

Kimberly Hutchings

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The Legitimizing Function of Masculinity Discourses in Theories of Contemporary International Politics

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Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a flowering of theoretical debate about the frameworks through which contemporary international politics should be understood. This has included the narratives of ‘end of history’ and ‘clash of civilizations’, reassertions of mainstream liberal and realist IR paradigms (liberal democratic peace theory/ tragedy of great power politics etc.), the rise of different versions of constructivism, optimistic (cosmopolitan) and pessimistic (end of time) accounts of globalization and so on. It has also included the development of feminist approaches to understanding international politics, and, more recently, approaches influenced by masculinity and gender studies. Although the latter have developed in parallel with the rest, they have had little impact on the ways in which international politics is framed when it comes to the ‘big pictures’ through which we make sense of that politics, both in academic debate and at a more popular level. Non-feminist mainstream and critical approaches to international politics have not, by and large, been persuaded that gender issues have anything other than a marginal relevance for the study of international politics.

The purpose of this paper is to examine one of the reasons for this ongoing marginalisation of feminist/ gender concerns. I will argue that a key reason for the ongoing invisibility of women and gender in the theoretical frames through which post-Cold War international politics is grasped, is the legitimating function played by masculinity discourses within those theories. My central claim is that masculinity operates as a resource for thought in theorising international politics. This means it

operates as a kind of commonsense shorthand for processes of explanatory and normative judgment, and thereby as one of the crucial ways in which our social scientific imagination is shaped and limited. I will explore how this works in two very different accounts of contemporary international politics, the ‘offensive’ realism of Mearsheimer and the post-Marxist story of ‘empire/ multitude’ in the work of Hardt and Negri. First, however, I need to say more about how I am defining the concept of ‘masculinity’.

1. What is ‘Masculinity?’

In the existing literature on masculinity and international politics, two ways of understanding the relation between these two have been opened up in feminist and masculinity studies work. The first directs us to substantive characteristics of the ways in which international politics has been practiced or understood and makes links between those characteristics and the characteristics of masculinity (eg. aggression, instrumental rationality, abstraction etc.). This way of thinking about masculinity and international politics, suggests a material, causal relation between masculinity and international politics, in which a particular understanding of the requirements of the latter, reinforces the privileged position of the former, and the view of international politics as an essentially masculine domain. The second way of understanding the international politics/ masculinity relation focuses less on the substantive characteristics of either international politics or masculinity and more on the work done by the formal, relational properties of masculinity as a concept. On this account, the substantive meaning of masculinity is not fixed. Instead, what is fixed, is the ways in which masculinity is identified with a particular kind of hierarchical logic of contrast (between different, more and less adequate masculinities) and contradiction (between what it is, masculinity, and what it cannot be, femininity). We can see how these different understandings of masculinity are at work in one of the main contexts

within which masculinity has received attention in the study of international politics, the literature on gender and war.

The overwhelming message of existing scholarship on war and gender is that masculinity is crucial to the ways in which war gains its meaning and legitimacy in social life. This idea has even gained recognition in the international policy community, which has recently begun to take on board the view that masculinity can be seen as a significant explanatory variable in political violence, and therefore as a 'problem' which needs to be addressed by institutional actors seeking to limit levels of political violence in the 21st century world (Breines, Connell & Eide 2000). These arguments suggest that the relation between masculinity and war is in some sense either causal or constitutive, though different authors differ about how precisely the relation works (Cohn 1987; Hartsock 1989; Elshtain 1995; Goldstein 2001). In all of these arguments the link between masculinity and war lies in shared norms. The standards that govern the being and conduct of men overlap with the standards that govern the being and conduct of war-makers, from foot soldiers to weapons experts to generals and political leaders.

At the same time, however, this picture is complicated by the fact that the norms of masculinity are variable and enforce not only hierarchical distinctions between men and women but also between different men. The highly rational, technologically skilled nuclear intellectual (unemotional, rational, calculating) discussed by Cohn is a very different archetype from the 'just warrior' (chivalrous, protective) presented in Elshtain's work, and again different from the heroic figure (courageous, strong, death defying) in Hartsock's account. The continuum of masculine qualities appears not only to be flexible but also to contain significant tensions between different elements (for instance, risk-taking and rationality or discipline). This permits distinctions between different, more or less adequate grades

of masculinity in addition to the possibility of failed or deviant modes. In more recent feminist work on gender and war, this complexity of the relation between masculinity and war is acknowledged (Enloe 2000; Cockburn and Zarkov 2002; Cohn and Enloe 2003). One of the ways in which recent feminist work on gender and war has tried to reconcile recognition of the complexity of masculinity with its significance for war is through using the notion of 'hegemonic masculinity' pioneered in the work of Robert Connell (Connell 1995; Cockburn & Zarkov 2002; Whitworth 2004).

