesişimsel paradigmanın diğer analitik çerçevelerin de dahil edilmesiyle bütüncül bir hal alacak olması diğer ilgili boyutlara da dikkatin yönelebileceği olasılığıyla mutlaka sorgulanmalıdır. Özellikle, bu çalışmada Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault (1971 sonrası), Roland Barthes (1971 sonrası) ve Michel Maffesoli'nin çalışmalarında da temsilinin görüldüğü, varoluşçu ve estetik düşünceden alınabilecek ilhamları/esinlenmeleri tartışmak istemekteyim. Tartışma, bu alanda 30 yıldan fazladır süren çalışmalarımın da boyutları içerecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Toplumsal cinsiyet, kesişimsellik, estetik, erotik, varoluş

During recent years, the intersectionalist paradigm has become prominent in gender studies. According to this, the world has been - and still is - organised around the constructed hierarchies and binaries of masculinity over and in contrast to femininity, the white race over and in contrast to other races, western ethnicities over and in contrast to other ethnicities, heterosexuality over and in contrast to other sexualities, straight and normal over and in contrast to queer, etc. These hierarchised dichotomies are generally criticised in terms of oppression, marginalising and exclusion; there are also special terms of critique associated with each of the hierarchised dichotomies, such as misogyny, racism, xenophobia and heteronormativity. Moreover, not only do the hierarchised dichotomies co-exist; they penetrate each other and constitute each other so that nationalism is co-constituted by misogyny, etc; and this interpenetration is what the term intersectionalism refers to. (See e.g. Collins, *Intersections*; Crenshaw, *Intersectionality*; Lykke, "Intersektionalitet").

No doubt this analytical paradigm has led to new and important insights on hierarchical and dichotomic relations between masculinity and femininity, as well as on the connections between the hierarchised dichotomies of gender and those of race, ethnicity, sexuality etc. However, the time has also come to ask whether analysing masculinity terms of hierarchy and dichotomy is turning into a bit of an automatic machinery, repeating itself without due respect for the diversities and nuances of the phenomena it wants to study. It must further be asked if the intersectionalist paradigm should be supplemented by introducing other analytic frameworks that may help sharpen attention to other relevant aspects. In particular, I want to discuss the possible inspirations that might be taken from existential and aesthetic thinking. I shall refer here to works by Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault (after 1971), Roland Barthes (after 1971) and Michel Maffesoli, as well as some of my own work.

The main part of the paper will deal with some developmental trends in 'modern' and 'late modern' societies that run counter to what would be expected by the hierarchy-dichotomy paradigm. Indeed they

concern the disappearance of gender hierarchies and dichotomies, as well as the development of rather different social formations. My empirical work has been on recent developments in Denmark; yet I believe that we are dealing here with general trends in Western societies (and to some extent elsewhere as well), although they take different shapes and speeds in different countries.¹ I shall further take a look at some other aspects that generally are not – perhaps cannot be – paid attention to by the hierarchy-dichotomy model (and indeed have often been absent from gender studies).

The explorations presented constitute what might be termed ‘scholarly qualified stories’. I intend them to be in accordance with existing relevant material from empirical investigations (others’ as well as my own), and I have aimed at exposing them to a reasonable degree of critical theoretical reflection. But the stories - like all scholarship and science, whether they realise their storied nature or not – have dimensions transcending this, and to that extent they might well be assessed in the light of their ability to lend some measure of perspective, their capacity to make one see things in a different light, opening up new possibilities.

The Construction of Modern Masculinity

I start with a brief overview of some main characteristics of ‘modern’ gender developments, as they can be found in the West since the beginning of the eighteenth century. In many respects, my version of this is in line with much other, feminist work, yet there are also some significant points of difference and changes of emphasis. In particular, I want to point out the specific ways in which binary opposition in relation to sexuality and aesthetics became central to modern gender constructions (cf. Bech, “Mandslængsel”; Bech, “(Tele)Urban”; Bech, *When Men Meet* 131-6; Bech, “Gendertopia”; Bech, “Gender Game”).

From the latter half of the nineteenth century, women gained entry into the domains hitherto considered to belong by nature to men. This

was a revolutionizing development indeed, as gender differences had largely been constituted through the performance of certain tasks and the occupation of certain spaces. Thus, what might be termed 'social' gender difference was problematized - perhaps there weren't really, in the end, any social tasks that women could not handle equally well as or better than men.

Gender problematizing had been a developing trend in the West since the eighteenth century (in some countries - France and England - earlier than others). Its scope, speed and rhythm varied from one country to another; generally, however, the second half of the nineteenth century appears to be the period in which the advance of women had reached such a level and had accrued such potential for increase that it was seen - by many men, but also by many women - as a societal gender problem.

