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Toward a political economy of men and masculinities: a theoretical intervention

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Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed profound transformations in capitalism – particularly through neoliberal economic restructuring – that have fundamentally reshaped men's lives (Cornwall, Karioris, & Lindisfarne, 2016). Characterised by market deregulation, welfare state privatisation, and financial sector expansion (Harvey, 2006), neoliberalism operates simultaneously as both economic policy and cultural logic, with far-reaching consequences for gender relations (Fraser, 2013). Neoliberal doctrine privileges a particular masculinity, presenting the 'economic man' as the idealised subject of its economic ontology – individualistic, rational, and implicitly male (Garlick, 2020). Yet, men are not uniformly advantaged by this system. While financial sector elites accumulate unprecedented wealth, the economic capacity of nonelite men globally has eroded (Salzinger, 2016). In the global North, neoliberal policies have marketised essential social services while weakening unemployment protections, all while manufacturing's migration to lower-wage regions has intensified job precarity (Harvey, 2006). These economic shifts have destabilised the androcentric breadwinner model by constraining working-class men's access to traditional blue-collar employment, and undermined middle-class men's expectations that education guarantees stable careers. The impact on economically marginalised men in the global South has been particularly acute. Unable to meet breadwinner norms or even make a living, many young men migrate to the global North, ending up in low-paid jobs outside the formal economy or within care work, cleaning, construction and hospitality, which reinforces their subaltern status in a postcolonial world (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2021). Consequently, masculinity now offers "limited protection against the displacements and losses that forty years of neoliberalism have yielded" (Brown, 2019, p. 175).

At a time when transformations in capitalism are most profoundly reshaping men's lives, masculinity studies has largely retreated from theorising political economy, that is, the

interplay between politics, economy and various social dynamics. While early (and influential) scholars in the field, such as Connell (1983; 1987) and Hearn (1987), were inspired by Marxism and took seriously the relationship between men, masculinities and capitalism, the field has since "shifted away from structural constraints and political economy to focus on the local, the body, and everyday life in the Global North" (Horton, 2022, p. 12). This drift is well illustrated by what are probably the currently three most influential concepts – inclusive (Anderson, 2009), caring (Elliott, 2016), and hybrid masculinities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) – centring transformations in men's behaviours and identities while largely overlooking socio-economic conditions. This has yielded rich empirical data and theorising on the social construction of multiple masculinities, but has made masculinity studies struggle to explain how economic conditions shape men's differential experiences in late capitalism.

This move away from political economy in masculinity studies mirrors broader developments in feminist theorisation. In what Fraser (2013) conceptualises as "a drama in three acts" (p. 1), she traces how second-wave feminism, in the first act, emphasised exposing and transforming capitalism's deep-seated sexism. In a second act, she argues that feminist theory and activism shifted its focus from economic redistribution to cultural recognition and difference. Fraser calls for a crucial third act in feminist theory: the need to revive the economic concerns of feminism's first act while retaining lessons learned from the second act's attention to culture, identity, and intersectionality.

While Fraser's narrative of feminist scholarship is somewhat simplified, we believe her call to reconnect with economic concerns is no less relevant for critical studies on men and masculinities. The field is committed to equality and justice, yet fails to reckon with the difficulties of living out social justice in practice. A critique of political economy would expand the field's focus beyond changing gendered behaviours and identities to encompass the broader social and economic conditions that enable all people – regardless of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, or class – to live liveable lives. Such a reframing underscores that meaningful social change requires engagement not only with masculine norms and identities but also with the structural conditions of capitalist society that contribute to producing and sustaining them.

This chapter makes a theoretical contribution to critical men and masculinity studies. Yet theory is not merely an abstraction of social reality; it can itself be an intervention in the social, as evidenced by feminist theory's long history of not only attempting to understand

the world but, as part of feminist struggle, of actively working to change it. We follow such a tradition of feminist theoretical interventions by arguing for a different theorisation of men and masculinities, one that attends not only to norms and identities but also to political economy. We do not offer immediate practical strategies for change, but provide scholars and activists with ways of thinking that can, over time, contribute to transforming gender relations – as Connell (1987, p. xi) argues, "theory is important, at least in the long run, for practical politics".

To this end, we first return to Connell and Hearn's work to examine how they understand gender change and the relationship between material and discursive processes. We then discuss caring, inclusive, and hybrid masculinities to assess their understanding of social change in relation to materialist accounts. Subsequently, we present our approach to masculinity and political economy by discussing some pitfalls associated with attempts to combine materialist and discursive perspectives. In particular, such approaches risk reinforcing a dualism between the two that resembles reductionist interpretations of Marx's analytic distinction between an economic base and an ideological superstructure – a tendency that Fraser, among others, has both sought to rework and been criticised for reproducing. We propose, instead, a way of reading economic and cultural processes together by drawing on neo-Marxist theory, particularly as developed by Stuart Hall. Finally, we demonstrate what becomes visible through such an analysis of young rural men in Sweden and how our intervention contributes to strategies to change men and masculinities.

Marxism in masculinity theorising

To develop a political economy of men and masculinities, we first turn to Hearn and Connell, whose work has illuminated the centrality of economic processes to the reproduction of male privilege. What follows is not a comprehensive presentation of their work, but we primarily focus on how they theorise change in men and masculinities, and how they conceptualise the relationship between 'the material' and 'the discursive' (or the 'base' and the 'superstructure').