The term 'hegemonic masculinity' refers to a particular idealized image of masculinity in relation to which images of femininity and other masculinities are marginalized and subordinated.

The hegemonic ideal of masculinity in current Western culture is a man who is independent, risk-taking, aggressive, heterosexual and rational.

(Barrett 2001, 79)

Barrett's definition of hegemonic masculinity given above, which builds on the work of Connell (1995), appears in the context of an article, 'The Organizational Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity: the case of the US Navy' (Barrett 2001). In this article, Barrett shows how the association of qualities and attributes with masculinity valorises those attributes (and thereby de-valorises others) and how this process of valorisation helps to construct and sustain the skills needed to fulfil various tasks within the organization. The article is a useful demonstration of how the notion of 'hegemonic masculinity' gives purchase to the analysis of military culture, because of the way that that culture depends on subtle and not so subtle distinctions between different ways of 'doing' masculinity as well as on a value system in which the denigrated, excluded feminine other (represented by homosexual men and women)

plays a crucial role. Barrett traces the complex ways in which the hierarchy between different forms of masculinity plays off the hierarchy between masculine and feminine. Players of all the roles in the navy identify with the idea of hegemonic masculinity, but are able to differentiate themselves from others by associating other roles with the 'less than masculine'. This is done partly through the differentiation of elements of hegemonic masculinity, which are then hierarchically ordered (for instance, 'risk taking' being given priority over 'rational' or vice versa).

As with the work of a range of feminist writers, Barrett's argument operates at two different levels. On the one hand Barrett draws attention to the match between the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity and the functional requirements of a military machine. On the other hand, Barrett demonstrates how the inculcation of these characteristics draws on the capacity of the idea of masculinity to embed hierarchies of value in the attitudes of the naval officers themselves. There is, however, a tension between these levels of argument, which works through the gender and war literature but is rarely explicitly acknowledged. This is a tension between a causal or conditional argument (in which masculinity is materially necessary to war because of what war is taken for granted to be), and an argument in which it is the formal, relational properties of the concept of masculinity that render war both intelligible and acceptable. In the former case, war anchors masculinity, in the sense that the meaning of masculinity reflects the requirements of war. In the latter case, masculinity anchors war, in the sense that it provides a framework through which war may be recognised, understood and judged.

I want to suggest that the tension identified within attempts to theorise the link between masculinity and war is characteristic of the broader terrain of attempts to theorise the link between masculinity and international politics. I also want to suggest that the persistence of masculinity as the lens through which international politics is

viewed is much more to do with the formal than with the substantive properties with which it is associated. Masculinity is a concept, the meaning of which is simultaneously embedded in a logic of contrast and a logic of contradiction. The logic of contrast gives masculinity its flexibility and malleability, and enables changes in dominant modes of masculinity to make sense in terms of familiar contrasts between higher and lower, normal and deviant, hegemonic and counter-hegemonic modes. The logic of contradiction embedded in masculinity is complementary to the logic of contrast. The crucial characteristic that is shared by all masculinity discourses, is that they are not feminine. It is the fixed value hierarchy ascribed to masculine and feminine that provides the means through which discrimination between different forms of masculinity becomes possible. But it is also the fixity of the masculine/feminine distinction that enables the differentiation of, for instance, courage, rationality and discipline as different aspects or gradations of masculinity, that is to say, as having something in common as well as being hierarchically differentiated according to context. In other words, making a link between a given social or political practice or institution with masculinity provides a stable ground for a range of cognitive operations through which we can discriminate between the inside and outside of particular phenomena (what counts as international politics and what doesn't) and between good or bad instances of particular phenomena (good statescraft and bad statescraft, the heroes and villains of world politics). I will now go on to illustrate this by looking at two recent attempts to trace the big picture of post-Cold War international politics: Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001) and Hardt's and Negri's *Empire* (2000).

