Enculturating men, cultivating masculinity

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EDITORIAL

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Competing conceptions of culture

Very few terms are as fiercely fought over and so readily used but so causally underdeveloped as that of 'culture'. The concept has a range of different interpretations but can be broadly divided between aesthetic and anthropological uses. In the former, some, adopting a firmly elitist view of culture-as-art, have insisted on a normative definition, embodied most famously in the maxim that culture *should* enculturate 'the passion for sweetness and light' (Arnold, 1869, p. xvii). Here culture is regarded as the preserve of an elite few, distinguished from the popular and the masses especially, and characterized through its capacity to 'elevate' taste, to 'refine' and to leave a lasting impression. Williams (1958), reacting to these superior and inegalitarian characterizations, in observing that 'culture is ordinary', sought instead to render the taken-for-granted everyday interactions as visible. This, he argued, was itself a manifestation of culture and he promoted the idea that (economically) marginalized groups *have* culture. Likewise, Geertz's (1973) oft-quoted anthropological method of 'thick-description' rests on the idea that culture is, to a certain extent ineffable, revealed only through the interpretive networks we build up around our daily interactions and the assumptions on which small mundane interactions are based; or as he puts it 'winks on winks on winks' (p. 314). The question is, to what extent do the two relate to each other and, importantly to issues of social change. Does culture as aesthetic change or does it merely represent culture in the anthropological sense?

Disagreements exist as to what culture in the aesthetic sense means and what it is good for. The term culture has its roots in the Latin *colere* which originally meant 'tilling the ground' (Baldwin, Faulkner, & Hecht, 2005, p. 5). It was extended further through the idea of the educative role of art during the 1700 and 1800s with the development of theories on the moral and ethical value of aesthetics and art specifically. In this respect, the original idea of culture as cultiva*ting,* with the horticultural metaphors that this entails, became intertwined with an empirically and ethical false insistence on universalism, containing within it the idea that the job of culture was to produce change and to afford growth. The German notion of 'kultur', however, came to stand in stark contrast to the concept of 'civilization', based as it was on Herder's conception of an authentic German 'folk spirit' as responsible for the superiority of German art (Viereck, 2003, pp. 38–39). The concept was weaponized by German nationalists during the 1800s as a means of distinguishing 'authentic' German art from a conception of French refinement as 'effeminate' and 'decadent', with all the gendered and racialized connotations that this took on at the time, as well as subsequently during the 1920s and '30s (Viereck, 2003). Indeed, the concept of culture as 'sophistication' and 'refinement' has often had connotations of being, itself, 'feminised' and has frequently been seen as operating in contrast to idealised notions of masculinity (Forth, 2008).

Adorno and Horkheimer's (1947/1997) infamously miserabilist culture-industry thesis echoed similar views in diagnosing what they saw as a similar societal malady in the elevation of popular culture to the status of art. Leavis, too, argued that 'civilization and culture are now becoming antithetical terms', lamenting what he viewed as an increasing sentimentality and trivialization of culture, something akin to debates around immediacy today, through the

development of film and shift away from literature. Such views were also common in radical and Marxist feminist theorizing which afforded mass entertainment an ideological function (Friedan, 1963/1979). This also indicates something of the normative problem of how to understand *popular* culture which has been viewed in part in quantitative terms of what media most people consume and in qualitative terms in a specific form of aesthetic product or sensibility which differs from what came to be designated 'high-brow' tastes. Though the extent to which mass entertainment and popular/mass culture could be a terrain for challenging, rather than merely reproducing the status quo through mass cultural aesthetics was subsequently taken up by the CCCS and feminist subcultural theorists as a challenge to such narrow conceptions (McRobbie, 1991). In short, even the concept of what became regarded as culture's role as cultiva*ting* was rarely considered unproblematic even from the perspective of cultural and economic elites. What they share, however, is the sense that culture in the aesthetic sense has the power to transform and to act on humans, whether for better or for worse.