Connell is best known for the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), a framework widely used within the field, likely because it aims to explain both "the persistence of male power and the potential for social change" (Duncanson, 2015, p. 232). While mainly offering a diagnosis of men and masculinities, it theoretically opens up for gender change, and has been mobilised into concrete strategies in

gender interventions (Jewkes et al., 2015). However, such interventions and much contemporary scholarship overlook the concept's Marxist roots, thereby weakening its orientation toward social change. The concept of hegemony was developed by Gramsci (1971) to explain how bourgeois power is sustained through ideological and cultural processes rather than direct force, violence or coercion. In addition to economic means, Gramsci highlighted the central role of institutions such as media and education in naturalising inequality. Connell (1983; 1995) applies this idea to gender relations, presenting hegemonic masculinity as a culturally dominant form of masculinity that secures legitimacy and power over other masculinities and femininities through processes of legitimation rather than force.

Connell's engagement with Gramsci reflects her grounding in Marxist–feminist debates over whether capitalism or patriarchy should be granted analytical primacy. While attentive to capitalism's injustices, Connell (1977; 1983; 1987) criticises both Marxist approaches that reduce women's oppression to class relations and social reproduction theory, which locates capitalist production's conditions in domestic reproductive labour. Though this latter perspective establishes a systemic connection between women's subordination and capitalist exploitation, Connell argues that it makes historical change difficult to theorise. This emphasis on historicity is central to her understanding of social transformation, as she puts it: "Without historicity, a politics of transformation becomes irrational" (1987, p. 93). For Connell, the historically situated character of social relations means that although dominant groups seek to reproduce their privileges, their hold on power is never guaranteed.

Consistent with this, Connell (1987) emphasises how social structures exist only through the practices that continuously produce them. Gendered inequalities are primarily practiced within three interconnected but analytically distinguishable structures of relations: *the division of labour*, which organises paid and unpaid work, the segregation in labour markets, disparities in wages and capital accumulation; *the structure of power*, which illuminates authority, control, coercion and violence across institutions such as the state, the military, the workplace and the family; and *cathexis,* which refers to patterns of affective attachment, sexual desire and emotional labour in intimate and social life. Connell (1987) stresses that these structures are neither exhaustive nor fixed, but can be identified at both the level of gender orders across society at large and within more localised gender regimes. In later work, Connell (2002) adds a fourth structure – *symbolic relations* – which captures the cultural notions of femininity and masculinity that shape practices across the other three

dimensions, consistent with her Gramscian use of hegemony (Connell, 1987) and efforts to challenge economic reductionism. This implies that ideology cannot be understood narrowly, as a matter of beliefs, discourses or representations, but that ideology materialises in social arrangements, shaping what is perceived as natural and legitimate. As for the concept of hegemonic masculinity, she argues that it is as "a configuration of practice" (Connell, 1995, p. 73) that rarely – if ever – is fully embodied by actual men, but still exerts material force because labour markets, family policies and organisational structures support certain forms of masculinity, and penalise deviation from the ideal.

In later work, Connell reiterates this point, stating that hegemonic masculinity is not merely a cultural ideal and that "gender relations are also constituted through non-discursive practices" such as work, domestic labour, violence, and sexuality (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 842). However, Beasley (2008) critiques such formulations, arguing that they reproduce a separation between the discursive and the material that echoes orthodox Marxism's dualistic base–superstructure model, which continues to privilege the latter over the former. Another concern is that (some) men's domination is treated as relatively stable, even when Connell acknowledges the possibility that "a more humane, less oppressive" form of masculinity could become hegemonic (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 833). Howson and Hearn (2020) argue that this stems from Connell conflating hegemony – understood in Gramscian terms as the pursuit of consent through leadership and persuasion – with domination. Taken together, these critiques suggest that Connell, particularly in some of her later formulations, may underplay a principle often stressed in her earlier work: that domination, and the means through which it is achieved, is never given but must be continuously fought for. This is also what gives the concept of hegemony its analytical strength, as it foregrounds the possibility of resistance and social change in a world where inequality is often taken for granted (Connell, 1987; Gramsci, 1971).

While Connell emphasises hegemony to understand stability and change in masculinity, Hearn has devoted considerable energy to developing a theory of patriarchy – and later "transpatriarchies" – which, as he puts it "prioritize[s] the material rather than the 'ideal'" (Hearn, 2015, p. 38). His early work focused on care and labour in the family and private domain (Hearn, 1987), which he conceptualised as the "material base of patriarchy where men as a 'gender class' oppress women" (Berggren, 2018, p. 334). The public sphere, by contrast, constitutes patriarchy's superstructure, created by men to consolidate power over women confined to the private domain (Hearn, 1992). Similarly, Hearn (1987) theorises

‘men’ as constituting a material base while ‘masculinity’ forms part of an ideological superstructure. However, he cautions that these distinctions are not clear-cut, suggesting that gendering may be as integral to production and its modes as to reproduction.