2. Masculinity and Grand Theories of International Politics

The two works I have chosen to focus on occupy very different positions in the spectrum of 'big picture' theorising about international politics. Mearsheimer's

work is firmly located in the discipline of International Relations and the neo-realist paradigm. It remains grounded in an account of international politics as inter-state politics, in particular, the politics of great powers. It therefore denies or marginalises the relevance of non-state actors, of structural relations of power such as class or gender, and of socio-economic processes such as globalization for the understanding and explanation of contemporary world politics. In contrast, Hardt's and Negri's work emerges out of Marxism and a variety of postmodernist theoretical positions (Foucault and Deleuze being influential in particular), and takes globalization and the overcoming of the significance of inter-state politics as the starting point for analysis. Ideologically, Mearsheimer represents a kind of conservatism, at least in relation to foreign policy making, whereas Hardt and Negri identify themselves with a revolutionary tradition and with various forms of radical anti-globalization political movements. These are very different arguments, and they are made in very different ways, but one thing they have in common, they both utilise the logic of masculinity as a way of rendering their arguments persuasive. I will argue that they do this by, within the specific context of their own theoretical account, setting up a hegemonic masculinity that then enables discrimination between what counts and what doesn't count, and what is good and what is bad in within the practice of international politics and in the terms of how it should be explained and judged. I will look at each theorist in turn, first outlining the substance of their 'big picture' and then the way in which they position their own discourse in relation to it.

Mearsheimer's narrative in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* reflects the standard parsimony of neo-realist accounts of international politics. Within such accounts, a limited number of assumptions enable explanation and prediction of the behaviour of states in the international domain. Mearsheimer's five key assumptions are: an anarchical international system; the offensive military capability of great

powers; the uncertainty of any state about the intentions of any other; the goal of state survival; and that states are rational actors (30-31). On the basis of these assumptions, he argues that we know that all states will struggle for relative advantage in relation to all others, that in the case of great powers this means aiming for hegemony, that multipolar balances of power are more unstable than bipolar ones and so on. The key issue for grasping the present of international politics, for Mearsheimer, is working out the dynamics of the contemporary balance of power, and identifying the likely distribution of threats accordingly. From the point of view of the US, he concludes, the key threat is a rising China, and this means that the current policy of engagement with China on the part of the US is fundamentally mistaken (401-402).

Mearsheimer treats states as agents, whose behaviour is structured by systemic aspects of their situation and by the fact that they have a certain goal (survival) and are rational. Within this political imaginary, the hegemonic position is occupied by a particular vision of the rational actor, who is presented to us in two ways: firstly, as the strategic thinker, the card player who knows how to do the trick (40); secondly as the actor capable of using violence in a controlled and intelligent way (37). These figures are male in the straightforward sense that Mearsheimer's rhetorical personifications of the state are gendered male, although they also clearly call upon familiar archetypes of masculinity. In addition, however, they are dynamically implicated in the logic of masculinity with which we are already familiar. Thus, a particular understanding of masculinity provides the standard for thinking about international politics according to a logic of contrast and a logic of contradiction. This logic enables us to see how some states are more appropriately masculine than others, and some states are inadequately masculine (emasculated).

There are two ways in which Mearsheimer uses the logic of masculinity to help underpin the ways he discriminates between inside and outside, good and bad in

his analysis. One of these ways relies on invoking the line between pathological and normal masculinity, the other on invoking the line between having and lacking masculinity.

In short, great powers are not mindless aggressors so bent on gaining power that they charge headlong into losing wars or pursue Pyrrhic victories. On the contrary, before great powers take offensive actions, they think carefully about the balance of power and about how other states will react to their moves. (37)

The contrast here between what great powers do (or should do) and ‘mindless’ aggression is made sense of through the contrast between bad masculinity out of control, and the good masculinity of the man who is capable of directing his violence strategically. The discrimination between appropriate and inappropriate great power behaviour is anchored rhetorically through the familiar value-laden contrast between healthy and pathological masculinities. It is noticeable, however, that the pathological great power is still on the continuum of masculinity, aggression, however mindless, compensates for the irrationality of charging headlong into wars etc., so that these states (men) can still be understood as states (men), even if insane.

This can then be set against the second way in which Mearsheimer utilises the logic of masculinity, as one which relies on the possibility of an absolute distinction from its feminine other. In his analysis, Mearsheimer is clear that he is both describing how great powers behave and prescribing for how they should behave, in the light of his assumptions. As we have seen, he argues that states, especially great powers, are and should be rational, and do and should use violence in a rational way. For this reason, irrationally aggressive great powers are condemned. However, there is a much more profound mistake that great powers can make on Mearsheimer’s account, a mistake that

effectively means that they are not behaving like a state, let alone like a great power. Any state or great power may misread the dynamics of a particular balance of power, the fundamental mistake, however, is to read international politics as anything other than an ongoing struggle for survival in a context of anarchy. To do this, is to abandon both rationality and reliance on relative advantage in the instruments of violence that are the only ultimately effective way of securing one's own survival. Liberal states that seek to institutionalise liberal foreign policies, as the US tried to do under the Clinton administration on Mearsheimer's account, are in effect, behaving like a woman. In other words, they are contradicting the masculine core of what international politics means. Such behaviour spells disaster.