This is also the context in which a particular *reaction* of masculinity takes place. A new kind of masculinity was constituted, having its centre and base in the only thing that, indubitably as it might seem, women did not possess. In short, masculinity was based on the penis and its capacities (as well as, to some extent, the strength and speed of the male body - as cultivated in modern sports). In the last instance, these appeared to be the guarantee of the difference to women, and - from this point of view - of male superiority over women. Thus, masculinity was perceived as something to be actively demarcated as a *binary opposition* to and *hierarchical superiority* over women - that is, precisely, the 'opposite' and 'weak' sex; and in this way gender relations took the shape of gender struggle. Obviously, the constitution of this masculinity - as based upon the possession of male sexual organs and the exclusive performance of sexual acts with women - went in tandem with the social construction of the modern 'homosexual man' and the modern 'homosexual woman' (more on this below).

In the process, there was also a change in the traditionally different cultural wardrobes of each gender, i.e. in clothes, accessories, gestures, postures and so on. The cultural wardrobe was transformed into a superstructure regulated by and expressive of precisely that which was

now taken to be the base of sex: the sexual organs and their capacities. Psychoanalysis – that believed to have discovered the basic truth of gender as such – was instead rather an agent in the production of modern gender, and often purveying the ideological putty needed to make the cultural wardrobe fit this new base (ties, stilettos, cigars, fur, etc.).

Now, some qualifications to this storyline. What I have summarized so briefly is of course only one of the logics at work in the construction of modern genders. It is however an important one, which generally has not been given sufficient attention. Grasping it helps explain the severity of the stress on oppositional dichotomy in relation to femininity in the constitution of modern masculinity. It also helps explain how and why masculinity became centred around (or indeed, ‘based upon’) sexuality – an issue that has been obscure in the literature, although there has been some talk of ‘compulsory’ or ‘obligatory’ heterosexuality also in relation to men.ⁱⁱ Moreover, recognizing this logic has far-reaching implications also for writing the history of pre-modern and non-modern masculinities. Thus, before the modern West, there was strictly speaking no homosexuality and no heterosexuality; nor was there any male ‘fear’ of women in the modern sense (women were perhaps feared to ‘contaminate’ men, but not to displace them); ‘sport’ did not exist; and perceived ‘deficiencies’ in masculinity were not automatically considered expressions of femininity (as manifested by the difference between, on the one hand, eighteenth and nineteenth century discourses on masturbation, and on the other hand, late nineteenth century discourses on ‘homosexuality’ and ‘inversion’). Obviously, I cannot go into detail with all of this in a brief paper.ⁱⁱⁱ

One should always be wary when confronted with statements on general social entities (such as ‘modernity’, ‘the West’, ‘masculinity’ or ‘women’), or on historical ‘developments’, ‘trends’ and ‘logics’. The history of masculinity, as Connell notes, is not linear; there is “no master line of development to which all else is subordinated, no simple shift from ‘traditional’ to ‘modern’” (198). Yet one should also be careful not to dissolve history into limitless motions of infinitesimal differences, thus

from the outset disregarding conditions of life and social changes that, at particular times and places, are common to large numbers of human beings and that they, at least initially, will have to take as the peremptory base on which to shape their lives. From this point of view it makes sense to speak of 'modern' conditions of life. More specifically, there is a sociocultural conglomeration of factors and phenomena - urbanization, visual media, industrial capital, state bureaucracy, parliamentarism, gender problematizing, fashion, psycho-medical apparatuses of self-analysis, etc. - which developed in the societies of the (north)western world from the latter half of the nineteenth century, although with varying dimensions and influence in different regions at different times. Gender problematizing, then, is not something that gender is affected by when put into an omnivorous container called modernity; rather, it is one of the essential constituents of a sociocultural conglomeration that turned out to be highly vigorous and influential.

Stating that gender problematizing is a constituent of modernity in this sense does not mean that, in other or earlier social contexts, women's and men's spaces and tasks may not have overlapped at certain points or occasions, or that the divisions have remained unchanged through time. Nor does it mean that there were no transgressions of dominant gender allocation in relation to spaces and tasks. Yet, before modernity, transgressions (socially accepted or not) were limited to rather few people or occasions.

It may appear surprising that intense social concern (indeed: moral panic) over gender problematizing would occur in such a large area during the same few decades of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet, as pointed out by a number of social historians, during these years similar kinds of concern about 'femininity' and 'masculinity' became major public issues in the US, Britain, and the societies of north-western continental Europe. The spread of discourses from one region to another was an influential element in this, but no doubt it was also related to some amount of synchronism in the developmental rhythm of the modern conditions alluded to above.