Building on his materialist feminism, Hearn (2004) critiques Connell’s (1995) hegemonic masculinity approach as overly ideational. He argues that the concept of masculinity focuses excessively on ideas and norms about manhood rather than on what men actually do: their practices in private and public spheres that sustain patriarchal and unequal relations. He conceptualises men simultaneously as a social category formed by the gender system, a dominant collective, and individual agents of social practices. Accordingly, he proposes the concept of ‘hegemony of men’ to explore how it operates through the web of political actors, including the state, the law, capitalists, and intellectuals (Hearn, 2004). Although he criticises Connell’s attempts to identify different forms of masculinities (Hearn, 2014), his own approach resembles Connell’s early understanding on materiality and hegemony.

Since the 1990s, Hearn has continued to draw on materialist feminist accounts while incorporating additional theoretical frameworks, including poststructuralism, Actor-Network Theory, discourse analysis, queer theory, and posthumanism (Berggren, 2018). This theoretical evolution culminated in Hearn’s (2014) explicit proposal for a material-discursive approach to men and masculinities. His understanding of materiality is relatively broad, encompassing not only Marxist-feminist analyses but also technological dimensions, reproduction, embodiment, and the materiality of discourse itself. Viewing men as material-discursive presents an ontology that incorporates the non-human and an epistemology that remains fundamentally human, even as the boundaries of the human category blur. While Hearn claims this approach involves productive contradiction, critics argue he has not sufficiently theorised the relationship between materialist and discursive frameworks (Berggren, 2018). Following his material-discursive approach, the long-term goal for Hearn (2015, p. 200) is ‘the abolition of men’, which does not mean ‘abolishing actual corporeal beings’ but rather the abolition of men as a social category of power, thereby enabling individuals to access multiple gender categories. Such change, Hearn (2018) argues, requires addressing both discursive and material aspects of men and masculinities – not only at the individual or group level but also at political, structural, economic, and ideological levels.

Although Connell and Hearn’s approaches to men and masculinities have attracted significant criticism, and their engagement with political economy is uneven – Hearn’s

account is materialist in a broad sense rather than specifically economic, while Connell moved away from her early, more dynamic understanding of hegemony – we are nonetheless drawn to their insistence on both economic and ideological forces in the reproduction of male privilege. In particular, we find their understanding of hegemony as contested negotiations between different interests helpful for understanding social change. These important insights have, however, largely disappeared in popular contemporary masculinity theories.

Contemporary masculinity theories

While there is a legacy of Marxism and socialist feminism in contemporary masculinity studies – particularly through the continued widespread use of Connell's framework – researchers within the field have increasingly drawn on 'postmodern' perspectives such as poststructuralism, actor-network theory, discourse analysis, and posthumanism (Gottzén, Mellström, & Shefer, 2020). Despite this trend, it is in fact three distinctively *modernist* approaches – inclusive, caring, and hybrid masculinities – that have gained most traction over the past decade, at least within English-speaking social science masculinity scholarship. While different in many ways, what unites them is their grounding in sociological thinking, social constructionism, their embrace of multiple masculinities, and their engagement with Connell's foundational ideas about hegemonic masculinity – even as they critique aspects of that theory. What also unites them, as we will demonstrate, is their move away from her socialist feminism and, hence, a relative disinterest in the role of political economy in social change.

Inclusive masculinity

Inclusive masculinity is a concept and theoretical framework primarily developed by Anderson (2009) who argues that increasing cultural and legal acceptance of homosexuality has reshaped heterosexual men's attitudes and behaviours. Anderson charts this transformation through the rise and decline of 'homohysteria' – the fear of being socially perceived as gay – during the twentieth century. Because negative attitudes toward homosexuals are fundamental to hegemonic masculinity, he contends that Connell's theory no longer adequately explains contemporary homosocial dynamics. Instead, he argues – primarily based on research on young heterosexual men in Western sport and fraternity settings – that 'orthodox' masculine values and behaviours are giving way to a more 'inclusive' form of masculinity, one that encompasses practices ranging from wearing pink

clothing to physical displays of affection between heterosexual men (Anderson & McCormack, 2018).

Anderson abandons Connell's emphasis on power dynamics and material processes, positing that men and boys can freely choose between orthodox and inclusive expressions of masculinity, thus rejecting hegemony as a necessary feature of relations among men. He maintains that orthodox and inclusive masculinities currently coexist with equal appeal, allowing men to adopt either form without facing stigmatisation (Anderson & McCormack, 2018). Whereas Connell conceptualises hegemonic masculinity as maintaining dominance through interconnected material and cultural processes, Anderson collapses these complex dynamics into two gender stereotypes that entail neither power struggles among men nor the perpetuation of gender inequality. Critics like O'Neill (2014) argue that inclusive masculinity theory obscures how men with class privilege can contest dominant masculine norms with relative impunity – a freedom unavailable to men without such privilege, who may face material consequences for transgressing gender expectations in ways tied to their economic vulnerability and labour market position. This limitation, we argue, arises fundamentally from the theory's failure to account for intersectional social structures embedded in economic processes. Although Anderson and McCormack (2018) gesture toward economic explanations in their refinement of the concept – arguing that homohysteria is declining "due to social shifts in the organisation of society away from industrial economies" – they do not substantiate these claims. Instead, they superficially invoke Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck's individualisation thesis, suggesting that "social institutions have less influence on moral values" (p. 549).