Mearsheimer draws on the logic of masculinity in setting up his categories and rendering his account of international politics intelligible and plausible. In addition, however, we find the logic of masculinity also at work in the ways in which Mearsheimer positions his own discourse. He contrasts his theory of international politics with other versions of realism (defensive neo-realism, classical realism) and with liberal and constructivist theories. From his point of view, he needs the reader to see how his account is related to but improves upon other versions of realism, but is incommensurable with, but much better than, liberal and constructivist alternatives. Thus we find Mearsheimer the theorist, positioned as more masculine (in relation to the rational actor, controlled use of violence hegemonic model) than other realists. Classical realists, rather like the pathological great powers, put too much emphasis on aggression as a characteristic of human nature. Defensive realists, in contrast, haven't quite got the balance right between rationality and aggression, and occupy a somewhat feminised, slightly lacking, position on the continuum of realist thought. Liberal and constructivist theories, however, are so far away from the assumptions of realism (in other words, so feminised), that they have difficulty counting as theories

of international politics at all. Mearsheimer ends the book with a warning to US foreign policy makers that they must beware the translation of liberal values onto the international stage, because to do so is to put the survival of the US in peril. Theorists of international politics cannot afford to be feminine, any more than foreign policy makers, it is their duty to join the company of men and embrace the hegemonic ideal of rational action and controlled violence.

It would be hard to find a greater contrast than that between the parsimonious great power theory of Mearsheimer and the eclectic, ambitious, not always consistent theoretical framework of Hardt and Negri. In contrast to Mearsheimer, Hardt and Negri rely on multiple theoretical sources and see complexity rather than parsimony as a requirement for understanding international politics today. It is impossible to do justice to all of the aspects of their argument here, instead I will focus on certain key contrasts, through which their argument is ordered, and which set up the ways in which, according to Hardt and Negri, contemporary international politics should be understood and judged. In broad terms, Hardt's and Negri's argument is that the nature of international politics has changed fundamentally in the closing decades of the C20th. It has shifted from an imperialist, capitalist, Westphalian order (imperialism) to a condition of globalized capitalism in which all life is biopolitically produced and ordered in the service of sustaining that globalized capitalism (empire). In the new global situation of empire there is no centre of power, instead power relations are systemically produced and reproduced at all levels of social, economic and political life. This situation creates different possibilities for revolutionary politics on the part of the 'multitude' than were embedded in the old imperialist order. The plausibility of Hardt's and Negri's argument depends on making analytic and normative distinctions between imperialism, empire and the multitude. I will go on to

suggest that these distinctions are, at least in part, secured, through drawing on the logic embedded in discourses of masculinity.

Hardt's and Negri's argument places empire between a previous historical phase of imperialism and the future of the 'multitude'. This historical distinction is also a normative distinction, between a past of oppression in which revolutionary action (in socialist revolutions and decolonisation struggles) failed to utterly transform the conditions of world politics, and a future of liberation, in which the productive power of the 'multitude' will literally make a new world. Empire occupies both a transitional position historically and an ambivalent normative position in Hardt's and Negri's narrative. On the one hand, empire is the logical culmination of imperialism, the victory of the oppressive forces of capitalism in a global, systemic form. On the other hand, empire is the condition of possibility of a different, more promising, kind of revolution. Empire is therefore both praised and condemned within the text. In order to make their argument, Hardt and Negri have to render their claims both about the nature of empire, and its normative status, intelligible. One way in which they do this is by setting up a hegemonic ideal of masculinity, and the logic of contrast and contradiction that this implies.

In Hardt's and Negri's case, the hegemonic ideal of masculinity is associated with the multitude either through the invocation of a specifically masculine figure (the 'postcolonial hero', the 'militant'), or through metaphors of war-making or male sexual potency. However, unlike, Mearsheimer's masculine hegemon, characterised by rationality and controlled violence, the hegemonic masculinity of the multitude is one of explosive creativity, the artistic genius rather than the responsible politician. In a tradition that goes back at least as far as Sorel's *On Violence*, this creative masculinity is contrasted with the repressive masculinity of imperialism (12). The question is, how to make sense of empire as the middle ground between imperialism

and the multitude, both historically and normatively. The paradoxical situation of empire is described, by Hardt and Negri, through its being positioned simultaneously as the continuation and intensification of the masculinity of imperialism, in which repressive power shifts into productive power, and as the place in which masculinity is entirely evacuated. Empire is both more masculine than imperialism and entirely feminised (impotent). On the one hand, the ‘constitutive machine’ of empire ‘penetrates’ all areas of life, produces ‘master’ narratives, and, in the manner of Schmittian sovereignty, determines the exception (for instance humanitarian actions across state borders). On the other hand, empire is parasitical, it produces nothing but lives off the blood of the multitude like a vampire (62), or, alternatively, is simply the passive field upon which the productive power of the multitude acts.

