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Whither critical masculinity studies? Notes on inclusive masculinity theory, postfeminism and sexual politics

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Abstract

Inclusive masculinity theory has recently been proposed as a new approach to theorising contemporary masculinities. Focusing particularly on the work of the theory's key exponent, Eric Anderson, this paper offers a critical reading of inclusive masculinity theory in relation to the context of contemporary postfeminism. Building on feminist scholarship which analyses the emergence of a distinctive postfeminist sensibility within the academy, I consider how inclusive masculinity theory both reflects and reproduces certain logics of postfeminism. My central concern is the manner in which this scholarship deemphasises key issues of sexual politics and promotes a discourse of optimism about men, masculinities and social change. Against this view, I argue that critical masculinity studies must foreground the analysis of gendered power relations and posit that the interrogation of contemporary postfeminism is critical to this endeavour.

Introduction

Inclusive masculinity theory has recently been proposed as a new approach to theorising contemporary masculinities. As the main exponent of this theory, Eric Anderson has been hailed for initiating the 'next generation' of masculinity scholarship (Klein cited in Anderson 2009). This paper seeks to develop a critical analysis of inclusive masculinity theory as elaborated by Anderson in relation to the context of contemporary postfeminism; in doing so, I am less concerned to dispute inclusive masculinity theory on empirical grounds than to interrogate its political underpinnings and effects. The argument proceeds in three parts. First, I set out an understanding of postfeminism as a social and cultural context in which feminism is simultaneously 'taken into account' and 'undone'. Second, I discuss the emergence of a postfeminist sensibility within the academy, specifically in relation to sociological analyses of social change and the 'turn to agency' within feminist scholarship. In the third and main section of this paper I critically examine inclusive masculinity theory and discuss the various ways in which Anderson's work reflects and reproduces a postfeminist sensibility, specifically through the erasure of sexual politics. I conclude with some more general reflections on the field of masculinity studies, arguing that an analysis of postfeminism is essential to critical scholarship on men and masculinities, contemporary culture and social change.

I. Postfeminism

The term 'postfeminism' is used in a number of analytically distinct ways, variously referring to: an epistemological shift marking a discontinuation with earlier feminist thought; an historical juncture occurring after the 'height' of second wave feminism; or a 'backlash' against feminism (Gill 2007, 249). While the concept of 'backlash' (Faludi 1992) is useful in thinking about the

compendium of social and cultural forces that work to counteract and undermine feminism, a number of feminist scholars question its underlying temporal logic. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra point out: “Feminist activism has long met with strategies of resistance, negotiation, and containment, processes that a model of backlash – with its implication of achievements won and then subsequently lost – cannot effectively incorporate within the linear chronology of social change on which it seems to be premised” (2007, 1). Ros Gill further charges that the backlash thesis fails to appreciate what is different about contemporary discourses and patterns of representation: “Much sexism, it seems to me, operates without the alibi of nostalgia for a time when men were men and women were women, but is distinctively new. It has to be understood not only as a backlash, a reaction against feminism, but also as a new discursive phenomenon that is closely related to neoliberalism” (2007, 254).

Writing in the British context, Angela McRobbie (2009) provides a ‘complexification’ of the backlash thesis that has been very influential for feminist scholarship on postfeminism. For McRobbie and many others (Gill 2007; Tasker & Negra 2007; Scharff 2012; Ringrose 2012), postfeminism is to be understood as a social and cultural landscape marked by a new kind of anti-feminist sentiment quite different from earlier backlashes against the (real and apparent) gains made by feminism in the 1970s and 1980s. Rather than directly opposing or disputing feminist claims, postfeminism gains rhetorical efficacy through the suggestion that gender and sexual equality have been achieved, such that feminism is no longer needed. In this way, postfeminism operates through a double movement or entanglement; feminism is simultaneously ‘taken into account’ and ‘undone’. McRobbie uses the concept of ‘disarticulation’ to describe this process: “By disarticulation I mean a force which devalues, or negates and makes unthinkable the very basis of coming-together (even if to take part in disputatious encounters), on the assumption widely promoted that there is no longer a need for such actions” (2009, 26). Where women are constructed as the ‘beneficiaries’ of social change, the logic of feminism as a social and political movement is undermined; postfeminist discourses and representational practices co-opt the language of liberal, rights-based feminism, converting ‘empowerment’ and ‘choice’ into consumer activities that substitute for political engagement and collective action. These vocabularies proliferate across the media and popular culture, and are invoked by western governments that instrumentalise feminism in order to demonstrate their own ‘progressive’ stance on issues of gender and sexuality (2009, 1). Heavily imbricated with neoliberalism, postfeminist discourses rely upon a language of individualism, transposed by an ethic of personal responsibility (Gill 2007).

Postfeminist discourses commonly centre on the suggestion, widely promulgated in the popular press, that feminism is out-of-date and outmoded (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009; Tasker & Negra 2007). Yet while postfeminist media culture routinely locates feminism (and feminists) in the past, the dispensation of feminism is not about returning to some real or imagined past. Instead, postfeminism attempts to configure a present in which feminism is past. McRobbie writes: “It’s not so much turning the clock back, as turning it forward to secure a post-feminist gender settlement, a new sexual contract” (2009, 57). Under the new sexual contract, the familiar dynamics of male dominance and female oppression are reworked and

patriarchal gender relations are upheld in new and apparently novel forms. Here, as McRobbie argues, “the disavowing of forms of sexual politics which existed in the fairly recent past, and the replacement of these by re-instated forms of sexual hierarchy, constitutes a distinctive new modality of gender power” (2009, 51-52). With sexual politics – that is, an understanding of gender relations as structured by power – consigned to the past, postfeminism represents an especially pernicious form of anti-feminism wherein the ‘taken into accountness’ of feminism allows for a more thorough dismantling of feminist politics, at the same time that gender inequalities are renewed and patriarchal norms reinstated.