Culture, in the anthropological sense is perhaps often equally as muddled. Some insist culture is about shared values and norms – shared by those linked by either physical geography or group (as in *sub*culture) - whilst others have tried to pinpoint culture as consisting of shared attributes which, whilst socially constructed, are more enduringly linked to identities and tend to be used as the basis for classifying and dividing large groups of people within and across nation states; attributes such as language, ethnicity or race. Historically, these groupings have been the basis for both the elevation and marginalization of particular groups as well as sources of personal, political or patriotic pride. There are, however, also questions over whether culture, in the anthropological sense, represents something singular, stable, homologous and coherent or whether it is transitory and fleeting. The insistence on some kind of authentic Ur-culture has dogged anthropologists the world over and, today, very few people insist on some kind of pure culture with those who endorse such a view often blighted by suspect motives.

When it comes to culture, these two broad positions – the anthropological and the aesthetic - are not necessarily oppositional. Sociologists of art have, in increasing frequency, since at least the 70s, insisted that artistic objects are constructed through the mundane, the everyday and the routine (Becker, 1982; Wolff, 1983) with all the inequalities in terms of access, dissemination and reception that these entail. In opposition to the elitist conception of culture as cultiva*ting,* aesthetic objects are, according to this view, culturally structured and invested with meaning within cultures and it is this which elevates their status. Thus, it is possible to reconcile the idea that cultural objects are culturally situated through the interactions of individuals and groups, which are often themselves exclusionary and myopic, within a broader cultural context. Nevertheless, despite a deep suspicion with the Frankfurt School's shortcomings (namely accusations of bourgeois elitism and the unique affective status afforded to high art) a belief in the capacity of art-as-culture to shape and influence, rather than merely represent, the social has seen a resurgence. At issue, therefore, is whether culture in the aesthetic sense simply represents or symbolizes culture in the anthropological sense or whether it also impacts on how social relations themselves are structured; whether cultural objects act on us and provide us with meaning or whether meaning is merely invested by individuals, groups, institutions or states.

Culture and social change in CSMM

Culture has been a vital concept in CSMM. Yet despite the prominent role it adopted in Connell's (1995) seminal text, it never receives a concrete explanation, used in a variety of ways

and often employed without qualification. At times it appears in the anthropological sense ('homophobic culture' p.78) and in others as concerned with representations the media in the aesthetic sense ('fantasy figures, such as film characters' p.77). Even Edwards' (2006) *Cultures of Masculinity*, despite drawing a distinction between the concrete material realities and questions of representation, does not really attend to the question of what culture is. Connell was also not the first to link the two conceptions simultaneously to masculinity. A focus on the relationship of representation to practice predates the so-called 'second wave' of masculinity studies and sex-role theorists invoked representations and stereotypes as the basis for their work. This strain was particularly important in the work of feminist theorists (Firestone, 1970/1979). Drawing from critical theory traditions, which mixed psychoanalysis with Marxism, such approaches used literature and film particularly to decode social notions of gender through an analysis of works and representations (de Beauvoir, 1953/1988; Millett, 1969).

