

« However defined, masculinity is always in crisis¹ ».

1. Definitions

In its broadest sense, the term "masculinity" refers to a set of characteristics that are associated with men. These can include behaviours, physical criteria, ways of thinking, roles, languages and cultures. The use of this term is not restricted to the study of people born with a biologically masculine sex. It can also be attributed to individuals who are perceived to meet certain criteria of masculinity, such as women, transgender and non-binary people, etc.

This term should be used in the plural, because masculinities are evolving, heterogeneous and constantly redefined over time and in different social spaces. Here, masculinities will be approached through the gender prism. They will be analyzed as characteristics of domination of the masculine over the feminine as well as between the different masculinities.

Recent studies have distinguished the concept of masculinities from that, similar yet different, of the term virility. According to the Larousse dictionary, "Masculinity" refers to "The set of behaviours considered characteristic of the male sex²" while virility is defined as "The set of physical characteristics of the adult male; what constitutes the male sex" and refers rather to sexual abilities. While the common meaning given to the two terms tends to describe "what a man should be," they cannot be defined jointly. The sociologist Haude Rivoal denounces an "instrumentalization" of this ancient assimilation and considers that it is necessary to deconstruct it in order to avoid any essentialization. There is indeed a risk of "highlighting virility as the social norm of masculinity", in particular by associating a "natural" aspect to it."³.

2. History, state of affairs and retrospective

When did the study of masculinities emerge as a research field in its own right? Their emergence can be traced to the early 1990s with the successful publication of *Men's Lives*⁴ in which Michael Kimmel and Michel A. Messner question masculinities in American

¹ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Male Trouble*, Thames & Hudson Ltd; 1995, New edition, 264 pages

² Dictionnaire Larousse (online), accessed on 28th December 2020.

³ Haude Rivoal, « Virilité ou masculinité ? L'usage des concepts et de leur portée théorique dans les analyses scientifiques des mondes masculins », *Martin Média*, «Travailler » 2017/2 n° 38, pp 141-159

⁴ Michael Kimmel, Michel A. Messner, *Men's Lives*, Macmillan USA, 1989, 550 pages

society. However, it is above all with Raewyn Connell's *Masculinities*⁵ that studies on the topic will truly emerge. By introducing her theorization of hegemonic masculinity, the author will allow the field of humanities and social science studies to take a closer look at this concept.

Studies on masculinities will emerge later in France to become a true field of research in the early 2000s. At the time, although researchers were interested in power relations between men and women, they were also curious about relations between men. The questions of domination and gender fabrication will gradually develop and be taken into account, particularly in sociology. Current analyses are rather framed in a plural perspective of masculinities, bypassing the Bourdieu reference. Indeed, they propose a queer approach to masculinities that rejects the binary division of gender (man/woman) and does not recognize itself in heterosexuality or cisidentity.

The notion of masculinity was mainly theorized in 1995 by the Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell in her book *Masculinities. Social Stakes of Hegemony*⁶. In 1985, she published a first article entitled *Toward a new sociology of masculinity* which already analyzed the question of the representation of masculinities and the importance of making it a subject of study. With the multidisciplinary objective of bringing together social sciences, feminism, gay liberation movements and socialism, Connell's work questions the social relations of class, gender and colonization. She defines masculinity as follows: "Masculinity could be simultaneously understood as a place within gender relations, a set of practices by which men and women engage in that place, and the effects of those practices on body experience, personality and culture."⁷

Above all, the major contribution of her work is the theorization of a typology of masculinities, in particular hegemonic masculinity.⁸ She defines the latter as the "configuration of gender practices aimed at ensuring the perpetuation of patriarchy and the domination of men over women"⁹. In other words, this type of masculinity is the expression of the power relations of men over women. According to the sociologist, these relations are ones of domination of the man and subordination of the woman. It also covers power relations between men, especially over the men who are considered not to fit the criteria of hegemonic masculinity. The hegemonic position will thus guarantee a form of domination. The author also highlights that the people who embody this masculinity need not be the most powerful, as the concept exists in all spheres of

⁵ Connell Raewyn, *Masculinités, enjeux sociaux de l'hégémonie*, Amsterdam Eds, 2014.