II. Postfeminism in the academy

Alongside broader discussions of the status of feminist scholarship within the academy and specifically the claim that feminist critiques have been sufficiently ‘dealt with’ (see Pereira 2012), a number of feminist scholars argue that a postfeminist sensibility can be deciphered within certain areas of the academy. Included within McRobbie’s account of postfeminism is a discussion of sociological theories of late modernity, which she argues contribute to the undoing or dismantling of feminism in a number of ways. McRobbie contends, first, that reflexive modernisation theses – as elaborated by scholars such as Anthony Giddens (1991) and Ulrich Beck (1992) – downplay the role of feminist thought and activism in the reconfiguration of contemporary social life: “There is no trace whatsoever of the battles fought, of the power struggles embarked upon, or of the enduring inequalities which still mark out the relations between men and women” (2009, 18). Secondly, in positioning women as the beneficiaries of social change, Giddens and Beck fail to consider how discourses of ‘personal choice’ and ‘self improvement’ produce new forms of injury and injustice. Third, their work assumes that progressive social change is logical and inevitable, as though “Western society was somehow predisposed to allow women to become more equal” (2009, 45). With social change cast as inevitable and inevitably progressive, Giddens and Beck seem to suggest that there is no longer any need for feminism. In a final indictment, McRobbie charges:

there is a kind of sociological complicity taking place in this work by Beck, Giddens and Lash, insofar as it fails entirely to reflect on the way in which these processes, which seem somehow inevitable or inexorable and which seem to free people up, and give them more choices, are in fact new and more complex ways of ensuring that masculine domination is re-instated, and at the same time protected from the possibility of a new feminism, in sociology as well as in public life (2009, 48).

For Ros Gill and Ngaire Donaghue (2013), a postfeminist sensibility is also decipherable within certain facets of the feminist academy. Charting the recent ‘turn to agency’ within feminist scholarship, the authors contend that “whilst agency has always been important to feminist theorising, in some recent writing it seems to have become a veritable preoccupation, endlessly searched for, invoked and championed” (2013, 240). Gill and Donaghue go on to elaborate a series of convergences between postfeminism as a cultural sensibility and feminist scholarship centred on agency, choice and

empowerment. They argue, first, that in each of these women's capacities as freely choosing and autonomous individuals are celebrated and, concomitant with this, any consideration of oppression is obscured or evacuated. Second, considerable attention is given to areas of women's lives that have long been of concern to feminists. As Gill and Donaghue describe: "It is notable that only certain fields have attracted such a focus on agency: sex work, but not supermarket work; egg donation, but not kidney donation; youth studies, but not old age studies" (2013, 251). Third, both operate with highly individualistic conceptions of agency such that any consideration of cultural influence is negated. Finally, postfeminist and feminist commentators alike frequently position themselves as critical of rather than in dialogue with feminism, indicting feminism for imposing an orthodoxy that both obscures and limits women's agency. For Gill and Donaghue, where feminist scholarship approximates postfeminist cultural discourses, it is as though postfeminism has 'come true': "the 'loaded issues' have disappeared – and there really is no remaining oppression, domination, injustice or inequality that has any kind of systematic or patterned nature" (2013, 244).

III. Inclusive masculinity theory

Taking these analyses as my point of departure, I want to consider how the logic of postfeminism is reproduced in inclusive masculinity theory as elaborated by Eric Anderson. In doing so, I am interested to consider what the dissemination and reception of Anderson's work signals for masculinities scholarship more broadly.ⁱ Anderson's theory of 'inclusive masculinity' is set out in the 2009 text *Inclusive masculinity: The changing nature of masculinities* and further elaborated in dozens of sole and joint-authored journal articles.ⁱⁱ Based on ethnographic research with predominantly white, middle- to upper-middle class university-aged men in the US and UK, the main thesis of this work is that recent shifts in the social and cultural landscape have brought about the development of more 'inclusive' or non homophobic forms of masculinity. Specifically, Anderson contends that decreasing levels of cultural 'homophobia' – that is, "the fear of being homosexualized" (2009, 7) – enable men to develop softer, more expressive and tactile forms of masculinity. Anderson argues that Anglo-American societies – referring to the USA and UK, but at times extending this remit to encompass Canada and Australia – progress through three 'cultural zeitgeists' of elevated, diminishing, and diminished homophobia.

In the first of these settings hegemonic masculinity dominates, but as cultural homophobia diminishes, more inclusive forms of masculinity emerge alongside orthodox masculinities. In these contexts, "multiple masculinities will proliferate without hierarchy and hegemony, and men are permitted an expansion of acceptable heteromale behaviours" (2009, 97). For Anderson, Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995) accurately describes the operation of masculinities in cultures of high homophobia, but becomes increasingly less applicable in contexts of diminishing and diminished homophobia. He claims: "Inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson 2009a) supersedes hegemonic masculinity by explaining the stratification of men alongside their social dynamics in times of lower homophobia" (2011b, 570-571). Arguing that Anglo-American societies are currently characterised by diminishing or diminished cultural homophobia,

Anderson posits inclusive masculinity as the empirical and theoretical successor to hegemonic masculinity.