Within CSMM, Connell's treatment of culture, was indebted to a Gramscian idea of culture as providing the ideological support for structural inequalities. Yet as Demetriou (2001) pointed out already in 2001, Gramsci's initial formulation of hegemony was itself something developed in response to Marx's tendency to reduce culture to an effect of the economic base and to deny the active role that 'common sense' (i.e. culture as shared values) played (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 416–420) and indeed, to a certain extent, the autonomy of the aesthetic and its capacity to shape the material. Marx's few forays into questions of art and aesthetics pointed to the ideological capacity of representations to naturalize and support taken for granted assumptions about how men act. Gramsci's core argument, however, which has been so effectively utilized contemporaneously by the far-right (see Nagle, 2017), is that culture – in the aesthetic sense as well as discourses about culture in the anthropological sense – can be an agent of change. Connell's is also a theory in part of cultural change. As she (1995) clearly states 'when conditions for the defence of patriarchy change, the bases for the dominance of a particular masculinity are eroded … new groups may challenge old solutions and construct a new hegemony' (p.78). Here, there is the tantalizing promise that aesthetic representations of masculinity promote shifts and complicate its taken-for-grantedness as a social configuration. Yet, in Connell's work, it is cultural *ideals* which provide the legitimation for the current conditions of patriarchy and it is fundamentally gendered economic power expressed through culture which is analysed. Whilst this view does accord power to the notion of culture as cultiva*ting* – as impacting on the hearts and minds of people of various genders - it portrays artistic objects, as both representing and reinforcing a particular vision of masculinity through representation. As such her model, as with other structural approaches does better at explaining reproduction rather than change.

Culture has figured in various ways in studies on men and masculinities since the field's inception but there has been a marked tendency toward decoding texts rather than exploring their effects. Writing in the 1990s on the back of the rise of bodybuilder-super-action-heroes during the '80's, Horrocks (1994, 1995) argued that such manifestations were indicative of a psychological response to masculinity in crisis as a result of structural renegotiations. The stress on unbridled machismo and hyper-violence in Rambo or Terminator films, of the guns-and-muscles variety, he argued was a response to increasing women's participation in the labour market and decline in male role-models. In a different vein, Hawkins (2009) suggests that the pop-dandy of the 90s and 80s, emerged as a response to changing norms around masculinity, hyperconsumption and a flirtation with the shift toward 'metrosexuality' (Simpson, 1994) which itself was explained in terms of the strides made for equality by gay-rights activists and increasingly fluid gender norms within the public sphere (see also Edwards, 2006). Today, right-wing influencers such as Jordan Peterson (2018, pp. 329–

331) bemoan the decreasing lack of bullies in cartoons for what he sees as men's increasing weakness, while others blame *Barbie* for (yet another) crisis in masculinity.

There are few similarities between the aforementioned and they have very different political intentions. Nevertheless, they share a view which is broadly in line with Connell's in that culture is reduced to text, to the passive and inert. As such, aesthetic culture becomes a means to read masculinity without considering the differential effects it has on the viewing publics, including oppositional readings. An interest in aesthetic culture's role as being treated as proof of what men are 'really like' has a long history ranging at least as far back as Antiquity but it has always had a disciplining effect in constructing rather than simply representing those ideas both amongst groups and at the level of whole societies. Concerns as to what effects listening to the wrong type of music/poetry or watching the wrong type of theatre litter Plato's Republic whilst Boethius lamented what he saw as the fact today that 'today the human race is lascivious and *effeminate*, and thus it is entertained totally by the representational and theatrical modes … boys must not be trained in all modes but only in those which are vigorous and simple' (emphasis added). As late as 2004, a 'gay-conversion' therapist advised parents that

> [I would recommend men to] … (1) participate in sports activities, (2) avoid activities considered of interest to homosexuals, such [as] art museums, opera, symphonies, (3) avoid women unless it is for romantic contact, (4) increase time spent with heterosexual men in order to learn to mimic heterosexual male ways of walking, talking, and interacting with other heterosexual men. (Nicolosi cited in Bright, 2004, p. 73).

Cave paintings, in their own way, have functioned in subsequent generations to support myths of masculinity, despite evidence now pointing to problems with the modern gendered model of dimorphic sexual difference in hunter-gatherer societies. Visual representations during the 18th Century, too, were not merely representations of how men were but tools for disciplining middle-class men's bodies as an effect of masculinist rationality and in direct opposition to othered and marginalized groups (see Forth, 2008). Such representations proved to be particularly vital in authoritarian regimes in constructing ideal forms of muscularity and in disciplining labour as well as reinforcing stereotypical gendered norms (Mosse, 1996; Vujošević, 2017). This all indicates two things; firstly that culture in the aesthetic sense not only represents but also constructs how men see themselves in relation to ideals; secondly, that the way that they impact on different groups of men at different times depends, in large part on culture in the anthropological sense.

