

## **REVIEW: THE END OF MASCULINITY**

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John MacInnes (1998), **The End of Masculinity** Buckingham: Open University Press pb, £13.99, ISBN 0335196586, ppxiii + 168

Gender has been a central focus for this journal in one way or another, from securing a gender balance on the editorial board to ensuring that a range of gender issues are regularly aired. The concept itself is contentious: 'gender' is used to denote identity and ideology; to differentiate between biological and social difference; to signal structured and systematic inequalities between men and women; to draw attention to the sexual division of labour; to refer to issues which have not been perceived as the stuff of public, political and academic debate. 'Gender' is, indeed, both 'ubiquitous and hidden' (Morgan 1986) but it is also the focus of considerable, ongoing debate within the social sciences in general and within feminist theory in particular. In contrast, **The End of Masculinity** argues that gender, or more specifically masculinity, has run its course as a means of conceptualising differences and inequalities between men and women.

The premise of John MacInnes's book is a reductive definition of gender as: 'an ideology people use in modern societies to imagine the existence of differences between men and women on the basis of their sex where in fact there are none, and whose existence at other times they deny'. He sees gender, understood in this way, as a product of a fundamental contradiction at the heart of modern society: between the idea that all men and women are in principle the same (enjoying the same human rights; as worthy as each other; equally capable) but also fundamentally different (particularly in terms of reproductive capacities). MacInnes argues, however, that the notion of gender as social (and as therefore unfixed and mutable) has its roots in conceptual problems which social contract theorists tried to solve. As an empirical entity, however, gender does not exist. Therefore, in order to demonstrate the non-existence of gender, MacInnes takes us on a theoretically elaborate excursion from Hobbes's consideration of natural versus social difference; through

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Freud's discussion of gender and socialisation theory; feminist theorists' attempts to revise Freud; and what the author sees as the entrenchment of the 'politics of identity', which absolve the social sciences, and in particular sociology, of the responsibility to address the historical conditions which 'encourage men and women to imagine the existence of such a thing as masculinity in order to make sense of their lives'.

The thesis of the book is that masculinity has emerged as a focal point because we live in times characterised by long-term social transition, in which access to material and symbolic resources and rewards are determined by 'office' rather than sex. MacInnes reminds us of the processes which gave rise to modern societies and which, in turn, have instated the irrelevance of sex in terms of access to rewards and status (in a strictly Weberian sense). Modern capitalism and bureaucracy is characterised by the rise of the rule of offices, not men, which has created an emphasis on sexual equality because it is the 'office' which is important, not the sex of the person who fills it. However, in modern societies, the idea that men and women are similar (in terms of capacities), which underwrites claims concerning equality, constantly competes with an awareness of men's relative advantage concerning access to rewards, resources and power. This tension has been the focus of attempts to disassociate gender, as social, from sex, as biological or 'natural'.

However, in MacInnes's view, gender, as distinct from sex, did not originate in the attempt to challenge sexual inequality (i.e. as a way of disrupting the link with 'nature') but was invented by social contract theorists, as a defence of sexual inequality. Therefore, the notion of gender should be seen as a mechanism for squaring substantive inequalities with the existence of formal equality. MacInnes's argument is that whilst gender, in particular masculinity, is deployed as an explanation for inequalities between men and women, it is a product of contradictory forces between the rise of modern societies (and market relations) and the patriarchal context from which they came. The transition to modern society itself creates gender as a solution to that contradiction and, he argues, this can be most clearly seen by examining the terms of debate underpinning the emergence of the social contract.

MacInnes focuses on the social contract theorists because, he argues, they provided a foundation for ways of thinking about society from which sociology emerged and they invented the notion of gender as a social expression of natural difference, a social 'fact' which underpins the sexual division of labour. In attempting to establish the terms of the social contract, Locke and Rousseau, but primarily Hobbes, wrestled with the problem of whether sexual relations were natural or social, and, MacInnes argues, they had to find a way of accommodating differences between men and women (principally the capacity to reproduce). The solution was to assert that any

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differences between men and women were socially constructed by men and women themselves, thereby casting gender as a socially constructed identity which was consistent with the modern society to which the social contract theorists were attempting to give birth, rather than an expression of natural difference. As feminist political theorists have argued, and as MacInnes reminds us, such a solution was partial and contradictory.

Part of the legacy of this partial solution, MacInnes claims, has been that sexual difference is 'fetishised' and it is this which is labelled gender. Given the route which social contract theorists took (designating difference as social and therefore created and invested in by men and women themselves in their everyday lives), it is probably not surprising, therefore, that modern psychological, social and political thought has focused on gender as a particular kind of identity which people possess (expressed as a set of characteristics, traits, behaviours and attributes) but which is, as Freud discovered, hard to define.