Inclusive masculinity theory is becoming a recognised (if contested) concept within men and masculinities scholarship.ⁱⁱⁱ Anderson's work is widely disseminated, with dozens of articles published in prestigious journals such as *Men and Masculinities* (2008a), *Sex Roles* (2008b), and *Gender & Society* (2011a); a coauthored 2010 article for *Journal of Gender Studies* (Anderson & McGuire 2010) ranks as the journal's third most read and eighth most frequently cited article.^{iv} Inclusive masculinity theory provides the framework for a Special Issue on masculinities, sexualities and sport in the *Journal of Homosexuality*, edited by Anderson (2011b) and bringing together a number of scholars' work. *Inclusive masculinities* (2009) has been endorsed by eminent masculinity theorists including Michael Kimmel and Michael Messner, with Alan Klein declaring: "With this book, Eric Anderson is now poised to move us to the next generation of masculinity scholarship" (Klein, cited on the cover of Anderson 2009). The text has been extensively reviewed in high profile journals (Martino 2011; Nagel 2010; Vaccaro 2011) and a small network of scholars actively support and promote Anderson's work. Most notable in this regard is Mark McCormack, author of *The declining significance of homophobia* (2012),^v which argues that young British men are dramatically reconfiguring masculinity and heterosexuality by renouncing homophobia and promoting inclusivity. This publication was met with an overwhelming response in the media and across academic, activist and policy forums; McCormack was recently given a platform to discuss this in a special commentary on 'making an impact' in *Sexualities* (McCormack 2013). In November 2012, the British Sociological Association (BSA) held a one-day seminar prompted by the work of Anderson and McCormack, on the basis that these authors "highlight a need for us to fully re-examine what it is to be a man, and to develop our understanding of how masculinities are constructed, performed and consumed after a period of significant social, cultural and economic change" (BSA 2012). The media attention surrounding Anderson and McCormack's work is remarkable, with a proliferation of articles about inclusive masculinities appearing in the British print media (e.g. *The Telegraph*; *The Guardian*; *The Daily Mail*; *The Independent*) and international online press (e.g. *The Huffington Post*; *Salon*). Anderson and McCormack themselves make regular contributions to the media, writing magazine articles, newspaper features and blog posts, as well as appearing on radio and television programmes in and beyond the UK.^{vi}

Optimism of the intellect: The (affective) appeal of inclusive masculinity theory

Acknowledging that new concepts and theories gain recognition through existing disciplinary apparatuses – journal publishing conventions and review procedures, disciplinary bodies and professional associations – it seems important to ask why and how inclusive masculinity theory has emerged at this particular juncture in masculinity studies. Of course, a number of factors contribute to the 'success' of a particular theory. In an illuminating article, Kathy Davis (2008) employs a sociology of science perspective to examine the espousal of 'intersectionality' within feminist theory. Her analysis identifies four characteristics of an influential concept or theory. Specifically, this will:

address a fundamental concern of the field; add a novel twist to an old problem; appeal to generalists and specialists; invite further enquiry through ambiguity and incompleteness.

Inclusive masculinity theory meets Davis' criteria. In the first instance, the theory attempts to address a long-standing problem in masculinity studies by proposing an alternative to hegemonic masculinity theory, debates over which have preoccupied the field (Beasley 2008; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005; Hearn 2004; Wetherell & Edley 1999). Second, inclusive masculinity theory appeals to both generalists and specialists because it is readily understandable and easily applied. Indeed, Anderson and McCormack profess a commitment to 'public sociology' and pour scorn on poststructuralist scholarship for its difficult language. Judith Butler comes in for particularly harsh (if by now familiar) criticism as Anderson indicts: "Butler ... is so inaccessible that she commits a violent, shameful act of academic exclusion" (2009, 33). It is perhaps testament to the accessibility of their own work that inclusive masculinity theory succeeds in capturing the attention of the definitive 'generalist' audience, that is, the popular press. Third, inclusive masculinity theory – with its account of rapidly declining homophobia among young men – definitely confounds expectations. Lastly, this new mode of theorising invites further enquiry, as Anderson calls on scholars to take up the analysis of inclusive masculinities across a range of settings (2009, 160).

While these factors surely contribute to the success of inclusive masculinity theory, I want to draw attention to another important consideration not discussed in Davis' account. Specifically, I am interested in the affective draw a particular theory or concept can have, that is, the way it appeals to readers' emotional subjectivities. The affective register of inclusive masculinity theory is decidedly optimistic. McCormack introduces his book as a "good-news story", stating that: "Although unusual for sociological work on gender and sexuality, this is a good-news story – a story of increasing equality for LGBT students, and a story of increasing inclusivity among straight students" (2012, xxv). Given the substantial media interest around this work, we may surmise that 'the declining significance of homophobia' is not only a 'good-news story', but also a 'good news story'.^{vii} In his endorsement of *Inclusive masculinities*, Kimmel describes the book as "suffused with hope" and Messner further states: "Eric Anderson's research gives us some cause for (dare I say it?) optimism" (Kimmel and Messner cited on the cover of Anderson 2009). Writing in praise of *The declining significance of homophobia*, Jeffrey Weeks commends: "This is a heartening book ... and makes one optimistic for the future" (Weeks cited on the cover of McCormack 2012). The language of inclusive masculinity theory even sounds optimistic, and in this we can discern an element of rhetorical leveraging; while Anderson uses 'inclusive masculinity' to describe the ways in which (white, middle class) heterosexual men are embracing gay men, the term 'inclusive' seems to denote something much more all-encompassing. For this reason, 'inclusive masculinity' should perhaps be placed alongside broader shifts towards the use of 'happy talk' within the academy, a pertinent example of which is the move away from 'race' in favour of 'diversity' (Bell & Hartmann 2007).