Caring masculinities

Over the last few decades, researchers have observed how men in Western societies value and practice care in presumably new and changing ways (Scambor et al., 2014). Building on this scholarship, as well as perspectives from critical masculinity studies and feminist theories of care, Elliott (2016) is a front figure for the theoretical development of the concept of 'caring masculinities', arguing that since care has long been associated with femininity, an important feature of masculinity has been the avoidance of care and nurturing beyond traditionally masculine protective and breadwinning roles. Elliott (2016) suggests, however, that values of care can be incorporated into masculine identities and practices. Caring masculinities entails not only "the integration of values derived from the realm of care

such as positive emotion, interdependence, and relationality" (p. 252) but also the rejection of domination. As such, caring masculinities are seen as playing a constitutive role in men's engagement in gender equality and offering the potential for progressive social change.

The concept of caring masculinities is rooted in a conceptualisation of masculinity as relational and plural (Connell, 1995). Caring masculinities are understood to reject men's domination of women, seen as integral to hegemonic masculinity, and are shaped by local, historical and cultural specificities (Elliott, 2016). In later work, Elliott (2020) draws on intersectionality to understand caring masculinities while discarding the claim, implicit in much research on inclusive masculinity (Anderson & McCormack, 2018), that progressive practices mainly stem from the privileged white middle-classes. Rather, Elliott argues that progressive masculinities, including caring ones, are fostered 'in the margin' – by gay men, men of colour, and working-class men (Elliott, 2016; Elliott & Roberts, 2024).

Although Elliott (2016) stresses that caring masculinities should not be understood as a typology or model of 'the new man', the framework remains focused on men's "expressions, behaviours and identities" (Elliott, 2020, p. 41) rather than examining underlying material conditions that shape how care is made possible in men's everyday lives. This limitation has been noted by Wojnicka and de Boise (2025, p. 11), who argue that disparities in men's caring practices are often "structural rather than cultural or attitudinal". For instance, childcare policies tend to promote equality in middle-class households, while working-class families face lower incentives to share care equally due to factors including larger gender pay gaps. Nevertheless, Elliott and Roberts (2024, p. 1691) argue that "men's lives are replete with instances of care that cannot be reduced to part of the production of (surplus) value" and urges us to "look beyond the logic of capital" with hope that this is not the only social relation that shapes men's caring practices. Even when later studies (Prattes, Roberts & Elliot, 2025) acknowledge that men of colour and migrant men disproportionately undertake low-status 'feminised' jobs in the care economy such as cleaning and caregiving, these observations remain descriptive rather than analytically centring political economy.

Hybrid masculinity

Hybrid masculinity, a concept introduced by Demetriou (2001) and later expanded primarily by Bridges and Pascoe (2014, 2018), shares with inclusive and caring masculinity the assumption that men's gendered identities and practices are undergoing transformation. However, it diverges sharply in its assessment of these changes. Where inclusive and caring

masculinity theories see genuine progress, Bridges and Pascoe characterise men's shifting behaviours as largely superficial gestures that ultimately reinforce gender inequality. Moreover, unlike inclusive masculinity, which distances itself from hegemonic masculinity, hybrid masculinity positions itself as an expansion of Connell's framework. This preserves a stronger connection to the socialist feminist foundations of her work, though the theory's conceptual development simultaneously represents a critical departure from this tradition as it avoids material conditions and political economy in analysing gender change (Gottzén, 2026).

Demetriou (2001) first introduced this terminology to examine how dominance persists through forming a "hybrid masculinity bloc" (p. 348), proposing that hegemonic masculinity sustains itself by dialectically absorbing diverse expressions linked to femininity or to marginalised masculinities. Though substantially shaped by Gramsci's work, Demetriou makes a consequential departure by foregrounding stylistic dimensions above all else. This becomes especially apparent in his illustration of heterosexual men's adoption of gay cultural elements. The result is reducing hegemony chiefly as a cultural tactic, systematically marginalising the economic, material, and legal interests and alliances that also affect these power relations (Gramsci, 1971).

Demetriou's privileging of cultural over economic politics recurs in Bridges and Pascoe's (2014) influential elaboration. For instance, Connell's (1995) definition of masculinity as a configuration of practice – which explicitly foregrounds material and organisational aspects – transforms into a narrower question of "men's gender performances and identities" (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014, p. 246). This takes us from analysing dialectical interactions among structural and superstructural dynamics to treating men's identity construction as the primary site of gender transformation. More specifically, Bridges and Pascoe (2018, pp. 260–261) propose that "hybrid masculinities" employ "hybrid strategies" including "discursive distancing" from hegemonic masculinity, "strategic borrowing" from subordinated masculinities and femininities, and "fortifying boundaries" between distinct groups. They thus spotlight cultural tactics and "identity work" (Bridges, 2021, p. 669) while downplaying the material, economic and organisational structures that also contribute to male privilege.