It makes sense here, I think, to speak of men and masculinity in more general terms, since these developments are not hegemonic in the strict Gramscian sense, as referring to one group or 'class' of men dominating other groups of men by ideological means, i.e. by managing to present their own particular interests as if they were identical to others'. Explicit and elaborate ideas on this masculinity were no doubt first ventilated among certain strata of men, yet other groups did not have to await their spread. Experiences and interests in reaction to the 'threat' from women would already be there among other men wherever women's advance made itself felt, and were able to gain expression without much ideological support from the outside. Accordingly, in this case we would not need to distinguish between, in Connell's terms, 'dominant' and 'complicit' masculinities, but simply between those men who reacted with an emphasizedly oppositional, sexuality based and heterosexually centred masculinity construction, and those who did not.^{iv}

Despite the importance of the development sparked off by women's advancing into 'male' spaces and tasks, it should not be forgotten that this is only one aspect among others in the making of modern masculinity. Each of the two genders would still to a considerable extent be influenced (and internally differentiated) by the spaces and tasks it predominately occupied, and the related power differential. Accordingly, the construction of modern masculinity has also been influenced by changes in the spaces and tasks related to developments in working conditions, international politics, consumption patterns, etc. Finally, it is of course important to stress that the sociocultural logic of modern masculinity depicted above is not directly congruent with the actual being and doings of all individual men since the second half of the nineteenth century. In real life it is only a trend, modified by myriads of class, ethnic, regional, etc., as well as individual, circumstances. Notwithstanding, it is undoubtedly an essential constituent of an epoch.

The Gender Game

To repeat: During the latter half of the nineteenth century, modern heterosexual masculinity (a pleonasm indeed) was established. The main propeller was women's entry into 'male' tasks and spaces; *and* men's reaction to this. Yet with time, changes have come about. The alarming novelty of women's advance has worn off, and their presence in social and public life has spread greatly, at least in some parts of the West. Thus in Denmark there has been a steadily developing trend towards the disappearance of social gender, in the sense that social spheres and social tasks are increasingly less gender-segregated. (Bech, "Gender Game"; Bech, *Kvinder og mænd* 91-207, 248-92). For decades, the vast majority of women have had salaried work outside the home; and their presence in the worlds of politics, research and higher education is steadily growing (although not always with the speed that some might wish). Moreover, the Danish welfare state guarantees a comparatively (i.e. when compared to other countries) high level of financial and social security for each individual; as well as offering to take over some of women's traditional tasks of caring for children, the sick and the old. (One may find this a good or a bad thing; I am simply trying to describe the development). Furthermore, and importantly, although spheres are still not generally populated or tasks generally performed by men and women to an equal extent, it is by now widely acknowledged that they *might as well be*. In consequence, increasingly few people really believe in essentialist notions of gender anymore.

Yet although *social* gender differences are thus disappearing, *cultural* gender differences are not (Bech, "Gender Game"; Bech, *Kvinder og mænd* 248-92). Rather, gendered difference is being celebrated in relation to cultural wardrobes - clothing, hairstyles, jewellery, etc. To some extent, no doubt, this is an expression of the fact that the old conditions have still not fully disappeared. Thus there is a *lag*; parts of earlier historical and earlier modern forms of masculinity are continually being reproduced as quasi-natural male identities, by way of costume, boys' games, all kinds of traditions. There is also a *reaction*, in which well-

worn gender attributes are re-arming in the face of the threat of annihilation. And there is a *reflection*, of the fact that the 'sexes' are still not socially equal (in terms of access to economic and political power and status). Yet such lag, reaction and reflection are now in the process of continuously retreating in step with the development towards women's matter-of-course presence in social and public life and the de-essentialising of gender notions. Why then is cultural gender (in the sense specified above) not disappearing as well? My answer is that the cultural gender differences - although increasingly 'unfounded' and accordingly threatened by collapse as their base progressively disappeared - were taken over by the logics of the city and the tele-city, and thus, by becoming entangled in these, are preserved and reproduced though in a fundamentally different key. I shall develop this in some detail.