It is right to be skeptical of stimulus-response models around the effects of aesthetic culture and cultural products (Hall, 1980). Immediate exposure does not necessarily lead to a sustained shift in viewpoints – especially when it comes to understanding the effects on gender. Experimental research can never identify the long-term consequences of why exposure to a variety of different representations resonate with certain men over others. Media-effects models are complicated by the fact that it is immensely difficult to extricate symptoms from causes. Though, whilst immediate shifts in attitudes or behaviour do not follow from exposure, *repeated* exposure, framed within certain interpretative frameworks does produce changes in the way we think and feel; however small and imperceptible. The question is how this process works and what are the conditions under which cultural production is both gendered and impacts on gendered expectations. The idea of replacing one singular *Zeitgeist* with another still exercises a strong hold over popular cultural imaginaries and academic theory alike, despite the fact that effects are demonstrably uneven. When repeatedly exposed to cultural arguments on the 'weakening' or 'crisis of masculinity', with the blame laid at the feet of films, art or symphonies, this clearly has more of an effect

than a one-time viewing of *Barbie*. At issue here is how we, as scholars, study the various entanglements of culture as aesthetic with a conception of culture as anthropological as necessarily interlinked but never unidirectional. As masculinity scholars it is particularly important to understand intersectional dynamics in both the production and consumption of aesthetic culture, as well as how they work not only immediately but in terms of a constantly evolving *process*.

The current issue

In this issue, Gammon explores the issue of why what he terms 'soft masculinities' in South Korean dramas are viewed unfavourably in Vietnam. Gammon explains this as a consequence of both cultural stereotypes surrounding the hyper-capitalist image consciousness and notions of authenticity. Exploring the topic in relation to the concept of 'gender threat' the article argues that the twin strands of Confucianism and communism intertwine with notions of authentic Korean masculinity. Here, mediation of aesthetic culture is vital in that whilst Korean soft masculinities are often taken as indicative of changing gender relations in the region, Gammon demonstrates clear resistance to such narratives as a result of how Vietnamese men position themselves in opposition to these popular TV shows. Thus, far from their popularity representing a wholesale shift in cultural sensibilities, they become a resource for strengthening more traditional forms of gendered relations amongst the men in his study.

Knott-Fayle, Kehler and Gough's study looks too at culture through the way in which allyship and the aligning of gay men with straight men in relation to sport. Significantly, the authors pay attention to how 'both straight and LGBTIQ + athletes build alliances across sexual and gender identities'. This attention to the conditions necessary for the process of cultural change provide a stark contrast with sweeping generalizations on the increasing liberalization of masculinity. By contrast, the authors look specifically at the way in which reciprocal interactions shift and produce change. The article, drawing on narratives from athletes, explores particularly the issue of transformation in terms of both attitudes and practice.

Smith's article explores the affectivity present in Chad Harbach's *The Art of Fielding*, which concerns young male baseball players in the US. Focusing too on the sporting arena, Smith offers a close reading of the way in which the text encapsulates tensions between the oft-cited 'crisis of masculinity' and discourses around emotional repression, reading these through stoic philosophy. Crucially, Smith's reading also deals with the issue of multiple subject positions and power relations between men through analysing the figures in the novel. In contrast to the previous article, however, Smith points toward the durability and stability of what he calls attachment to 'affective miseducation in emotional stoicism … illustrating the *absolute incompatibility* between dominant performances of aggressive, controlling, "stoic" masculinity and what Zuckerberg calls 'true Stoicism' to distinguish it from popularized self-help versions'. Smith instead advocates what he views as the novel's underlying importance; namely the importance of engaging with stoic philosophy beyond self-help as a means of cultivating healthy notions of masculinity.

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