The consequences for how they conceptualise strategies for change are quite substantial. Hybrid masculinities reproduce hegemonic gender norms at the level of representation, but as the analysis concentrates exclusively on gender expressions and

cultural behaviours it does not explain how gender inequality is materially reproduced and institutionally embedded. The framework is the most promising of the three contemporary theories discussed in this chapter, but without attention to economic structures, labour markets, property relations, and the material organisation of care and reproduction (that is, how 'hybrid masculinity blocs' are made up of an assemblage of economic, political and cultural processes and interests) hybrid masculinity theorising forfeits the analytical tools necessary to understand how male privilege persists through concrete economic arrangements and institutional power.

In sum, while these three concepts differ in their relationships to feminism, power, and previous masculinity theorising, they share a constructivist, sociological foundation emphasising identity, interaction, and meaning-making. Consequently, they theorise social change primarily through individual or group-level shifts in gendered attitudes, behaviours, and identities. Significantly, all three have departed from the Marxist influences central to Connell's masculinity theorising, despite claiming to build on her concepts. This shift means that gender change is largely understood as men adapting to new gendered norms and incorporating traditionally feminine or queer practices into their masculinity. While these approaches offer valuable insights, we argue they must be supplemented with analysis of how political economy also shapes both masculinity and gendered inequality.

The dialectics of gender change

In contrast to contemporary masculinity theories, the foundational work of Connell and Hearn is explicitly rooted in Marxist thought. Inspired by their approaches to men and masculinities, we aim to incorporate analysis of political economy into our poststructuralist feminist work on men and masculinities – an endeavour similar to Fraser's (2013) call to combine the lessons of Act I and Act II of feminist theorising. To do this, it is crucial to discuss the dialectical relationship between base and superstructure, or what Hearn (2014) calls the material–discursive, as this relationship is foundational to how we understand social change and what strategies we propose for achieving it. As noted above, Beasley (2008), for instance, criticises Connell, Hearn, and other early masculinity scholars for "dividing off 'discursive' from 'material' processes, structures, interests, and practices" (p. 95), arguing that this division reproduces the base–superstructure metaphor that ultimately attributes societal transformations to economic forces. Conversely, as we have tried to show, contemporary modernist masculinity theorising tends instead to locate forces for change at

the level of men's attitudes, behaviours and identities, presenting what Jameson (2009, p. 323) calls an "epistemological model of ideology", which positions individual knowledge as the primary mechanism through which ideology functions. This highlights a conundrum when analysing and promoting gender change: How can we understand transformations in men and masculinities without either reducing gender to economic forces or treating gendered norms and behaviours as autonomous from material conditions?

Fraser (1997) has proposed one of the most popular feminist solutions to these issues. Rejecting the classical base–superstructure model, at least in terms of unidirectional economic determinism, she distinguishes between two dimensions of injustice that partly overlap with the Marxist metaphor: socioeconomic injustice, rooted in political-economic structures such as exploitation and material deprivation, and cultural injustice, arising from patterns of representation, cultural domination, non-recognition, and disrespect. Fraser (1997) argues that no form of injustice is purely economic or cultural, but instead falls along a spectrum. Class is positioned toward the economic end, as cultural devaluation of the working class primarily stems from economic exploitation. Sexuality lies closer to the cultural end, as sexual minorities are distributed across classes. While sexual discrimination has economic consequences, the injustices are primarily cultural and based in misrecognition and exclusion from institutions like marriage. Gender occupies the middle of the spectrum as a 'bivalent' form of injustice, rooted in both economic exploitation – such as women's unpaid domestic work – and in cultural ideologies that devalue women's labour and define them primarily as caregivers rather than breadwinners. Fraser's (2023) ideas about social change are absolutely central to her theorising. She proposes socialist politics and cross-movement alliances as the remedy for capitalism's different injustices. The remedy for socioeconomic injustice is redistribution – restructuring the allocation of resources, labour and wealth – while the remedy for cultural injustice is recognition – revaluing identities and cultural differences (Fraser, 1997).

Fraser offers an important corrective to masculinity studies by urging feminist scholarship to address both cultural and socioeconomic dimensions in transforming men and masculinities. However, her recognition–redistribution model has also been heavily critiqued for remaining dualist and failing to see the interrelatedness of the two spheres (Alcoff, 2007; Young, 1997). While intended to show how economic and cultural logics interact across different forms of injustice, the model ultimately imposes artificial distinctions between them, as evident in her treatment of sexuality as the 'purest' form of cultural injustice

(Swanson, 2005). As one of Fraser's critics, Butler (1997) has challenged the analytical division between culture and economics by insisting that heteronormativity is not 'merely cultural' but as fundamental to capitalism as class exploitation: the heterosexual family has been central to the reproduction of labour power, and capitalism is intrinsically involved in regulating sexualities. Like class differences, gender and sexuality also 'materialise' in and through capitalist processes. In response to Butler and other critics, Fraser (2023) has increasingly emphasised the interconnectedness of culture and economics in the production of injustice, but it is still possible to argue that her 'expanded' conception of capitalism continues to foreground 'the economic' by highlighting the extent to which pervasive capitalist relations "impede cultural, political, and economic justice" for the vast majority of women (Johansson Wilén, 2024, p. 323).

As we can see, the base–superstructure dualism haunts any attempt to theorise material and discursive forces simultaneously. It is therefore worth revisiting alternative approaches to this dualism that may offer a way through the impasse. In this regard, we think that Hall's (1983/2016) theory of articulation provides a particularly useful framework.

