Review

Robert Morrell (ed) (2001) *Changing Men in Southern Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, London and New York: Zed Books

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Changing Men in Southern Africa is an important text for being the first major work in South Africa dedicated to the study of masculinity. As such, it is a theoretical challenge to the academy. In reviewing the book I want to ask some questions about the theoretical pin that holds the book together: the notion of masculinity itself. I do this not so much as a critique of the book, or an attempt to dismiss the notion of masculinity, but in the spirit of the theoretical challenge that it represents.

In the 1990s a growing interest developed in the international literature about whether 'men are in crisis' and about the 'New Man' – in other words, men who favoured women's liberation, looked after the children, supported women pursuing careers, were sensitive and introspective. Campaigns to promote women's rights and gender equality were associated with the organic rise of a 'new men's movement', which emerged from men coming together to discuss the role of men in the exploitation of women. The earliest public expression of this movement was the British publication, *Achilles Heel*, founded in the 1970s. By the 1990s governments and the UN were including issues of masculinity within the purview of their gender policies. The question that was often posed was the following: if equality is to become a reality there has to be a genuine desire for change on the part of men and women. Hence the 'New Man' was one defined as 'wanting to change'. Once 'man' was posited as 'able to change', this implied, contrary to a version of feminism that took men as given, that men were potentially allies in the struggle for equality. Why? Precisely because being a man was not fixed to any necessary 'identity'. It is precisely this diversity that the term masculinity seeks to capture. Unfortunately, the focus on reducing inequalities between

men and women, Morrell suggests, has obscured the way masculinity is defined and practiced in Southern Africa since 1994. Hence the book.

This shift to an interest in diversity, at first glance, seems to insinuate itself from the historical and social record. The view from masculinity studies wants us to see men as constructed in the context of class, race and other factors, interpreted though the prism of age (8). Morrell contrasts, in this regard, the Talib(m)an with, say, a man that does not believe all women are nags, or belong in the kitchen or should be pretty but quiet. At stake are the different conditions under which these men have been made as 'men'. Masculinity wants men treated in a similar way, say, to how some feminists regard 'woman' – a historical and social production. Masculinity studies are a sort of disciplinary corrective, a will to even-handedness in the domain of gender studies.

Let us note from the start that studies in masculinity are dogged by a theoretical challenge which did not necessarily arise before. When 'men' are defined by virtue of their *a priori* relations to women (domination, exploitation), then the ontological status of 'man' is precisely these relations. Simply put, man was identical to these relations. Studies in masculinity, however, unsettle precisely this ontology. If masculinity is a historical and social construct, such that 'men' are diverse, what is the quality of identity (man-ness) that makes Taliban men, 'New Men' and gay men, somehow, all men? Morrell himself does nothing more than note this difficulty. He observes that there are those for whom men are associated with a core set of transculturally similar/identical activities or traits (7). Others are satisfied that the only commonality between men is their penis. This is no negligible matter. At stake is the *raison d'etre* of the book itself, and moreover, the conceptual integrity of the notion of masculinity. What do the men in *Changing Men in Southern Africa* have in common? Does the notion of masculinity want to have its cake and eat it? Does it want both to reduce the status of 'man' to a floating signifier (such that his meaning is purely and simply contingent) and, at the same time, retain some sense of a universal quality (penis, domination, exploitation)? If all that is common to men is their penis and the penis is not constitutive of their identities as men (precisely because they are produced elsewhere) then the penis is not a causal variable. If, however, there is some hard kernel to being man that defies socio-cultural construction, then masculinity says little about man (as a gender relation) and much about *other* aspects of their identity. Why? Because in this case the male gender relation would be these universal relations of man-ness.

Either the notion of masculinity dissolves the category 'man' altogether, or it contradicts itself.

Does Gramsci's notion of hegemony help us out here? Does the notion of hegemony permit both the notion of man as construct and simultaneously the notion of man as universal? Firstly, let us note that the notion of man (from the point of view of masculinity) is not homologous to the notion of class. A class relation remains identical, irrespective of the culture in which it is located. It is always a relation of exploitation (strictly defined). This is not the case of 'man' in masculinity studies. What is important is that Gramsci treated class (as an objective position) as a causal factor in the production of ideology (class in its contingent state). It is precisely where, on his own terms, he failed. Now a similar sort of move is closed to the study of masculinity. Having equivocated on the ontology of men (what is the manness of men), how do we know that hegemonic ideologies say anything about men per se? How do these discourses of and about men relate to the universal gender relation when we are unable to say what that might be? What this means is that, for example, we are not in a position to understand when or why rape is an expression of masculinity or of something else. Jacklyn Cock's article in the book, in part, makes a similar argument. In wanting to link violence and anxiety, she suggests that new social identities involve uncoupling militarism from masculinity. Here the violence may be predominantly carried out by men, but is not in and of itself 'masculine'.

There are important clues to dealing with these theoretical dilemmas in some of the chapters in the book. Shadowing many of the papers is consternation about the high levels of violent crime in South Africa and especially that of rape. Several authors draw an explicit relationship between such crime and 'culturally projected ideals of masculinity' (Xaba:107). Being a 'comrade' in the 1980s was not simply a political vocation or calling but intimately related to a libidinal economy of esteem, status and power. When these same 'comrades', after having sacrificed 'education for liberation', were unable to re-establish their places in the libidinal economy after 1994 through formal, legal practices, many took to violent crime. Here crime and rape are symptomatic of efforts to re-establish the libidinal economy of the 1980's through other means. They are symptomatic in the same way that lifeguarding in Durban offers young African men of Thekwini access to the libidinal economy (Crispin Hemson); as does stick-fighting amongst migrant workers in KwaZulu (Benedict Carton). Such a perspective allows us to consider right-wing activism in South Africa as the other side of the coin of

crime and rape. The loss of white privilege, suggests Sandra Swart, has seen the Afrikaner lower middle class face economic competition from other 'ethnic' groups and classes. Job losses and economic precarity render white Afrikaans men socially vulnerable; that is, unable to reproduce their positions of authority and wealth in Afrikaner society. As crime becomes another way for former comrades to re-create the libidinal economy of the 1980s, right-wing politics promises classes of Afrikaners a chance to reproduce the symbolic and material capital they had during the apartheid period.

What these essays gesture towards is treatment of the dilemma discussed above. Masculinity in many of the essays in the collection tacitly posit a relationship between: men, symbolic and material exchange (status, power, money, goods) and expressions of man-ness. Here masculinity is not simply a social and historical construct. If we borrow an unfashionable Marxist expression we might say that what determines a relation of masculinity *in the last instance*, is the universal phallic signifier. We might say, in other words, that access to symbolic and material capital is attained for men as such through the elaboration of masculinity. Here the phallus (the lack that is desire) is not simply a biological element, incidental to masculinity, but the very term that structures the relationship (man, capital, masculinity) in the first place.