Anderson and McCormack proffer to their readership a sense of cheery optimism and hope; as one reviewer suggests: "It's not often that an academic study makes one feel better about being in the world, yet Eric Anderson's

Inclusive masculinity does” (Adams 2010). There are, however, serious problems with the arguments put forward by Anderson and McCormack, not least of which is their disregard for key issues of sexual politics. In the following section I provide a critical analysis of inclusive masculinity theory and later relate this to the wider context of contemporary masculinities scholarship. In doing so I am less concerned to dispute inclusive masculinity theory on empirical grounds – though I think this is an important project, ably taken up by scholars such as Tristan Bridges (forthcoming) – and am more interested in interrogating the underpinning politics as well as the political effects of this new brand of scholarship vis-à-vis postfeminism.

***Masculinity studies’ sexual politics: Now you see it, now you don’t*^{viii}**

I should begin by pointing out that the erasure of sexual politics from academic work on men and masculinities is nothing new. As such, before discussing what is novel about inclusive masculinity theory, I want to identify some continuities between this and earlier bodies of work which tended to deemphasise gendered power relations. In doing so I refer to the critiques of masculinity studies raised by feminist and pro-feminist scholars, in particular Anthony McMahon’s analysis of the ‘psychologisation’ of sexual politics in writing on men and masculinities (1993). In an analysis that has since been extended upon (Robinson 1996, 2003), McMahon posits that masculinity scholars evince a selective engagement with feminist scholarship. Notable in this regard is a heavy reliance on feminist object-relations theory, in particular Nancy Chodorow’s *The reproduction of mothering* (1978). Commenting on the irony that this text – which is principally concerned with the psychology of women – should be so influential within the field of men and masculinities, McMahon argues that the appropriation of this work enables masculinity scholars to disavow men’s interest in patriarchal gender relations while seeming to engage a political framework. He writes:

Feminist object-relations theory, ironically, makes it easy for men to deny agency in the maintenance of patriarchy ... Reliance on this approach allows male writers to employ rhetoric that is highly critical, and, at the same time, to ground these criticisms in an analysis that directs attention away from men’s practices. Thus it is possible to speak in terms of male power, domination, and advantage while proposing an explanation in terms of the agent-less reproduction of a social structure (1993, 687).

The appropriation of feminist object-relations theory thus permits masculinity scholars to focus on the burdens of masculinity for men, without any concomitant analysis of men’s interest in maintaining unequal gender relations. While the intention of such scholarship may be critical, its sexual political effects are conservative, as attention is focused on a reified ‘masculinity’ rather than men’s practices (McMahon 1993, 689).

These same tendencies are evident within Anderson’s writing on inclusive masculinities. Anderson demonstrates a highly selective engagement with feminist work and, perhaps predictably, employs a feminist object-relations framework to explain the social reproduction of gender inequality

(2009, 38).^{ix} Where he does draw on other modes of feminist thought, this is not particularly satisfactory. For example, Anderson describes Adrienne Rich's influential essay, 'Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence' (Rich 1980), as an analysis of the regulation of 'homosexuality' (2009, 36). In doing so, Anderson effectively reproduces the erasure of lesbianism so carefully documented by Rich; indeed, Rich specifically objects to the conflation of lesbianism and male homosexuality, stating that lesbian sexuality is "usually, and, incorrectly, 'included' under male homosexuality" (Rich 1980, 637). Anderson goes on to state his agreement with Pierre Bourdieu (2001) in viewing male dominance from a historical materialist or radical feminist perspective (2009, 38). In this way, Bourdieu is made to stand in as representative of (a singular, undifferentiated) radical feminism; this is in spite of the fact that Bourdieu infamously gives little attention to women or gender in his work. The text Anderson cites, *Masculine domination*, represents one of Bourdieu's only attempts to address such issues and has been subject to intense criticism from feminist scholars (Lovell 2000). Having asserted the importance of historical materialism, Anderson then cites Caroline New's contention that "men's interests in patriarchy are inseparable from the social relations in and through which they are expressed, and cannot therefore be invoked to explain those relations" (New 2001, 735, cited in Anderson 2009, 38). Disavowing men's interests in gender inequality is, of course, counter-posed to historical materialism – which centres on the analysis of class-based interests – and exemplifies Anderson's refusal to deal in the political structure of gender relations.

Anderson dedicates an entire chapter of *Inclusive masculinity* to enumerating the 'costs' of orthodox masculinity for men, contending that this is something scholars have not sufficiently attended to (2009, 47). This, however, is a difficult claim to substantiate – and one that goes without citation or explanation by Anderson – given that a great deal of scholarship is concerned to examine the negative implications of (hegemonic) masculinity for men (for example, in relation to health). Indeed, many scholars explicitly reject the 'costs' framework because it is already a dominant discourse, frequently manifest in accounts of 'masculinity in crisis' (Robinson 1996). Anderson's claim is also historically amnesiac, given that early sociological work on masculinity deliberately set out to challenge the preoccupation of sex role theory with the 'burdens' of the 'male role' (Carrigan, Connell and Lee 1985). Rather than engaging these arguments, Anderson draws on the work of Warren Farrell to argue that "sexism carries a price tag [for men]" (2009, 47). What interests me here is not so much the point Anderson is making, but rather the use of Farrell to substantiate this point. The text Anderson cites, *The myth of male power* (Farrell 1994), is a veritable treatise in anti-feminist sentiment which posits that patriarchy is a feminist myth and men are the 'real victims' in society (see Edley and Wetherell 2001). Though Anderson tempers his endorsement of Farrell, drawing attention to certain limitations of his work, this citational construction – which posits that sociologists fail to address the costs of masculinity for men, and then cites Farrell as an author whose work does address this issue – seems to posit that only antifeminist scholars consider how narrowly conceived cultural constructions of masculinity impact men. Concluding his chapter on the costs of masculinity for men, almost as an afterthought, Anderson includes a short paragraph entitled 'What about agency?' (2009, 51). Unfortunately, the question goes

unanswered.