To start, in Marx (1859/1904), the base–superstructure metaphor captures the complex interaction between different social processes. At the highest level of abstraction, the mode of production forms the base on which two superstructural dimensions – political and legal structures, as well as ideological consciousness – are built. It should be noted that Marx positions his historical materialism against Hegelian idealism, which can make him appear as an economic reductionist who explains development through material practices rather than ideas. However, he does not advocate for rigid materialism in which ideas merely reflect material conditions; rather, Marx advances a dialectical understanding in which developments in one sphere do not necessarily produce changes in another (Marx, 1857/1993).

In addition, according to Hall (1983/2016), Marx never intended the base–superstructure metaphor – the highest level of abstraction – to be applied mechanistically to concrete societies. While Marx's abstract theory of labour explains core dynamics of capitalist production, the specific constitution of labour forces in different contexts cannot be understood without also addressing how exploitation may depend on differences constituted by, for instance, race and gender. Analyses of transformation in specific historical conjunctures need to account for multi-determination and cannot rely too heavily on abstraction. Like Hearn (2014), Hall (1983/2016) rejects a strict separation between the

material and the discursive, claiming that neither fully determines the other or that their connection is inevitable. For Hall, the relationship between base and superstructure is "absolutely dialectical", meaning that it is not given by socio-economic structures or positions but produced through processes of articulation (Grossberg & Hall, 1986, p. 55). Articulation refers to the historically specific linking of different social, political, and ideological elements, but these linkages are neither permanent nor guaranteed but must be actively forged and sustained through political and ideological struggle (Hall, 1986).

Hall's approach is particularly valuable to our argument because he explicitly theorises the relation between materialism and discourse without collapsing into either economic or idealist determinism. He largely accepts poststructuralism's understanding of the fractured nature of the subject, the constitutive effects of discourse on subjectivity and experience, and rejects any assumption of pre-given, coherent identities (Hall, 1985). In similarity with Connell, Hall sees ideology, discourse, and the systems of representation through which we understand and present ourselves and others as materialised through social practice. However, Hall (1983/2016) also argues that there is a risk in indiscriminately treating ideas, norms and social relationships as materialised practices as they are not always material in the same way. Unlike Hearn, who argues for a broad conceptualisation of materiality, Hall argues that there is a specificity to practices performed within capitalist modes of production that significantly shape the materialisation processes taking place. This perspective holds that while all social practices, norms and relationships – including gendered, sexual, and racial differences – are material, they materialise in distinct ways in and through capitalism. Rather than being governed by universal structures or autonomous systems of meaning, such processes are shaped by articulations within specific historical conjunctures.

Hall's understanding of social change follows from his non-reductive approach to the material–discursive relationship. Change occurs not through the automatic unfolding of economic contradictions, but through the contested process of disarticulation and rearticulation of social forces, ideologies, and identities. Like Connell and Hearn, Hall (1983/2016) draws on Gramsci's concept of hegemony to conceptualise social transformation. What Hall terms as 'double articulation' refers to the contingent – rather than necessary – linking of material interests and ideological interpellation, and is the mechanism through which hegemony can arise, function, and be undermined. It produces an unstable equilibrium which legitimises dominance temporarily, as long as it is sustained. Social

change becomes possible when the articulations holding a hegemonic formation together weaken – when economic crises, cultural shifts, or political mobilisations create space for counter-hegemonic articulations. We want to highlight that Hall's understanding of hegemony differs somewhat from Connell's and Hearn's. Hearn's 'hegemony of men' appears as the strategy of a relatively stable collective gender class, and Connell presents 'hegemonic masculinity' as a configuration of practice where only non-hegemonic groups are affected by hegemonic relations (Demetriou, 2001). Hall begins, instead, from the recognition that economic interests are internally contradictory, identities fragmented, political alliances never given in advance, and that both hegemonic and subaltern groups are affected by these contingent alliances (Gottzén, 2026). This means that socio-economic positions do not automatically translate into political or ideological identification, which can help explain why hegemonic consent is often contradictory, and why men may come to identify with political projects, moral discourses or cultural struggles that appear opposite to their economic or gendered interests. Moreover, while both Connell and Hearn emphasise "dominative hegemony", Hall sees hegemony as an "aspirational" (Howson, 2006, p. 9) political strategy that must be constantly "*won*, worked for, reproduced, [and] sustained" (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson & Roberts, 1976, p. 40; original emphasis) through alliance-building at particular conjunctures – moments when contradictions intensify and previously naturalised arrangements become open to challenge (Hall, 1983/2016). Thus, cultural and ideological dimensions must be central to any analysis of contemporary social formations, including changing masculinities in the neoliberal era – but always understood as articulated with other, often economic dimensions.

Rural young men's political subjectivities

One arena in which masculinity scholars have showcased and examined the reproduction – and occasional subversion – of problematic forms of masculinity is in educational settings with boys and young men (Pascoe, 2007; Willis 1977/1993). The case we draw on here similarly focuses on everyday life at a lower secondary school. In the late 2010s, the second author, Susanna, conducted a year-long ethnographic fieldwork in a rural community in Sweden. Through participant observation, she followed around 25 boys aged 14–16 from both working- and middle-class backgrounds. Most had parents without higher education; fathers typically worked in manufacturing or transportation, while mothers worked in welfare and service sectors.