The ontological terrain of Empire, completely plowed and irrigated by a powerful, self-valorizing, and constituent labor, is thus planted with a virtuality that seeks to be real. The keys of possibility, or really of the modalities of being that transform the virtual into reality, reside in this realm beyond measure. (359)

This dual, masculine/ feminine positioning of empire is not explained within Hardt’s and Negri’s account so much as rendered intelligible through our understanding of the logic of masculinity. The progressive connotations of empire are carried by its relation to the hegemonic ideal of masculinity as the power of production/ creation. In practice, however, this productive power turns out not to belong to empire at all, but to an energy which is already in the hands of the multitude, even if they do not yet realise it. According to the logic of masculinity, no machine can be both masculine and feminine, and since masculine is superior to feminine, it must be the masculine that will eventually

triumph over the feminine in the machine of empire. Empire cannot last, because empire is a woman.

Our analysis has to descend into the jungle of productive and conflictual determinations that the collective biopolitical body offers us. The context of our analysis thus has to be the very unfolding of life itself, the process of the constitution of the world, of history. The analysis must be proposed not through ideal forms but within the dense complex of experience.

(30)

As with Mearsheimer, Hardt and Negri not only utilise a logic of masculinity in order to characterise their object of analysis and its key determinations, they also position their own analysis in relation to that logic. This superiority of their framework of analysis is demonstrated on the one hand, through a contrast with other perspectives on the masculine continuum, which are nevertheless inadequate (more feminised in the sense of being less in tune with the productive power of hegemonic masculinity) in certain respects (Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari). On the other, that superiority is further reinforced by a contrast with, for example, forms of cosmopolitanism, which fail to appreciate productive power altogether, and thus read the politics of NGOs in mistakenly benign terms (36-7, Falk). Whereas Foucault and Deleuze remain on terrain in which debate is possible and potentially useful, Falk occupies the position of the feminine other, the equivalent of Mearsheimer's liberal theorist who simply doesn't understand how international politics works.

Conclusion

An obvious response to make to the above analyses of both Mearsheimer and Hardt and Negri, is to raise the question of how much their invocation of masculinity

discourses really matters. From one point of view, the use of masculinity language and logic is a matter of rhetorical decoration, which is distinct from substantive inductive or deductive argument. On this account, Mearsheimer and Hardt and Negri could make the same arguments, either without rhetorical decoration altogether, or using another set of rhetorical tropes to make the same case. If this is so, then their use of masculinity discourses is rendered insignificant. My answer to this criticism is twofold. Firstly, I would argue that the framing of contemporary international politics in terms of a logic of masculinity locks our political imagination into a very familiar world, in which we already understand how things work both ontologically and in terms of value hierarchies. The fact that, within the Western political imaginary, no one wants to be a woman, is a powerful incentive against raising questions about the logical moves made in the arguments of theorists such as Mearsheimer and Hardt and Negri. My second response is that the formal characteristics the logic of masculinity can also be found in other conceptual schemes grounded in binary oppositions, and is therefore not wholly peculiar to masculinity discourse. It would, therefore, be possible for Mearsheimer and Hardt and Negri to draw on other carriers of binary logic to make their case (and indeed they both do so to some extent). Nevertheless, as feminist philosophers have pointed out over the past half-century, the binary logic of masculinity/ femininity is particularly powerful and pervasive, and provides a commonsense anchoring point for other sorts of binary distinctions, such as mind and body, ideal and real, reason and emotion and so on. Within this context, invoking masculinity provides a useful and familiar shortcut for judgment.

Both Mearsheimer and Hardt and Negri aim to do two things through their arguments: firstly, they aim to paint a big picture of what international politics is like, how it works and what is likely to happen to it; secondly, they aim to establish the credentials of their particular mode of analysis in relation to other possibilities. I have

suggested that in both cases, their invocation of a logic of masculinity helps to accomplish these aims. In addition, however, the use of the logic of masculinity as a mechanism for framing our understanding of international politics accomplishes something else. It quite literally renders the thinking of women or the feminine impossible other than in terms of either lack or absence. Paradoxically, the fact that our thinking is so thoroughly gendered continues to block the possibility of thinking gender and confirms the marginality of women and the feminine to our understanding of the international realm.

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