⁶ Connell Raewyn, *Masculinités, enjeux sociaux de l'hégémonie*, Amsterdam Eds, 2014.

⁷ Connell Raewyn, *Masculinités, enjeux sociaux de l'hégémonie*, Amsterdam Eds, 2014, p65.

⁸ Lilia VANBEVEREN, "La masculinité hégémonique, entre déconstruction et résurgence", 04.01.2021, Gender in Geopolitics Institute, available online at : <https://igg-geo.org/?p=2831>

⁹ Ibid, p74.

society¹⁰. Ultimately, it is a matter of claiming an authority that can take various forms (economic, political, cultural power, etc.).

The author also theorizes three other forms of masculinities:

- Subordinate masculinity: these are individuals who are automatically considered inferior in the face of hegemonic masculinity, in a logic of subordination and exclusion. Example: homosexual men.
- Complicit masculinity: these are the individuals who will benefit from certain advantages of hegemony while avoiding the resulting tensions. They do not embody this hegemony but benefit from patriarchy.
- Marginalized masculinity: these are the individuals deprived of any power of hegemonic domination. For example, men of colour, precarious, disabled, etc., and who have no power of hegemonic domination. It is rather often a question of race and class relations¹¹.

Connell explains that these different masculinities are bound by change and History, leaving them in a constant state of reconfiguration and negotiation.

In addition to Connell's work, other authors have analyzed the issue of masculinities. In his book entitled *La domination masculine*¹² (1998), Pierre Bourdieu looked at social relations between the sexes from a completely different perspective, asserting that there is symbolic violence in male domination. According to him, there is a habitus that predetermines the traditional social roles of men and women. A number of criticisms have been made of his work, notably by anthropologist Nicole Claude-Mathieu. She accuses the author of portraying men as victims of male domination in the same way as women.

Moreover, Bourdieu describes femininity in opposition to masculinity, which some researchers, such as Claude-Mathieu, consider to be a binary and essentialist theorization of gender identities, occulting in particular transgender identities or non-binarity concepts. Mathieu also criticizes him for not thoroughly investigating the violence caused by masculinities and for remaining in the realm of the symbolic¹³. For her part, Françoise Héritier will later describe this binary vision of masculine/feminine based on the notion of gender difference in her text *Masculin/féminin*¹⁴.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, pp75-80.

¹² Bourdieu Pierre, *La domination masculine*, Points essais, 1998, 192 pages.

¹³ N.C. Mathieu, « Bourdieu ou le pouvoir auto-hypnotique de la domination masculine », *Les Temps modernes*, May-July 1999, no 604.

¹⁴ Françoise Héritier, *Masculin/féminin : la pensée de la différence*, Odile Jacob, 1995, 332 pages

The work of the American philosopher Judith Butler does not follow the same conception. According to the theorist, gender is performative, which means that masculinities are not defined according to the biological assignment given at birth. For the author, it is not only a question of analyzing the relationships between men and women, but also of making a gendered reading of masculinities: cisgender men (whose gender identity is the one assigned at birth), transgender men (identifying as male), etc. The author is also interested in the relationship between men and women. In the same vein, Jack Halberstam in his book *Female Masculinity*¹⁵ (1998) analyzes the diversity of gender expressions and masculinities from a queer perspective by showing that male identities can be observed through female bodies. The author seeks in this book to identify what masculinities are in society, considering them as a construction and showing that female and transgender masculinities have been ignored as a field of research.

More recent and accurate analyses of masculinities have been offered in recent years by gender studies researchers. Anthropologist Mélanie Gourarier, for instance, has analyzed dating attitudes as a hegemonic masculinist practice. She asserts that "Contemporary masculinity is about governing oneself to better govern others."¹⁶ Still in the field of university research, the researcher Florian Vörös has studied the way in which domination is created through male fantasies, especially sexual ones¹⁷. More informal channels for the dissemination of knowledge, such as podcasts, have allowed for the development of wider reflections on masculinities. In her podcast *Les couilles sur la table*¹⁸, journalist Victoire Tuillon offers analyses of masculinities based on the position of men, with the use of guest speakers, researchers and specialists. In particular, she devoted an episode to black masculinities and the crisis of masculinity.¹⁹