While most boys performed reasonably well academically, aware that sufficient grades were required to access both vocational and academic tracks in upper secondary school, they simultaneously displayed rowdy behaviours consistent with stereotypical images of (rural) working-class masculinities (Toft, 2024). Their everyday school life was characterised by constant competition through which they asserted physical strength, verbal ingenuity, and wit. Such practices are well documented in masculinity studies as homosocial mechanisms through which heteromasculine dominance is enacted (see, for example, Pascoe, 2007). The practices included feminising peers by casting them as weak or gay, as well as ironic performances of non-dominant masculinities used to underscore distance from such positions. They also involved parodying perceived hypermasculine positions, such as racialised or 'ghetto' (Swedish: 'orten') masculinities – a practice with clear racist undertones.

Problematic behaviour of this kind has been understood and targeted in different ways over the years. During the 1980s and 1990s, Swedish policy largely framed phenomena such as racism as consequences of class inequality, particularly among working-class men, and sought solutions through economic reforms such as equal access to education, employment, and housing. From the early 2000s, however, this class-based perspective has given way to an understanding of racism as a social structure rooted in intolerance, increasingly addressed through individual-focused interventions aimed at correcting attitudes and opinions through education (Edenheim, 2020). Today, the state-mandated Swedish approach to teaching democratic values in schools draws on 'norm-critical pedagogy', aimed at challenging normative attitudes by foregrounding inequalities and privileges related to a range of different power structures (Björkman & Bromseth, 2019). The approach rests on the assumption that making gendered and racialised norms and hierarchies visible will foster attitudinal and behavioural change.

As mandated, the school provided norm-critical education, but its primary target group – the rowdy, white working-class boys – did not accept this fostering uncritically. Instead, they often incorporated norm-critical language into their joking and banter. For example, when one boy laughingly remarked "That's so gay", another proclaimed to anyone within earshot that "Just so everybody knows, it is okay to be gay", as if jokingly attempting to pre-empt potential critique. In another instance, a boy who asserted heteromasculine dominance by shoving a friend into a locker while calling him homosexual would, moments later, enter the classroom with the inclusive greeting: "Hello ladies, gentlemen and non-

binaries". The boys actively incorporated 'progressive' language into the very practices through which they performed dominant masculinity, most often drawing on far-right humour directed at an imagined left. When their female peers raised issues of gender equality, the boys labelled them "feminist fanatics". At other times they adopted the language of the 'politically correct' identitarian left, randomly accusing other students of racism. When they themselves were accused, they would initially agree – "Yes, of course I'm a racist" – only to soon signal that they had been joking. This resonates with research suggesting that trolling – that is, the introduction of inflammatory content with the intent of provoking others – can function as "an exercise in ascribing gender to oneself and others" (Condis, 2018, p. 16). By transgressing a known taboo – claiming to be racist – the boys presented themselves as brave and carefree, only to dismiss the provocation as a joke, showcasing they knew they were not permitted to actually be racist (Areschoug, 2022).

Observing these practices, it was clear that the mandate to educate students about norm critique obfuscated the fact that students were already knowledgeable of such issues, and many of the young men possessed well-developed vocabulary for pinpointing issues of power, oppression, and inequality. Yet awareness that labelling someone as gay is considered wrong, or that inclusive language is preferable, does not mean dominant practices necessarily stop. While the boys knew how to display qualities associated with being 'inclusive' (Anderson, 2009) and even 'caring' (Elliott, 2016), this did not alter oppressive gender relations, aligning their performances more closely with 'hybrid masculinity' (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). This points to a limitation in pedagogical models and interventions that assume increased knowledge or awareness will itself lead to transformed attitudes and practices (Jameson 2009). Rather than reflecting lack of understanding, the inclusion of progressive language alongside the persistence of dominant masculine practices suggests they are embedded in social relations that cannot be undone through norm-shifting education alone.

Drawing on the theoretical discussions above, we argue that these young men's practices cannot solely be understood as cultural or ideological identity work, but must be situated within the historical, economic, and spatial relations that shape rural life. For instance, their scepticism toward progressive discourses was closely tied to where the ideas were understood to originate from. Feminism, LGBTQI+ rights, anti-racism, and environmentalism were primarily seen as urban projects with little relevance to their rural reality, and associated with city life and peers (mostly girls) expected to leave for careers

elsewhere. In contrast, the boys largely anticipated remaining local and entering labour-intensive industries such as forestry, manufacturing, and transportation.

These differing orientations were not merely attitudinal but embedded in historical and material processes. In Sweden, industrialisation shaped rural labour markets around industrial and extractive work, and while these formations have been destabilised by deindustrialisation and economic restructuring, they fostered masculinities oriented around wage labour, physical endurance, and technical competence (Brandth & Haugen, 2005). Even as urban centres remain dependent on rural resources and industries, dominant urban imaginaries frame rural areas as lagging behind economically, culturally, and morally (Areschoug, 2019). Within this context of material dependence and symbolic devaluation, progressive discourses have come to be experienced by the boys not as emancipatory, but as externally imposed and disconnected from their lived realities.

