



**NORMA**

International Journal for Masculinity Studies

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group

ISSN: 1890-2138 (Print) 1890-2146 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rnor20>

## Political masculinities as agents of change, Anglia Ruskin University, 9–11 December 2016

Stephen Burrell & Maria Sagmeister

To cite this article: Stephen Burrell & Maria Sagmeister (2017) Political masculinities as agents of change, Anglia Ruskin University, 9–11 December 2016, NORMA, 12:1, 80–84, DOI: [10.1080/18902138.2017.1291123](https://doi.org/10.1080/18902138.2017.1291123)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/18902138.2017.1291123>



Published online: 23 Feb 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 156



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

CONFERENCE REPORT



## Political masculinities as agents of change, Anglia Ruskin University, 9–11 December 2016

I arrived in Cambridge with much excitement for the Political Masculinities as Agents of Change conference, which took place from 9 to 11 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 men's practices, 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, while 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 is 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 to date. He argued that while 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 being 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 working with men and boys, 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 1 to 3 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 am 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 reflexively, and in ways which support rather than supersede the movement for women's liberation.

Stephen Burrell

*School of Applied Social Sciences/Centre for Research into Violence and Abuse, Durham University, Durham, UK*

 s.r.burrell@durham.ac.uk  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2447-0272>

Cambridge presented itself appropriately rainy in the beginning of December 2016, when the Interdisciplinary Conference on Political Masculinities as Agents of Change took place at Anglia Ruskin University.

What are Political Masculinities, or rather, are there dimensions of gender which are not political? And, of course, how may they be understood as Agents of Change? The questions the conference title posed were tackled in many different ways during the weekend. More than 60 papers from diverse disciplines, presented by people from various backgrounds, approached the title from very different angles and therefore met the conference's intent to define the concept of 'political masculinities' broadly. Throughout the weekend, there were three parallel tracks, so I am able to report only on a third of the wide variety of papers the conference offered.

One aspect of how masculinities could be understood as agents of change is in terms of challenging rigid gender stereotypes. The first symposium, held by Rosemary Lobban, Sam Martin, Ashley Brooks, and Wendy Abbot, was on the display of emotions by men. All three papers took a specific 'outburst' of emotion as starting point, a video of a recent interview with the British politician Iain Duncan Smith, and discussed it from different angles. The discussion that followed asked not only in which settings it is acceptable for men to cry – sports and death – but also what men would gain from being able to take their emotions out in the open, in contrast to the notion of the rational, invulnerable powerful male.

Certain assumptions of 'real men' do not include much display of feeling, yet *masculinities* are plural for a reason. In one of the afternoon panels titled 'Political Masculinities in the United States in the Late 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century', Sebastian Probst contrasted the 'heroic artisan' masculinity of the working class with the masculinity of the nineteenth-century bourgeois. His colleagues brought even more conceptions of men in this time and place into the discussion. Kristoff Kerl presented a paper on the Ku Klux Klan as 'an organisation of real men', which perceives the republican order as deeply connected with the social dominance of white protestant men. Antisemitism could in this context be understood as a strategy to overcome a perceived crisis of white protestant masculinity and supremacy. Björn Klein, on the other hand, talked about female impersonation in turn-of-the-century

New York City, focusing on the Cercle Hermaphroditos and Ralph Werther in particular. It was shown how a self-described effeminate man challenged normative masculinities and at the same time respected and reinforced ideals of men and women, a contradiction that is still brought forward by a handful of feminists in contemporary discussions on transgender.

Saturday morning also included the keynote lecture by Jeff Hearn on absence in men's politics. Considering that men are most likely regarded as a very present identity in many areas of politics, highlighting absences presented a fascinating train of thought. Today politics take place in the virtual world as well as in transnational settings, in which presence and embodiment lose or at least change their meaning. The classical dichotomy of the public sphere, traditionally the sphere of (male) politics, and the private sphere, to which feminist politics of men turned, collide: privatizing and individualizing the public man while screening the private with the public eye. A third notion of absence – next to the virtual and the transnational – was age. Old men were found to be absent from the public, as well as from the discourses in Masculinities Studies, an observation that applies to old women as well. This question of age would return later on in the weekend, when the book *Men's Stories for a Change* by Randy Barber and colleagues in the Older Men's Memory Group was presented. It contains stories by a group of older men who met over 13 years to share memories about ageing and masculinity.