As a lifespace, the city is essentially a world of strangers (Lofland, *World of Strangers*; Sennet, *Fall of Public Man*). In this kind of social world, certain 'logics' - operative trends in the shaping of experience and conduct - develop. Thus, in the crowds of the city, people become surfaces to one another - for the simple reason that this is all one has the chance to notice in the urban space filled with strangers. The others turn into surfaces for one's gaze, just as one becomes oneself a surface for theirs, and awareness of this is inescapable. Thus, the surface becomes the object of the form of evaluation which can be performed by the gaze - that is, an *aesthetic* evaluation, according to criteria such as beautiful or disgusting, boring or fascinating. And it becomes something that must be styled according to such criteria. These processes, then, constitute what can be called *aestheticisation*. A further logic inherent in the urban world of strangers may be termed *sexualisation*. The gaze which sees the surfaces of others, and which is active in the design of one's own, typically sees and evaluates on sexual criteria as well (Bech, "(Tele)Urban"; Bech, "Citysex"). Thus, surfaces are styled with a view to their potential signification of sexuality, and gazes are attracted to them for that very reason or because they are actively scanning the surfaces in search of sexual attractions. Moreover, the world of strangers appeals at the same time to closeness and distance, to exposure and hiding, and to relentlessness in the consumption of the

other and in being consumed by her or him. Thus, it is a sphere of never-ending cruising and stimulation. Aestheticizing and sexualising recur (although partially in other forms) in the other urban life-spaces that have developed over the last fifty years or so: the 'telecity' and the 'intertelecidity', i.e. the worlds of strangers of multi-channelled television and the internet.

Inherent in the spaces of the city and the telecity, then, are logics - operative tendencies of considerable force - of aestheticisation and sexualisation. These, precisely, are the logics important for the fate of cultural gender. As explained above, in the modern gender developments related to women's advance, cultural gender wardrobes became sexualised. Indeed, as we have seen, they were transformed into 'superstructures' of gender constructions which, precisely, had *sex* - sexual organs, sexual acts - as an essential 'base'. Thus, desire was intimately bound up with this opposition-demarcating gender construction - from the start, so to speak. However, as I have also explicated above, this base of gender construction erodes. It was constituted in the process of the problematizing of social gender, and derived its strength from a reaction to this; yet, in a second phase, social gender is more than problematized, it is in process of disappearing, and consequently, so is the reaction that constituted sexuality as a major base for a sexually related cultural wardrobe. The aesthetics and sexuality of this formation of cultural gender, however, had already become entangled in the sexualising and aestheticising logics of the ever more influential urban and teleurban worlds, and in this way they were reproduced, though also transformed to suit the play of these logics. Cultural gender is thus set free not only from its pre-modern interweavement with social gender, but also from its modern connection to reactive, sexuality-based gender.

The overall result of these developments is the constitution of what can be called *gender game* (Bech, "Gender Game"; Bech, *Kvinder og mænd* 248-292). This is a historically new formation; it differs decisively from the formation of gender struggle and its actively opposition-demarcating constructions of hierarchized and antagonistic gender relations. An

essential feature of the gender game is a certain distance to one's gender. The cultural gender wardrobe is now experienced *as* a cultural wardrobe, not as a natural part of one's essential being. Put differently, the participants no longer have an unambiguously essentialising relation to the wardrobe; rather, they take up a 'constructing' attitude in relation to it. To this extent, the cultural gender wardrobe is considered as a set of pieces that can be manipulated for the purposes of playing the game. Moreover, the cultural wardrobe is extended to comprise also the aestheticized and sexualised parts and performances of the 'naked' body. Obviously, the accentuation of these in the times of gender struggle was already a cultural construction; now, they are experienced as such and included among the pieces to be manipulated in the game.

The gender game is moreover characterised by a particular merging between gaming piece and player. This is not to say that there is no distance - rather the opposite, as appears from what I have just mentioned. However, the player always appears in the guise of her or his gaming piece (or, in other words, dressed in a gendered cultural wardrobe). From the above a certain number of gaming rules follow. On the one hand, both women and men play as active subjects (both are in the position of an active player). Correspondingly, they respect each other as 'equal players'. At the same time, however, there is a difference in object position (metaphorically: in the gendering of the gaming pieces) since women, as active players, are referred to the sexualised and aestheticized utilization of - or 'playing with' - a traditionally feminine (and thus 'passive') cultural wardrobe whereas men, as active players, must play with a traditionally masculine (and thus activity-connoting) cultural wardrobe. This fundamental restraint, however, allows for a broad spectrum of gaming possibilities; a 'man' (or a 'woman') must so to speak choose how much of a 'man' (or of a 'woman') he (or she) wants to be. It should be noted that gender game is not equivalent to gender play, i.e. a situation where women and men may play 'freely' with cultural gender wardrobes and positions. No doubt, such gender play occurs to some extent and in some instances; however gender games are

comparatively rule-bound and to some extent compulsory (though it is also possible to take exception).