3. Contemporary issues

Many consequences are linked to representation of masculinities in different spheres of society. Firstly, the representation of these dominant attitudes tends to invisibilize other forms of masculinities. It is indeed possible to observe that the hegemony staged by some men will not leave room for other individuals, especially other men. For instance, television will mainly show white, cisgender and heterosexual men on screen. In particular, we can see that the presenters of television programs illustrate a real

¹⁵ Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, Duke University Press, 1998, 360 pages

¹⁶ Cécile Daumas, « Mélanie Gourarier : «La masculinité contemporaine, c'est se gouverner soi-même pour mieux gouverner les autres » », *Libération*, 1st March 2017.

¹⁷ Florian Vörös, *Désirer comme un homme ; enquête sur les fantasmes et les masculinités*, La Découverte Sciences Humaines, 2020.

¹⁸ Victoire Tuillon, *Les couilles sur la table*, podcast, Binge Audio, since 2017.

¹⁹ Victoire Tuillon, *Les couilles sur la table*, *Il n'y a pas de crise de la masculinité*, episode 1, 2017, 37min57sec.

gender domination through, for example, their authoritarian speeches or the staging of their bodily expressions.

The "marginalized" masculinities are set aside and subjected to the authority and norms of the hegemonic male figure. In this perspective of social hierarchization of masculinities, it will always be a question of negotiations within power relations, regardless of the social environment. In reality, it is mainly about male domination of race and class. As Connell explains, masculinities are not fixed and are constantly being renegotiated among themselves. The author states that: "Masculinity is not a system but rather a configuration of practices within a system of gender relations."²⁰ Hegemony sets aside any other form of masculinity that does not correspond to criteria of physical strength, aggressiveness, seriousness, self-confidence or competition. Beyond the forms of exclusion, some individuals sometimes even suffer insults and violence in the broadest sense, notably LGBTQI+ people, people of colour, poor people, etc.

Secondly, its opposition to the notion of femininity will reinforce the concept of gender binarity between men and women. As a result, a patriarchal domination develops against women and characterizes women as being in absolute opposition to masculinity. Another consequence of hegemony will be the expression of a form of misogyny and homophobia in order to push back the spectre of femininity, a spectre that should not be reached in the order of gender according to the masculinists.

In the same way, the over-representation of dominant masculinities is even detrimental to the men who represent it. As stereotypical models of masculinities evolve over time according to different periods, it is sometimes difficult to adapt to new norms in order to maintain one's legitimacy within the hegemony. Above all, it should be added that it is rare that an individual perfectly represents a hegemonic form of masculinity.

The last contemporary issue concerning masculinities is the crisis of masculinity. This is a very old discourse, often carried by men, which asserts that the advent of feminism, particularly the sexual liberation of women, would have diminished the social role of men. Today's societies would be too feminized, causing male suffering. In reality, this discourse on the crisis of masculinity is an anti-feminist conception that has been theorized by masculinists (MGtow, Incels, MRA etc.²¹), that is, a reactionary movement for the defense of men's rights that fundamentally contradicts the progress of women's condition. This conservative conception is strongly criticized by many social scientists. Québec researcher Francis Dupuis-Déri, a specialist in masculinities issues, defines this discourse as "a rejection of equality by men and their reaffirmation of the importance of a

²⁰ Connell Raewyn, *Masculinités, enjeux sociaux de l'hégémonie*, Amsterdam Eds, 2014.

²¹ MGTow : Men Going Their Own Way. Masculinist and antifeminist movement ; Incels : « Célibataires involontaires », misogynist online communities; MRA : Men's Rights Activists, masculinist social protest movement.

hierarchical difference between the sexes.²² » In fact, according to him, it would be an aberration to assert that men are in crisis even though they still hold more power and privileges than women. This discourse, widespread in many countries, is in total contradiction with the reality of current masculinities, particularly hegemony. Dupuis-Déri adds: "This discourse also serves to justify the (re)affirmation of a conventional masculinity."²³ »

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²² Francis Dupuis-Déri, La crise de la masculinité, Autopsie d'un mythe tenace, Les éditions du Remue-ménage, 2018, 320 pages.

²³ Ibid.

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