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## **Men, Masculinities and the Conundrum of ‘Gex’: An Interview with Jeff Hearn by Helle Rydstrom**

**This is an extended text from an interview conducted with Jeff Hearn in connection with his inauguration as Honorary Doctor at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Lund University in May 2016.**

### **Prelude**

Already in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Jeff Hearn was developing Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities together with R.W. [now Raewyn] Connell (1979, 1983) and scholars such as Tim Carrigan, Connell, and John Lee (1985), Michael Kimmel (1987), Keith Pringle (1995), Michael Kimmel and Michael Messner (1998), and Bob Pease (2000). Over the years, Jeff has critically explored the ways in which gender, sexuality, violence, labour, organizations, and institutions take shape locally and globally onto the backdrop of political change. He is currently working on several research projects, including those on transversal dialogues;<sup>1</sup> the EU project GenPORT, the portal project on gender in science, technology and innovation;<sup>2</sup> the ERC Transrights on transgender rights,<sup>3</sup> and the WeAll project on the Future of Work.<sup>4</sup> Recent books are *Men of the World* (2015), *Men’s Stories for a Change* (Barber et al. 2016), published collectively from a 13-year memory work group of older men who have been involved in various profeminist and related activities; *Revenge Pornography*, with Matthew Hall (Hall and Hearn, 2018); and *Engaging Youth in Activist Research and Pedagogical Praxis: Transnational Perspectives on Gender, Sex, and Race* (2018), co-edited with Tamara Shefer, Kopano Ratele and Floretta Boonzaier, based on collaboration between Finland and South Africa. Two further books are in early stages: a collection, provisionally titled, *The Unsustainable Institutions of Men*, with Ernesto Vasquez del Aguila and Marina (Blagojević) Hughson, and an authored book with his long-time collaborator over 40 years, Wendy Parkin, on ageing and organizations. He has also recently been involved in the large global collaborative International Panel on Social Progress (IPSP) project, ‘Rethinking Society for the 21st Century’,<sup>5</sup> due to report at the end of 2017.

## Introduction

**Helle Rydstrom (HR):** Jeff Hearn, this interview was motivated by you being granted the title Honorary Doctor, *doctor honoris causa*, at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Lund University in the Spring of 2016. While revolving around men's role, position, and status in society, your research does not exclusively focus on masculinity. Rather, you have emphasized the importance of linking masculinity studies with a feminist critique of patriarchy. In recent publications you have critically reconsidered the Gramsci inspired notion of hegemonic masculinity launched by R.W. Connell (1979/1983) by arguing that "men are far more hegemonic than masculinity" (Hearn 2004; 2015:16). You and your colleagues have pointed out the necessity of examining "the double complexity that men are both a social category formed by the gender system and collective and individual agents, often dominant agents, of social practices" (Hearn 2004:59). In your work, you seem to strive to bridge the gap between abstract analysis and policy making to improve equality and ensure the right to live a life without being abused to paraphrase Martha Nussbaum (2000). Could you explain about the driving forces behind your devotedness to engage with the analytical and political field of men and masculinity studies?

**Jeff Hearn (JH):** There are several ways of responding to that, but to put it directly I am driven by politics and political change, feminisms, sexuality movements, some profeminism. I am also driven by some experiences from my class background in London, at the centre of empire, and witnessing some terrible material inequalities, there, as well as growing up early quite a lot in a world of girls and women. These have stayed very strongly with me. I feel really strongly about social issues. I see gender as a class-type relation, hence the hegemony of men, of both actors and of the social category, in which it's good to ask, how do things look from the other sides.

This reminds me of when I used to teach social policy, over many years, at Bradford University in the United Kingdom, for a long time. I was teaching about social issues such as poverty, health and housing, and of course to know about that you need to know about some numbers as well. Numbers are always wrong, we know that, all statistics are wrong, for example, the United Nations Development Fund (UNDP) or violence statistics, but the numbers tell us something about living conditions. To be uninterested in quantitative research I think is presumptuous, even analytically foolish, in playing down the impact of material context.

There's one other thing I should comment on: I think it's important to see critical studies on men and masculinities, at least the studies I align with, as part of, not separate from, feminist work. The Swedish researcher, Marie Nordberg, who very sadly died quite recently, and I planned an article where we only cited feminist women writing on men and masculinities; there is a long and different history of women writing critically on men and masculinities<sup>6</sup> that gives a different story. For me, the work of Mary O'Brien, Christine Delphy and Catharine MacKinnon<sup>7</sup> was foundational in studying men and masculinities, along with postcolonial feminists and many more ...

**HR:** You mentioned about quantitative data which, regardless of lack of precision, can provide a broad overview of a particular societal problem such as men's violence against women—which by the way has been estimated to 35 percent on a world scale, according to the World Health Organization (WHO 2017). Ignoring the magnitude of a problem like men's violence against women in intimate relations means to miss an important dimension which can inform qualitative analysis.

**JH:** Exactly. It is dangerous, can easily become very condescending to ignore quantitative figures; this is becoming more and more obvious in mainstream politics too, in the 'post-fact' world. I mean if people have little money, if people hardly have an earning due to unemployment or other reasons, that is part of their material situation. It is central to know about their situation. I have noticed in some research contexts, not where we are right now at Lund University, there is little or no interest whatsoever in quantitative issues and statistics. I think it is important to know about many dimensions and forms of research, including conversation analysis and discourse analysis, for example, but that is not the whole story, you need to know about many various approaches. For instance, to reduce violence or pornography to only text and discourse is dangerous, if that means ignoring the production and consequences of violence or pornography, including for those involved in making it.