It is clear then that there are many continuities between inclusive masculinity theory as elaborated by Anderson and earlier work which tended to deemphasize sexual politics. Having established this relation, I want to draw attention to what is new about inclusive masculinity theory as an approach to masculinities scholarship. I argue that within this brand of theorising, sexual political matters are not simply ignored but are instead presented as already settled, or in the process of being settled. It is in this regard that parallels can most clearly be seen between inclusive masculinity theory and the social and cultural context of postfeminism in which it is produced.

The rhetoric of social change

As in the sociological literature discussed by McRobbie (2009), there is a sense in Anderson's work that social change is logical and inevitable. This is, perhaps, partially explained by the circularity of inclusive masculinity theory, whereby decreasing cultural homophobia leads to the development of inclusive masculinities, which are in turn characterised by an absence of homophobia. More pertinent here, however, is the teleological narrative of decreasing homophobia that underpins inclusive masculinity theory. Distinguishing three 'cultural zeitgeists' of elevated, diminishing and diminished homophobia which Anglo-American societies progress through in linear succession, Anderson seems to suggest that Anglo-American societies are somehow predisposed towards gender and sexual equality. This account of social change is peculiarly agentless, premising that more progressive attitudes to homosexuality are the result of "the increasing loss of our puritan sentiment" (Anderson 2009, 5). While feminist campaigns and gay liberation are given mention, they are very much in the background of this narrative; if any group of social actors is to be credited with the decline of homophobia, it is the young, white, heterosexual, middle-class men of Anderson's study, here imagined as the harbingers of new and more equitable forms of gender relations.

Even when speaking about the role men play in changing patterns of gender and sexuality, Anderson shifts attention away from located male practices and onto a reified 'masculinity', contending that "inclusive masculinities should open a new arena in gender politics" (2009, 158). The account of linear, progressive social change developed by Anderson parallels the kinds of cultural narratives critically interrogated by Jasbir Puar (2007), for whom the claim that western societies are necessarily sexually progressive is deeply implicated with imperialism. Her arguments resonate closely with McRobbie's contention that in the postfeminist context, feminism is strategically instrumentalised as a means to shore up divisions between 'the west and the rest' (2009, 1). Positing a model of linear and progressive social change, inclusive masculinity theory offers no space to think about permutations of patriarchal relations or the development of new forms of gender and sexual inequality. And if Anglo-American societies are inevitably moving towards gender and sexual equality, following the "apex of homophobia in 1988" (Anderson, 2009, p.156), it would seem there is no longer any need for feminist and LGBTQ social justice campaigns.

This narrative of linear and progressive social change is central to

Anderson's critique of hegemonic masculinity theory and in this respect his analysis is distinct from many other critiques of hegemonic masculinity theory (Beasley 2008; Hearn 2004; Wetherell and Edley, 1999). For Anderson, it is not that the theory of hegemonic masculinity is somehow flawed; indeed, hegemonic masculinity theory has provided the framework for some of his earlier work (Anderson 2009, 93). Rather, Anderson argues that the theory of hegemonic masculinity does not apply to contemporary masculinities. That is, instead of critiquing the theory of hegemonic masculinity on theoretical grounds, Anderson contends that dramatic social and cultural change has rendered the theory redundant. He writes: "what I see occurring in my investigations (of white university-aged men) is not accounted for with hegemonic masculinity theory. Times have changed, and this requires new ways of thinking about gender" (2009, 32).^x Thus Anderson's critique of hegemonic masculinity is based on the understanding that progressive social change has undermined the utility of a concept centrally concerned with the analysis of gendered power relations. Because although Anderson discusses hegemonic masculinity as it pertains to understanding power relations between men, the concept was formulated as a means to theorise power dynamics among men and between men and women; as Carrigan, Connell and Lee describe, hegemonic masculinity theory is an extension of feminist theories of patriarchy and begins from the premise that "the overall relationship between men and women is one involving domination and oppression" (1985, 552). That Anderson neglects this aspect of hegemonic masculinity theory is ironic in light of these authors' further contention that: "This is a fact about the social world ... that is steadily evaded, and sometimes flatly denied, in much of the literature about masculinity written by men" (1985, 552).

While I have reservations about the way Anderson engages hegemonic masculinity theory, I want to impress that my argument here is not substantive: I am not claiming that the concept of hegemonic masculinity is the 'best' approach to the study of men and masculinities. Indeed, when Mark McCormack, a key supporter of Anderson, contends that "there is a tendency to overstate the utility and applicability of hegemonic masculinity theory" (2012, 39), I am inclined to agree with him. What concerns me here is the uncomplicated narrative of progressive social change the theory of inclusive masculinity presumes and reproduces, and how this compounds the logic of postfeminism and effects the erasure of sexual politics. It seems to me that there is something altogether too convenient about the way Anderson invokes a discourse of vague 'social change' in order to dismiss scholarship that runs counter to his own.