I trust the reader to remember that, in the above, my aim has not been one of evaluating these developments, indeed of praising them (although one might ask whether they are not, from some points of view, better than what was before). I have tried to develop a theoretical framework for adequately analysing certain developments. Without such a framework one would not be able to catch sight of and analyse socially important phenomena and changes that go on in contemporary everyday life in many parts of the world, including such sites as streets, discos, television and internet interactions.

The primary field of the gender game is the world of strangers of the city and the telemedia, where aestheticizing and sexualizing are practically unavoidable. But the game is also carried from the city into other spheres such as the workplace (shops, image production, and tourism) and the home; moreover, within the latter, television and the internet are already constituting tele-urban space. The gender game is perhaps particularly developed in some societal contexts, such as the Danish one, where both women and men are accustomed to women moving about in the streets and elsewhere outside the home; and where there are widely accepted norms of equality and equal worth between women and men.

Again, I would like to stress that my storytelling on the gender game concerns a *trend* - moreover, a trend that co-exists and mixes with the older trend of gender struggle and hierarchical, antagonistic gender constructions. No doubt, many people would stress the aspects that preserve and continue the old. My point, though, is that developments have now reached a level where, to use the metaphor of dialectics, quantitative changes turn into qualitative ones: Phenomena cannot be studied adequately in terms of what they primarily are *not* anymore; they should also be conceptualized and theorized in terms of what they substantially are now or are in the process of becoming.

A Homosexual Form of Existence, Absent Homosexuality, and Taste

In the section on modern gender constructions, it appeared that modern masculinity developed into an actively demarcating hierarchical opposition to femininity, centred on the sexual organs and their performance in relation to women. This would leave out a number of men who did not live in accordance with this sexual imperative or preferred to have sex with other men. This distinction has often been theorised as a matter of a 'homosexual identity' on the one hand, and a homophobic homosociality on the other. I have not found this conceptualization to be fully adequate in relation to the empirical material, and I have suggested some terms that I believe are more in line with the phenomena and in this sense 'phenomenologically' more adequate (Bech, *Når mænd mødes*; Bech, "A Dung Beetle in Distress"; Bech, *When Men Meet*). In the context of this paper I shall concentrate on men and their relations.

The modern 'male homosexual' is - or was - not primarily an 'identity' constructed by 'dominant discourses' in a hierarchic-dichotomic relation to heterosexuality. 'Being homosexual' is a *form of existence* comprising a number of particular characteristics: certain basic tunes and recognitions - e.g. of existential uneasiness and freedom, of injury and feeling watched, as well as of a certain distance from one's own masculinity and potential femininity. There are also particular ways of experiencing - such as aestheticizing, sexualising, camp and (hyper)sensitivity; particular dreams and longings - e.g. of another country; and particular forms of conduct and expression - such as stylings and stagings, travels and breaks, signals and the gaze. Further, there are specific forms of social relation - including brief encounters, changing relationships with partners, couples with institutionalized infidelity, as well as organizations and friendship networks. And as a historically and socially specific form of existence, the homosexual is not merely the product of the forces of preference, oppression or discourse and the powers underlying these. He is first and foremost a gateway for the

problematic of modern life. The modern conditions of life – the city, the collapse of norms, the absence of safe and secure communities and identities, the struggle of the sexes, the images and the stagings, the institutions of art, the theory and practice of liberal democracy, the external surveillance of the police and the internal analysing of science – form the background to his life-world, presenting themselves at the same time to the individual homosexual as a problem area in which he is always already placed and in relation to which he cannot escape placing himself. The homosexual form of existence is what it is because it concurrently bears the immediate imprint of these conditions and problems, is an answer to them, and to a certain extent follows the answer guidelines contained in them. His particular erotic preference, the oppression and the discourse act primarily as reinforcing factors in this context; they help to push him closer to these conditions of life (though he is not just pushed towards them, they also pull him). Further, the oppression and the discourse (and perhaps indeed the preference) are themselves to a large extent expressions of these conditions.

This does not, of course, imply that all men who cultivate sex with other men are identical and have been so since the end of the nineteenth century. However, in realizing certain erotic interests – wherever they come from – very many men could not avoid becoming involved in this form of existence to some extent, irrespective of their background and affiliations in terms of class, race, etc. This is partly because such a realization brought one into close contact with the very same conditions of which the homosexual form of existence is a result and to which it is an answer. Further, this form of existence would be encountered as something which was already there since, as a matter of fact, it did become established and materially sedimentated as the dominant pattern for living – the dominant world – under such circumstances. Accordingly, the modern homosexual world – when and where it became established – exerted a gravitational pull on individuals.