This pattern became even more pronounced in follow-up interviews conducted when participants were aged 20–22. The young men expressed frustration with urban critiques of the extractive forest industry in which many were employed, as well as the heavy vehicles and fossil fuels they depended on. From their perspective, critics challenge the rural, work-based masculine identities they had invested in while failing to grasp rural living conditions. Although the young men continued to show awareness of progressive values, stating that racism is wrong and that earlier sexist or homophobic remarks were merely youthful jargon, many had nevertheless aligned politically with the Sweden Democrats, a far-right party which opposes gender justice, LGBTQ+ rights, immigration, and environmentalism while explicitly appealing to rural perspectives. In many ways, this constitutes an ideological struggle over spatial and cultural identities, but it is also reinforced by economic and political processes that contribute to these frustrated rural positions. The industries in which the young men work are central to Swedish export and receive substantial state support. For the young men, employment in industries that promote traditional masculinity functions as both an emotional and material anchor in a context marked by fragile welfare safety nets and rising unemployment. Political-economic structures thus contribute to shaping these masculinities.

The young men's situatedness problematises Fraser's arguments. While they may be culturally 'injured' by urban stereotypes, their performances of rural identity are difficult to disentangle from performances of gender – rurality and masculinity are deeply intertwined, making it analytically challenging to 'recognise' rurality without simultaneously recognising masculinity. Moreover, when employed, the young men were relatively financially secure.

While other working-class groups may need more acute economic redistribution, their rural belonging remains embedded in complex economic relations and state (non)support. We propose understanding the formation of subjectivities – in this case the contradictory political subjectivities of young, white, working-class men – as tentative and fractured, formed through the double articulation of material interests and ideological interpellation (Hall, 1983/2016). While the ways economic and cultural forces correspond in producing particular gendered subjectivities are never determined or guaranteed, they are nonetheless likely in late-capitalist societies and warrant critical interrogation.

Here, we offer no practical prescriptions for working with young men, but reorienting masculinity studies around political economy may help develop approaches to gender change that do not rely exclusively on shifting norms and identities – a limited instrument at a historical conjuncture when neoliberal capitalism is transforming the material conditions of both young and adult men's lives. If the field is to contribute to a counter-hegemonic project through which gender relations can materialise differently, it must critically examine why its ideological arguments fail to persuade many men. A first step is to address the differentiated capacities they have to embody particular masculinities across different spatial contexts. By holding ideological and economic interests together, masculinity scholars may more adequately engage the concerns of groups positioned differently in relation to feminist struggles: not only 'progressive', urban-oriented young women, but also 'conservative' young rural men.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have shown how masculinity theorising has shifted from dialectical relations between economy and ideology to an almost exclusive focus on men's "expressions, behaviours and identities" (Elliott, 2020, p. 41) as the site of gender change. This has occurred at a moment when capitalism has become increasingly expansive, penetrating ever deeper into everyday life and perhaps shaping gender relations more profoundly than ever before. Confronted with these developments, masculinity theory appears inadequate to the task of understanding social change. If meaningful gender change is, as Bridges (2019, p. 31) suggests, a "moving target" requiring ongoing research to chart, it is thus time for the field to shift its aim towards political economy. This chapter seeks to challenge the dominance of identity-focused approaches and point towards alternative directions better equipped to understand and work towards the transformation of men and

masculinities in a late-capitalist era. To this end, we need to attend to both the materialism of feminism's first act and the second act's focus on culture, identity, and intersectionality (Fraser, 2013). We have argued specifically for a neo-Marxist approach inspired by Hall's (1983/2016) understanding of how economic relations and cultural formations are articulated together in specific historical conjunctures. We do not claim this to be the only approach, rather, we want to open a dialogue about how critical scholars of men and masculinities theorise change, and how such theories inform the strategies, policies, and practices proposed by researchers, activists, and practitioners working with men and boys.

In an effort to avoid stigmatising marginalised men through deterministic class analyses, some scholars argue for moving beyond the 'logics of capitalism' towards a focus on other social and cultural relations (Elliot & Roberts, 2023). But, as our case study demonstrates, focusing on gendered identities and norms alone is insufficient for understanding young men's resistance to progressive values. Norm-critical pedagogy in Swedish schools shares contemporary masculinity theory's emphasis on expressions, behaviours and identities, and, as we have argued, risks overstating individual-level change at the expense of structural conditions. Racism, homophobia, sexism, and transphobia cannot be countered solely through a moralising politics of recognition (Fraser, 2019), since these injustices are rooted not only in misrecognition but also in the material structures of capitalism. As Connell (1987) and Hearn (1987) demonstrate, masculinities are deeply embedded in economic structures, with capitalism long sustained by a gender order that privileges (certain) men. We do not, however, advocate replacing cultural reductionism with economic reductionism in which men's relation to the means of production mechanically determines gender formation. Rather, envisioning social change – and cultivating hope for a future beyond neoliberal capitalism (see Elliot & Roberts, 2023) – requires a critical account of how that system currently operates. We therefore propose understanding masculinities through the double articulation (Hall, 1983/2016) of material interests and ideological interpellation, and argue that strategies for change must address not only behaviours and identities but also the economic conditions that contribute to shaping them.

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