Freud's observation concerning masculinity and femininity, which MacInnes outlines in Chapter 5, is one which has had lasting significance for not only psychoanalysts, but also social psychologists, masculinity theorists and popular commentators. Masculinity has increasingly been viewed as thinglike: it is reified as something which exists, can be observed, can be measured. MacInnes thinks this is hocus and provides some evidence for this view: it is impossible to adequately define masculinity because the very term represents an aggregate list of qualities which some men, at some point and in some contexts, may display. But it is impossible to find masculinity in all men and qualities associated with masculinity are found in some women, in some contexts and so on. Therefore, those who persist in thinking that masculinity is a substantive entity which can be identified, mapped, observed and ultimately changed, are profoundly mistaken, and the pursuit of establishing mechanisms and processes through which gendered identities are shaped is equally in error.

This is a particular problem in the contemporary period, because of the way in which popular commentators (i.e. the media) and 'contemporary sociologists (i.e. Anthony Giddens) use gender/masculinity to refer to characteristics, traits and attributes which people possess, to explain the sexual division of labour and to provide the means of its abolition. Here MacInnes wanders into quasi-psychoanalytic territory to explore the relationship between the 'personal' and the 'political', to which modernity has also given rise, and which the author finds troubling. The idea of the 'personal is political' has itself been transformed from one which highlighted the connections between experiences mostly associated with women in the mid-20th century and social, economic and political structures, to an idea which

emphasises the requirements for the self (in this case, individual men) to be transformed in order to disrupt the sexual division of labour.

In contrast, for MacInnes, the personal represents that which is distinct from that which is socially shaped: it is an unknowable, unconscious 'I', which protects the individual from over-socialisation. Moreover, it is the emergence of 'modern psychic insecurity' which privileges the personal and advocates political, that is, self-monitoring, solutions. Hence, MacInnes rejects the notion of the personal as political, or rather the notion that all aspects of the personal are always political, an idea which has some resonance within feminist social and political theory (e.g. Young 1990).

The thesis presented in **The End of Masculinity** is complex and theoretically elaborate - the brief outline here no doubt fails to do it justice. Nonetheless, I have a number of reservations about the basis and targets of the argument. MacInnes asserts:

We tend to favour explanations of the different social positions and character of men and women based on their gender identities rather than social mechanisms that allocate otherwise similar people to radically different life experiences, opportunities and positions in the social division of labour.

(p.41)

I remain unconvinced that gender is exclusively used in this way and I am unsure to whom the 'we' refers. First, whilst gender is clearly used to denote identity, and has become a familiar feature of contemporary debate, it is certainly not the only way in which it is used. Indeed, it is somewhat disingenuous to assert that this is the case, particularly as the author's own discipline has been at the forefront of developing gender as a sociological, rather than as a descriptive or as a pop-psychological concept. Gender is methodically used in 'contemporary sociology' to signal systematic inequalities and differences between men and women in terms of their access to resources, rewards and status, and a good deal of conceptual work has been ongoing for at least a decade to refine the concept of gender, in attempts to avoid the reification of which MacInnes is critical. Such debate has also been going on within feminist theory, but MacInnes resolutely avoids engaging with much of this literature at all, except to call radical and psychoanalytic feminists to account for privileging the notion of gender as 'identity', which has underpinned the significance of the 'personal'. Yet MacInnes's own analysis makes claims which have been substantially addressed within feminism, and if he had ventured further into contemporary debates he might have found many feminists and feminist sociologists who share the view that

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gender, when too closely and narrowly aligned to individual difference/identity, is an impoverished conceptual tool.

A second reservation has to do with the inclusive use of the term 'we' throughout the text. The implication here is that 'we' are all implicated in the reification of masculinity, that is, talking about it as though it were a thing we can behold and modify. The more troubling use of 'we' has to do with one of the key targets for his criticisms, namely 'contemporary sociologists'. Whilst MacInnes rarely locates and specifies this group, they seem to be mainly limited to a handful of highly prominent sociologists who have been writing recently about apparent transformations in relations between men and women and in intimate relationships (for instance, Anthony Giddens). They use identity and gender in a fairly loose and shorthand way and their work has been well-critiqued elsewhere (e.g. Jamieson 1998). But MacInnes holds these authors up as representative of 'contemporary sociology' and as examples of the troubled trajectory which the discipline has taken (i.e. down the path towards identity, the politics of the self, personal experience and so on). This may undoubtedly be the case, particularly so for those parts of the discipline already working at the interface with social psychology or drawn to more post-structuralist forms of analysis (some of which are represented in this journal from time to time), in which binary oppositions between sex and gender have forever been abandoned in favour of their interdependent discursive construction. For MacInnes, this is not what sociology should be about, and it should return to what it is good at: focusing on the material disadvantages between different social groups, their consequences, how they might be challenged. Yet there is considerable irony here, in that whilst MacInnes cites the importance for sociologists to focus on historical materialism, the book itself persistently returns to 'matters of the mind' and the psyche.

This book 'challenges established ways of thinking about sex, gender and masculinity' and 'the treatment of these issues across the social sciences'. Well yes, but an important caveat must surely be that the definition of gender deployed in this book is reductive and it does not confront its limited definition as part of the problem it seeks to explain. One might agree with the author that, ultimately, gender equality is better pursued collectively than by the transformation of masculine identities, since these can no more be defined than men themselves can become pregnant. However, the message is directed at a pretty narrow group: let's hope they are ready to receive it.

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