As to the relations between those men who did not participate in the homosexual form of existence, I have coined the term ‘absent

homosexuality' as a phenomenologically adequate term to capture a range of these relations during modernity (Bech, *Når mænd mødes* 135-225; Bech, *When Men Meet* 17-84). The term refers to the compulsory and simultaneous conjuring up *and* denial of the spectre of the homosexual whenever men come close to each other – a phenomenon that can be studied in ways of seeing and the structure of social spaces; in the working of institutions such as science and the police, in the male milieux of sports and torture; in the symbolic worlds of scholarship and journalism, film and comics; in the eradication of certain forms of male relations and the ambiguity of the inclusion of women; in violence against homosexuals. There is a propelling dynamic of reciprocal reinforcement and amplification. The more homosexuality is present and emphasized, as a reality or a possibility, the more energetically and expressly it must be denied. Conversely, denial has the unfortunate – or fortunate – consequence that it conjures up precisely what was to be rejected. It is important to point out that, in absent homosexuality, the emphasis may well lie on the positive and affirmative pole and not simply the negative one, and that male resistance to physical orgasmic homosexuality is not always in opposition to inter-male erotics, but may be a way of protecting or intensifying it or indeed produce this.

Again, I should stress that the 'modern' homosexual form of existence as well as 'modern' absent homosexuality only constitute two of no doubt several other phenomena in the construction of modern masculinity – although they are no doubt important ones. With developments towards late modernity, radical changes are going on in relation to both phenomena (Bech, *When Men Meet* 194-217).^v Thus, there is a trend towards the disappearance of the modern homosexual. The homosexual form of existence was above all a special response to certain conditions of modern life, to which he came especially close – before and more so than others. However, the conditions of modern life now affect an ever-growing number of people, as the former 'buffers' – above all, marriage and the family – are in the process of loosening their former obligatory and strict character. Concomitantly, there is a tendency that the particular cultural and social traits of the homosexual – his special ways of

living, experiences and expressions – spread and become universal. More and more people establish new kinds of intimate living together; they experience changing partners and serial monogamy, and establish friendship networks as a supplement to or an alternative to family networks; they enjoy the pleasures of oral or anal sex (at least on video or the internet); they experience gender – that is, ‘being a man’ or ‘being a woman’ – as a problem and an opportunity, rather than as something self-evident or natural. In short: every feature that used to be thought of as being specifically homosexual is in the process of becoming increasingly common.

From this it also appears in which way this disappearance of the homosexual is taking place. It is not primarily a matter of the homosexual becoming like the others (as the latter were before 1965), and thus becoming ‘integrated’, ‘disciplined’, ‘normalised’, ‘bourgeoisified’ and ‘heteronormative’. Rather the opposite. What was specifically homosexual, or might be imagined to be so, disappears in the way that the general becomes like it. In this sense one might speak of a *homo*-geneising of ways of living. Accordingly, in many respects it is more adequate to speak of the disappearance of the heterosexual as a specific socio-cultural phenomenon.

Thus, the modern socio-cultural constructions of the homosexual and the heterosexual are in the process of disappearing. This does not necessarily imply that differences in sexual preferences disappear (wherever they come from...). What does seem to come about is a high degree of de-dramatizing, which may also imply more experimenting. In any case, what used to be thought of as ‘homosexual drives’ or ‘desires’, constituting the inner essence of the homosexual, are now in the process of becoming a matter of *taste*, comparable to the taste for hiphop, classical music or jazz (Bech, “Mellem mænd”; Bech, *When Men Meet* 208-217). Taste is a category of the aesthetic; as such it transposes whatever debate there might be into aesthetic terms. You may like or dislike some tastes, and you may try to convince others by praising the wonders of one kind of taste; but there is not really much point in trying to prove that classical

European music is better than jazz or than Zeki Müren or Umm Khalsoum. The aesthetic realm also changes the logic of understanding: 'He does this because that is what he prefers; because it is his taste'. Explanations that go beyond the field of aesthetics become irrelevant; one is not supposed to answer questions on the (imagined) scientific cause of one's tastes or when one 'found out' that one 'is' like that. Similarly, just as fans of jazz or Zeki Müren like to meet to cultivate their tastes and the kinds of socialites that have evolved around these, so do cultivators of same-sex tastes. To borrow a term from the French sociologist Michel Maffesoli, they form *tribes of taste* (Maffesoli, *Temps des tribus*).