Examining the discursive machinations through which Anderson retires hegemonic masculinity theory, I also want to draw attention to the ways in which he attempts to retire scholars associated with this conceptual frame. Insisting that hegemonic masculinity theory must be located in its 'appropriate' social and cultural context, Anderson discusses the 1980s and early 1990s as "an epoch of heightened homophobia" (2009, 90) and commends scholars such as R. W. Connell, Michael Kimmel and Michael Messner for having "rightfully assessed the zeitgeist of their time, cementing hegemonic masculinity into the literature" (2009, 91). While thinking about how concepts and theories relate to the social and cultural context in which they emerge is an interesting project (and one this paper partakes in), what is

noteworthy here is the way Anderson situates theorists of hegemonic masculinity in the past (“their time”). Elsewhere referring to these same scholars as masculinity studies’ “former leading figures” (2011b, 573), Anderson seems posed to install himself and other proponents of inclusive masculinity theory as the forebears of a new direction in masculinity studies. This kind of generational (and, perhaps, ageist) logic is accompanied by the supposition that new directions in the field must be, indeed can only be forged by young scholars. In the conclusion of *Inclusive masculinity* Anderson states finally: “I appeal to graduate students and young scholars, those who possess enough adolescent capital and those who can freely associate with youth without feeling out of place: Investigate the intersection of inclusive masculinities in other arenas” (2009, 160). In this way, those scholars whose work focuses on sexual politics and gendered power relations are situated in the past, as young scholars are called forth to examine the (implicitly depoliticised) present.

The problem with “homophobia is masculinity”

Arguing that a decline in cultural homophobia has led to the development of inclusive masculinities, Anderson overstates the centrality of homophobia to cultural definitions of masculinity and in so doing downplays the sexual politics at stake in the reconfiguration of masculinity formations and practices. Though homophobia is heavily imbricated with masculinity, this is not to say that homophobia is the definitive expression of masculinity. A clear example of Anderson’s privileging of homophobia in cultural constructions of masculinity – from which his entire argument proceeds – is found in his contention that within cultures of elevated homophobia “homophobia is masculinity” (2009, 8, 95). Although Anderson attributes this construction to Michael Kimmel (1994), in actual fact, Kimmel’s influential essay is entitled ‘Masculinity as homophobia’ and centres on the relation between masculinity, fear and shame through a discussion of homophobia: he does not argue that homophobia is ipso facto masculinity. Moreover, Kimmel is deeply concerned with how homophobia is implicated with sexism and racism – issues that receive scant attention in Anderson’s work. The overwhelming focus on homophobia and homophobia in inclusive masculinity theory means that little consideration is given to the relation between masculinity and heterosexuality, and the ways in which the dynamics of heterosexuality structure men’s practices and male subjectivity. This is despite the fact that Anderson’s research is conducted almost entirely with heterosexual men, many of whom emphatically insisted upon their heterosexual identity even when engaging (strictly delimited) same-sex sexual practices (2009, 151). Why then does Anderson not consider the importance of heterosexuality to cultural definitions of masculinity? Why is this not given any further analysis or critical interpretation?

Reviewers of *Inclusive masculinity* have raised similar points. In a review for this journal, Wayne Martino (2011) asks why Anderson doesn’t consider how these kinds of sexual ‘transgressions’ actually serve as a way of demonstrating masculinity. Writing in the *Journal of Men’s Studies*, Elizabeth Nagel presses further, questioning why Anderson doesn’t relate these practices to the privileged position of his research subjects: “It is arguable that this privilege is exactly what enables these men to engage in homoerotic,

homosexual, and effeminate behaviours with impunity" (2010, 2). For Anderson, however, "trying to distinguish the privileged from the marginalized ... is an increasingly difficult task" (2009, 159). It is not that Anderson overlooks the regulatory force of heterosexuality and heteronormativity in social constructions of masculinity; rather, he argues that: "Heterosexism is an independent and unrelated variable for the operation of inclusive masculinities" (2009, 98). In this way, Anderson foregoes any consideration of the gendered power relations of heterosexuality, despite evidence that sexual access to women's bodies continues to play a key role in the organisation of masculine subjectivities and men's practices (Pascoe 2007; Richardson 2010).

Recognising that "inclusive masculinity theory does not examine the mechanisms through which heterosexual identities are maintained" (2012, 89), Mark McCormack introduces the concept of 'heterosexual recuperation' to explain the ways in which young men maintain a heterosexual identity without recourse to homophobia, here again conceived as the 'primary' mechanism of heterosexual boundary maintenance. Heterosexual recuperation operates by two key mechanisms: conquestal recuperation, understood as boasting about heterosexual desires and conquests, and ironic recuperation, described as the satirical proclamation of same-sex desire or gay identity (2012, 90). McCormack is, however, at pains to demonstrate that the use of heterosexual recuperation is limited and that conquestal recuperation is not linked to sexism or misogyny, stating: "When conquestal recuperation is used, it does not occur alongside overt forms of misogyny" (2012, 92). Of course, the very notion of 'conquestal' would seem to denote a relationship of (male) dominance and (female) subordination, but this goes uninterrogated. Research which finds that these kinds of discursive strategies do contribute to misogynistic attitudes and practices is dismissed by McCormack on the grounds that "this research occurred in homohysterical cultures" (2012, 96); in this way, McCormack relegates earlier feminist research to an irrelevant 'past' and conveniently ignores more recent feminist work in this area (see Ringrose, 2012). Perhaps recognising that his analysis fails entirely to consider the experiences of the girls and women who are drawn into these strategies of heterosexual recuperation, McCormack concludes with the rather blithe assertion: "further research is required to assess the impact of conquestal recuperation on girls in school cultures" (2012, 96).