Later on in the afternoon the potential of 'non-traditional men as agents of change' was the subject of a panel convened by Magdalena Zawisza, which mainly concerned media representation of such masculinities and their effect on everyday life. Magdalena Zawisza, Russell Luyt, Anna Maria Zawadzka, and Jacek Buczny presented a study on advertisements breaking male gender stereotypes. They found that the use of non-traditional male stereotypes (e.g. house-husband) would actually increase advertisement effectiveness compared to traditional male stereotypes (e.g. businessman). Natasza Kosakowska-Berezecka also turned to male stereotypes regarding the gendered division of household labour. She found that men's willingness to share household tasks depends on the perception of the task as being feminine, male, or gender-neutral. The parallel panels focused on alternative masculinities as role models in teaching, and health care, the US-debate on the 'bathroom bill', porn, and many country-specific papers were presented on Saturday.

Sunday morning's panel began with an extract from Merav Perez' Ph.D. project, in which she examines military service avoidance in Israel by men as well, as by women. In her presentation, she focused on her findings regarding masculine identities constituted by middle-class men who have avoided military service. Her emphasis lay on tensions regarding the local masculine ideal, in which militarism is fairly important. Henriette Dahan Kalev's paper discussed ideological aspects of men's fashion in the founding days of Israel. When kibbutzim were established at the beginning of the twentieth century, a new style of masculine dress following Communist fashion emerged. The very simple outfit identified masculinity with Zionist nationality. This form of masculinity was contested by the second generation of Mizrahim, Jews of Arab countries of origin, who used fashion as a tool for social change. I also presented a paper in this panel and tried to lay out a feminist theorization of female-perpetrated male rape that refuses the simple perpetuation of notions of female vulnerability and male aggression, while compelling us to recognize male vulnerability.

Sexual violence and the means to its prevention were addressed also in another parallel panel, where asserting 'positive masculinity' to fight sexual violence was discussed as well as the criticism of male allies earning excessive praise. The question of allied men in the fight against sexual violence towards women is one shape which a wider and omnipresent question at the conference – and in feminist Masculinities Studies altogether – takes: what part do men play in the struggle for gender equality? This is what Jemma Stringer turned to in her keynote

lecture, in which she reported from her practical experiences with Oxfam. While in theory the importance to gain men as allies is widely accepted, the practicalities of a workable path towards gender equality, in which men have an equal or even a partial stake, is difficult terrain, as she put it. Her keynote took the conference's aspiration to combine theory and practice seriously in turning to the audience in the second half of her lecture to 'pick our brains' and engage in a very lively discussion exploring the potentials and the tensions of this work in practice.

Stringer stated that everyone loses out in gender inequality, but women lose the most, and they also carry the burden of responsibility for fixing it. To address harmful aspects of masculinity, the dark side of male privilege, an important strategy is to involve men in feminist struggles and share responsibility. It is a good sales pitch, but also a dangerous game: will we end up giving the privileged more resources? Or even end up giving men authority over gender equality and therefore women's rights?

During the last panel track, the question of men's involvement was brought forward once more. Michael Flood took a critical stance towards the turn to men in feminism, connecting this question with a more general critique on recent developments that might be captured with the term 'pop-feminism'. It was pointed out that in campaigns like HeForShe, sexism and patriarchal structure are individualized, that in our days all it takes to be a feminist is to choose your hashtags wisely. On the other hand – and it did not take the audience long to counter – what do we gain from keeping feminism an elitist project? How feminist men's organizations in practice struggle to gain more visibility and what they themselves find strategies for approaching a broader public, was addressed by Mara Kastein, who talked on gender equality oriented men's politics in German speaking Europe. Marion Löffler and Karin Bischof took a close look at the Austrian situation and analysed the construction of masculinity in the conservative right-wing government, which came into power in 2000. They argued that the political project of 'change' of the time implied a restructuring of political masculinities, which they explored based on analysis of parliamentary debates.

Another notion of political masculinities as agents of regressive change was brought forward by Bob Pease regarding climate change. Certain men, because of their disproportionate share of power, are said to also have a disproportionately large share in climate change. On the one hand, this is a very material analysis, but on the other hand, stereotypes also play a part in this, for example, by connecting the consumption of meat to masculinity. Pease therefore proposed a shift in the perspective from those especially vulnerable to global warming to those who privilege from it. In this he was also taking into consideration intersectionality and male privilege while putting forward a pro-feminist environmentalism.

Other papers delivered on Sunday covered topics such as aggressive and softened masculinities among Thai men in sporting contexts, masculinities in late Ottoman Beirut, as well as the importance of intersectional social inequalities in politicizing masculinities.

The conference was an inspiring event, revealing the wide range of theory as well as political practice in which masculinities may actually play a part as agents of change. At the same time, it became clear that the different forms that men's engagement in feminism could or should take is still controversial. The conference was excellently organized and offered a great opportunity to get to know new people and to benefit from research from all over the world.

Maria Sagmeister

*Department of Legal Philosophy, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria*

 maria.sagmeister@univie.ac.at