With late modern developments, 'absent homosexuality' is in the process of disappearing as well (Bech, *When Men Meet* 208-217). The life spaces of most people are increasingly those of urban or telemediated worlds of strangers. This involves an emphasis on distance, gaze and surfaces which in itself implies aestheticising as well as sexualising, all the while the contrast of cultural masculinity and femininity is accentuated – precisely, as an aestheticised and sexualised contrast. Consequently, the male body and its cultural attire become sexualised for men. For instance, the picture surface in a number of today's most popular advertisements for masculinity products are already nearly indistinguishable from the gay soft porn of the 1950s. Along with a growing public debate on sexual matters, this may imply a greater general acknowledgement of the aesthetics and erotics of the attractions between men, the more so as no shadow can fall any more from the homosexual – who has already vanished. The result amounts to a form of sexualised relation between men which is *post* homosexualisation, absent of absent homosexuality. Conceivable, then, is a continuum between a comparatively small group of aficionados of same-sex tastes and a large group of part-time tele-media enjoyers. The difference, however, is not as great as it might seem, since even the impassioned cultivators of same-sex taste increasingly live in a tele-mediated world of sexualised, non-orgasmic relations to strangers.

Gendered Existence

What happens if we take in yet another perspective, for instance from the existential analytic developed by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger? He never wrote much about gender (and the little he did usher on this theme seems very outdated). Yet one might seek to develop inspiration for gender studies from his general analysis of existence (Bech, *Kvinder og mænd* 293-354).

As an existing being you find yourself, at any given point in time, always already having become something specific – a student, for instance, living in Copenhagen or Antalya, etc. In Heidegger's terms, the existing human being is always already thrown as something specific (Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*). We may add that, generally, this involves gender as well: one finds oneself as having been thrown as a man or a woman. There he is, thrown as a man – though he shall never know for certain precisely what it is to be a man or why he became so. Moreover, from the standpoint of any given moment it is, retrospectively considered, irrelevant how it came about that he is a man. The relevance of the question of biology or society, construction or essence, determination or free will, is always already in the process of fading away from the point of view of someone existing: All might have been different, of course, and he may like it or not – in any case, it became this way. Thrown-ness is not simply to find oneself as having become something specific, but also to find oneself as having become so without ground, reason and guarantee.

Having been thrown as a man is his point of departure from which he is always already in the process of throwing himself further on in life. But gendered throwing is peculiar. On the one hand, it is never totally free: Having been thrown as a man posits a certain binding, suggests a certain direction and implies an interest in what it means to be a man, and what he may get out of it and of being together with other men. (Here, we are already in the process of moving further than Heidegger's general analysis of existence would suggest). Yet at the same time – and especially so under late modern conditions – there is no compelling reason that he

should continue to throw himself as a particular kind of man or indeed as a man, and not instead become an embroiderer or have a sex change operation. Just as thrown-ness is without ground and guarantee, so is throwing.

Gender interest – the interest in what one may get out of having been thrown and throwing oneself as a particular kind of gender – is thus pre-given as well as groundless and without secure reason. At the same time there is no compelling reason *not* to want to be ‘one’s’ gender – although one may want to be so in a specific way. If the interest is taken up and pursued, it may turn into ‘pure interest’. It cannot justify itself by reference to biology, childhood or history, but merely by its own inner qualities and its consequences. To this extent, gender interest is ‘set free’ (whether, more specifically, it is about soccer or outfit). For instance, male interest – the interest among men in what one can get out of having been thrown as and throwing oneself as a man, and of being together with other men - cannot be defended by reference to its being male interest, but nor can it be rejected on these grounds. Nor is there any particular reason to believe that ‘pure male interest’ would develop into a hierarchical and dichotomous relation to women or to men with inter-male sexual tastes. The idea that genders must always be analysed in relation to each other is in part a modernity-centred idea. Besides, it is possible that inter-male interest and inter-female interest, as well as their manifold and diverse forms, may develop a particular ethics, holding that other gendered or non-gendered interests shall have the same possibility of unfolding as they themselves have, as long as no-one is really hurt by them. Thus, there would be inter-male interest and inter-female interest (as well as many common or combined interests), but they would not be hierarchically and dichotomously posited (although frictions may always arise). Indeed, this development is well underway in some societal contexts.

With this approach we gain access to aspects of gender that often remain un-thematised. The traditional conceptual binaries – nature or culture, biology or society, essence or construction – lose relevance. Other

dimensions appear: existence, thrown-ness, throwing, and interest. The idea that, above all, gender research should be about investigating hierarchies and dichotomies reveals itself as a prejudice. 'Pure gender interest' does not orientate itself according to these distinctions. At the same time a good deal of that which was condemned by many (not all) versions of feminism, appears as 'legitimate pursuits'. There is no reason to criticise them for their genderedness, unless you have the prejudice that there must always be women where there are men, and vice versa. It becomes possible to approach something that gender research was perhaps never really able to explain without reducing it to the effects of biological, childhood, societal or historical determinants. That is, to approach what it is to *be* gender, and what it is to be a man who wants to be a man, or a woman who wants to have a child. Again, this analysis may be relevant in relation to some developments in late modern societies in which social gender has largely disappeared, but not to other contexts.