I am a feminist, but...

While affirming that their work is, indeed, feminist, Anderson and McCormack both make repeated use of disclaimers. In a permutation of the familiar postfeminist phrasing, this is almost as if to say: "I am a feminist, but ...". Exemplifying this tendency, McCormack concludes his introduction by stating that although his work "could be read as a critique of the feminist sociology of gender and education ... Such an interpretation would be a profound error" (2012, xxix). He continues: "I am firmly located within feminist ideals and politics. Rather, I suggest that we need to recognise social change where it occurs, and I argue that feminist research on sexuality, gender and schooling needs to be historically located and contextualised with respect to the social demographics of the participants, their geographical location, and the broader cultural context" (2012, xxix). Leaving aside the implication that

feminist research fails to adequately address (or even recognize) social change, the contention that feminist scholarship needs to be 'historically located' seems to suggest that feminist scholarship is always already 'past'. Through recourse to this kind of temporal logic, McCormack excuses himself from having to do the necessary intellectual work of engaging with or critiquing feminist scholarship and – critically – avoids having to directly come out against or refute feminism. I am again struck by the convenience of this argument, and its distinctly postfeminist quality: the disarticulation of feminism is achieved not through renunciation, but through incorporation; this is to say, the disarticulation of feminism requires, first, that 'feminism' be articulated.

Finally, I want to point to some of the pre-emptive strategies employed by Anderson to foreclose criticism of inclusive masculinity theory. Acknowledging that "some may have difficulty in trusting that today's youth are rapidly shaking off the masculinist orthodox burden of their forefathers" and "others may think I am overly stating the data, or being overly optimistic about what is occurring" (2009, 160), Anderson contends that his findings are "somewhat immediately verifiable" simply by observing young men:

One can easily see how today men are permitted to carry one-shouldered bags. One can easily see the sexualisation of men's bodies in advertising. One can see the increasing demands that men dress sharp. One can see that items, colours, and behaviours once heavily associated with the purchasing power of women, have been marketed to men (2009, 160).

This is a superficial analysis in the most literal sense; Anderson is arguing that simply by looking at young men it is possible to see that they are now more 'inclusive'. Sorely lacking here is any critical analysis as Anderson takes it for granted that because young men look different, they must somehow be different, and that this difference is necessarily a good thing (for a counterpoint to this view, see Bridges forthcoming). Moreover, Anderson does not consider the new forms of regulation and exclusion these shifts involve, or the financial interests at stake in more closely involving men in consumer capitalism. All of this is left to the side as Anderson thrills: "I am delighted to see that men's clothing have consumed once-feminized styles as fashionable: The adoption of pink, cardigan sweaters, skinny jeans and one-shouldered bags. I am delighted that men can now use facial moisturizers and other skin care products" (2009, 157). The defiant, celebratory tone Anderson invokes seems to echo the triumphant voice with which postfeminism reclaims all that feminism has disallowed. It is, really, as if 'postfeminism has come true' (Gill & Donaghue 2013) – and not just for the girls!

In a closing defence of inclusive masculinity theory, Anderson proclaims: "On too many occasions academics sit in their ivory towers proclaiming what is or is not happening from a distance. We are stamped with a version of youth's social world from which we experienced, and we add to this what research traditionally reports in order to calibrate our understandings of sex and gender. Accordingly, we look for data to confirm our view, this is something known as confirmation bias" (2009, 160). While employing an inclusive 'we', this statement nevertheless seems to invoke a "grammar of individualism" (Gill 2007, 259) as Anderson makes clear that if scholars do not or cannot replicate his findings, this is down to some personal

failing on their behalf. Placing responsibility on scholars as individuals, Anderson effects a distinctly neoliberal, postfeminist injunction.

IV. Critical masculinity studies

Inclusive masculinity theory centres on the belief that profound shifts in the social landscape, most particularly the decline of cultural homophobia, have led to the development of more 'inclusive' forms of masculinity among young men in the Anglo-American context. For Anderson, the primary proponent of this view, the extent of social change is such that contemporary masculinities cannot be understood within the framework of hegemonic masculinity theory, and new ways of theorising are required. This construction enables Anderson to locate himself at the forefront of a new, more hopeful and optimistic era in masculinity studies – an epistemic shift that has been welcomed with a palpable sense of relief by a number of masculinity scholars, not to mention the popular press. What seems to have been overlooked, however, are the ways in which inclusive masculinity theory both reflects and reproduces a postfeminist logic in which sexual politics is consigned to the past.

In certain respects, however, this is not surprising, given that masculinity studies scholars generally have failed to take up the analysis of postfeminism. Indeed, it is a struggle to identify any work within this field that examines postfeminism as a social and cultural context that shapes masculinity formations, relations and practices.^{xi} Within this journal, for example, a literature search for 'postfeminism' or 'postfeminist' turns up only a couple of results; when the search is restricted to abstracts, zero results are returned.^{xii} The lack of discussion about postfeminism within masculinity studies suggests a continuing selective engagement with feminist scholarship, and raises further questions about the political orientation of the field. In neglecting to engage the analysis of postfeminism, masculinity scholars fail to address how men are implicated in what many feminist scholars regard as the remaking of gender and sexual inequality in new and ever more insidious forms. This general disregard, taken alongside the emergence of work like Anderson's, which actively compounds the logic of postfeminism, prompts me to ask: whither critical masculinity studies?