In Conclusion

In the above, I have argued that the hierarchy-dichotomy paradigm does not in itself open attention to a sufficiently nuanced analysis of some important changes in contemporary societies. I have pointed to the trend towards aestheticized and sexualised gender games between (socially constructed) men and women, as well as a general aestheticisation and sexualisation of men for men, and the experiencing of sexual preference as a taste. Moreover, I have pointed to the importance of paying attention to the specific ways in which hierarchized dichotomies are constructed, and suggested that the concomitant concepts of power, hegemony, homophobia etc. are not always adequate, even in relation to 'modern' societies. For instance, homophobia is not always the most adequate term even there; notions of 'absent homosexuality' may be more adequate, among other things because they open up to noticing those aspects of preserving inter-male erotics that may be connected with the denial of physical-orgasmic sex. And the homosexual is not primarily a construction brought about by homophobic 'dominant discourses', but

rather a form of existence with specific basic tunings related to social life-worlds. Finally, I have suggested that conceiving gender in terms of human existence (in the specific sense of this term) may clear the way to bringing some generally overlooked aspects of gender into gender studies, especially in connection with late modern societies.

All of this has been conceived in relation to what I have termed modern and late modern societies of the West (and the reader will remember that I have taken some care to specify what I mean by these terms and why they may be reasonable to use as a story line in some contexts). But I think that this analytic framework is useful also in relation to the study of trends that appear wherever similar conditions develop. For instance, Necef (“Islamisk chik”) makes reference to a study by Sandikci and Ger on the aestheticizing of women’s headscarves in the big cities of Turkey (“Turkish Headscarf”); and one may wonder what happens to masculinity styles here. In any case, the dynamics of fashion, urbanization and the telemedia are at work all around the globe. I also wonder if taste may not be in the process of becoming – or indeed may have remained – a socio-phenomenologically appropriate term in relation to same-sex-preferences in many parts of the world. Moreover, in many societies (perhaps all), there were and are forms of flirting and philandering, styles of masculinity, kinds of attraction, love and mutual esteem that cannot be reduced to the working of male power and the suppression of women.

Much of all this, obviously, has to do with aesthetics, erotics and existence. In the above, I have made reference to inspirations from the German philosopher Martin Heidegger and the French sociologist Michel Maffesoli. There are many other scholars from whom inspiration can be sought when it comes to bringing aesthetics, erotics and existence into gender studies. For instance, Michel Foucault’s ideas (in volume 2 and 3 of *L’histoire de la sexualité*) on changing forms of what he termed ‘aesthetics of existence’ are relevant not merely to masculinities in classical Greece or Rome; and Walter Benjamin’s or Roland Barthes’ ideas of an aesthetic and erotic science might invite kinds of scholarly writing.

ⁱ I have presented parts of my work on this in Bech, "Mandslængsel"; "(Tele)Urban Eroticisms"; *When Men Meet* 131-6; "Gendertopia"; "The Gender Game"; "Après l'identité"; and *Kvinder og mænd*). A detailed presentation of the empirical work I have made, and the scholarly literature I have discussed, would exceed the limits of this brief paper. On the whole I will have to make do with references to the works where I have given such expositions and references. Parts of the text of the present paper have appeared in some of these works, though not in the context outlined by this paper.

ⁱⁱ For instance Rubin, "Traffic in Women"; Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality"; Sedgwick, *Between Men*; Connell, *Masculinities* 103-6; Katz, *Invention of Heterosexuality*.

ⁱⁱⁱ I have discussed a number of these issues in more detail in Bech, *When Men Meet* 239-42 (= endnote 4) and 252-7 (= endnotes 72 & 74). A good advice: In order to diagnose the specific character of different constructions of masculinity in different social contexts it is important to pay close attention to the invectives directed against those 'men' who do not conform to what a 'real man' is supposed to be. Perhaps it was only in 'modern' societies that masculinity became cramped in a binary, exclusive gender logic of the kind that 'deficiencies' in masculinity were above all considered to be synonymous with feminization.

^{iv} On hegemonic masculinity, see Connell 76-81.

^v In the terminology I use here, 'late modern' refers to a societal context in which the life conditions of 'modernity' have become close and real to large numbers of people (cf. below). Historically, this situation appears in some societies from the 1960s on.

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