In a paper now recognised as foundational to the field of masculinity studies, Carrigan, Connell and Lee contend: "the political meaning of writing about masculinity turns mainly on its treatment of power" (1985, 552). I argue that the analysis of postfeminism currently represents an acute endeavour for critical masculinity scholarship, precisely because postfeminism effects the erasure of sexual politics; under postfeminism, "sexual politics is presented as irrelevant" (McRobbie 2009, 90). To interrogate postfeminism, to take it as an object of analysis, is to ensure that an appreciation of gendered power relations is held central in theorisations of men and masculinities, social change and contemporary culture. How then can such a project be taken forward?

I do not presume to know in advance what form masculinity studies scholars' engagements with postfeminism may take, nor do I suggest that scholars must fully agree with the understanding of postfeminism discussed here. Nonetheless, I want to propose some questions that might provide a basis for thinking about men and postfeminism. To begin, masculinity scholars might ask: how are men located in postfeminist culture, and how do

these locations differ by virtue or race, class, sexuality and age? How do men respond to and interact with postfeminist representations, discourses and practices? We could further consider: how does the social and cultural context of postfeminism impact masculine subjectivities and men's practices? How are men negotiating the changing dynamics of gender and sexuality elaborated under postfeminism? And, if we understand postfeminism as a site for the retrenchment of gender and sexual inequality, then what role might men have in this? In what ways is the postfeminist context conducive to the reinstatement of gender inequalities, and how do men participate in this? How is the understanding that feminism has been 'taken into account' employed as an authorising discourse? Can the logic of postfeminism be mobilised by men to (re)secure male power and privilege?

To address questions such as these is to approach the study of men and masculinities in ways that foreground rather than evade the analysis of contemporary sexual politics. In doing so, it is necessary to challenge discourses of easy optimism and instead pursue more complicated narratives that recognise change alongside continuity, permutation as well as retrenchment. Where the analysis of postfeminism becomes an imperative of masculinity studies and scholars begin to interrogate the ways in which men and masculinities are imbricated with and implicated in postfeminism, inclusive masculinity theory may be recognised not as advancing the field, but as ceding a critical political imperative.

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ⁱ My thinking in this regard is shaped by Clare Hemmings' landmark work on the political grammar of feminist theory (2011). Positing that academic knowledge practices are shared rather than individual, Hemmings attributes quotes not to authors but to journal publications. In doing so, she emphasizes that arrangements of academic publishing (peer review and editorial systems) are such that academic work is not simply the product of individual authors but emerges in and through existing disciplinary structures. Viewed from this perspective, Anderson's work can be understood as both reflecting and inflecting wider attitudes and accepted conventions within masculinity studies and it is for this reason that I situate my analysis of inclusive masculinity theory within a wider discussion of men and masculinities scholarship.

ⁱⁱ Owing to space constraints, I cannot provide references to all of this literature here. A list of Anderson's academic work is available at his website: <http://www.ericandersonphd.com/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Here I refer primarily to the context of British masculinities scholarship, which is heavily imbricated to North American and Australian masculinities scholarship; however, inclusive masculinity theory is unlikely to find support beyond the privileged domain of the global North.

iv Figures updated 21 October 2013.

v Though unacknowledged by McCormack, this title seems to mark out a continuity with William Julius Wilson's controversial work *The declining significance of race* (1978).

vi Again, space does not allow me to document the full extent of this material here. Readers may refer to the authors' websites, as above and: <http://markmccormackphd.com/>.

vii The 'newsworthy' character of inclusive masculinity theory bears commenting on, particularly in relation to the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF). Flouting public presumptions that gender scholarship is invariably 'critical' and 'negative', the work of Anderson and McCormack has a popular appeal that at times verges on populism (for example, Anderson's condemnation of academics in their 'ivory towers' (2009, 160)). Under the REF – a decidedly neoliberal injunction – media exposure is heavily incentivized and scholars are encouraged to produce work that is media-friendly. While there is much to be said for a system that recognizes academics' engagements outside the university (such as the activist work many feminist and anti-racist scholars have pursued for years without recognition or reward), a concern with 'output' and 'impact' as measured through media exposure can have the effect of rewarding scholarship that is ideologically appealing rather than intellectually rigorous.

viii This heading borrows from Beatrix Campbell's essay 'A feminist sexual politics: Now you see it, now you don't' (1980).

ix It is important to foreground that feminist object-relations theory itself is not at issue here. Rather, it is the propensity of masculinity scholars to invoke this perspective specifically to explain gender inequality and male domination. In this formulation, any consideration of how men might actively seek to perpetuate gender and sexual inequality is evacuated. As Arthur Brittan contends, a feminist object-relations perspective enables masculinity scholars to suggest that "if mothering [is] to blame for male domination then, in the final analysis, men are blameless" (Brittan 1989, 195, cited in McMahan 1999, 187).

x In sharp contrast to his contention that sociological work on masculinity undertaken in the past twenty years is no longer relevant, Anderson makes extensive use of experimental psychology research from the 1950s and 1970s; this disparity seems to imply that while sociality is mutable and changes over time, psychology is in some way fixed and unchanging.

xi Notably, what scholarship is available on masculinities and postfeminism is primarily being undertaken by feminist cultural studies scholars. See for example the edited collection *Postfeminism and contemporary Hollywood cinema* (Gwynne & Muller forthcoming).

xii Results updated 21 October 2013.