### **Swedish Gender Studies**

**HR:** If taking a broader look at the Swedish gender studies landscape, how would you characterize the qualities of various schools and traditions?

**JH:** The profiles are very different for the gender institutes in Sweden, at various universities, for example, at Örebro, Lund, Karlstad, Linköping, Umeå, Uppsala, partly in terms of how they relate to pre-existing disciplines, and partly in their invoking of interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity or postdisciplinarity, and what is actually represented in those kinds of words. I think the place of what I would call social science is absolutely central, and at the same time I would also agree on the importance of cross-disciplinary work of various kinds, but you still need to relate it to the larger picture. For myself, I have **found interdisciplinarity**, transdisciplinarity, and postdisciplinarity to be very important in cross-national research projects, for example, the EU CROME [Critical Research on men in Europe] project in the early 2000s.<sup>8</sup> The project looked at the social problem and societal problematization of men and masculinities, and it included feminists and profeminists, both social scientists and humanities scholars, such as Irina Novikova, who is an expert in, amongst other things, literature and film, and Elżbieta Oleksy, whose special expertise is US film. The mix was very important; among other things this cross-national work showed the limitations of Anglophone literature and concepts on men and masculinities, as has work further afield in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere.

### **The ‘Usefulness’ of Research**

**HR:** In your mind, should research—in search of a better word—be ‘useful’? By the word ‘useful’, I am thinking of the translation of abstract analysis into various kinds of policy-related initiatives taken on the ground, for instance, by agencies, civil society organizations, and activist dedicated to increase social justice and create a more just world.

**JH:** In a way that is a driving force, but I am not sure about the word ‘useful’ because of the current neoliberal political climate and research discourse; in the UK ‘useful’ has become a matter of demonstrating impact; the word useful has become devalued. But academia in general—and not only gender studies—is political. This includes research which is not related to humans directly. I mean if you look at astrophysics, which I know nothing about, it is still political. It is still a political issue whether you should choose **to fund** one telescope over another. The priorities about the instruments and about the funding priorities are political. The political aspect of academia is absolutely central, and of knowledge production in general.

This is not a straightforward process. There are different agendas, I wouldn’t dare to say what the overall agenda is for gender studies, but there are short agendas and long agendas for

research, to borrow Cynthia Cockburn's (1989) phrase. You might have a fairly limited agenda for a particular project to find out about x or y to gather some data and interview some people about that which you report and try to make sense of. But there might be a longer term agenda of the research, well beyond policy, which is totally transcending immediate findings and maybe even recasting, perhaps dismissing, the whole problem studied, the simultaneous processes of naming and deconstruction.

**HR:** Even though you as a scholar might have your own political agenda and vision concerning equality and social justice, you need to make an effort to stay as unbiased as possible when collecting data. You need to be able to operate at various levels simultaneously. For example, conducting anthropological fieldwork involves staying for an extended period of time in a particular context in which you are confronted with a spectrum of practices, some of which you might find alarming. Interviewing perpetrators of violence, I think, is a case in point regarding the conflicting emotions which data collection might provoke. For the fieldworker, an urgent question even concerns when to interfere, but that is of course another discussion (see e.g. Davies and Spencer 2010).

**JH:** Yes, if you are interviewing someone I think you need to apply two brains, for instance when you are interviewing men who have used violence; you need to be really in the moment and not disrespect the man, whatever he has done, and take what he says seriously, though he might well say many things you totally disagree with. So then you need to have another brain over here which somehow is looking at things differently, and very critically. I think that research involves this kind of doubleness, or troubleness, at any time. So the political aspect, or the usefulness, of research is not straightforward. I would be in favour of funding which is not focused on what seems to be or is generally defined as immediate usefulness, such as what is gender, which is a really difficult question, perhaps an impossible question to answer; such funding could be very useful also in the longer term for a just world.

As I've got older I've more interested in the future, though studying and working earlier in Planning was also about the future. There is developing a big tension around what are the long-term ambitions for gender or gender relations. I think that tension is gradually becoming more intense, and it is about to what extent gender power relations in the longer term are about more equality, or more fairness, or more justice between the different current categories of people or whether it is about what you might call getting rid of or moving beyond gender.

I am talking about a long term perspective here. You can see the possibilities of a post-gender society in maybe 20 years from now; there are definite signs. So usefulness could be directed towards such questions as well as issues such as stopping violence. There is no doubt a fundamental political dimension to such questions.

### **(New) Materialism**

**HR:** In *A Realist Theory of Science* (2008), Roy Bhaskar concludes that “things exist and act independently of our descriptions, but we can only know them under particular descriptions. Descriptions belong to the world of society and of men [sic]; objects belong to the world of nature. We express [our understanding of] nature in thought. Science, then, is the systematic attempt to express” (Bhaskar 2008:241-242). Such arguments have inspired the wave of ‘New Materialism’ which we see in current gender studies (e.g. Barad 2007; Braidotti 2002; Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012; Gunnarsson 2013). What are your thoughts on ‘New Materialism’ and how does materialism relate to the notion of gex; a notion which you recently have coined (Hearn 2012b, 2013)?

**JH:** I am not so concerned with the use of the specific term, ‘New Materialism’; from my point of view, materialism has never gone away. This is all still very provisional, but I see this idea of ‘gex’ very much in the context of materialism, as referring to the body definitely and labour and economy; we don’t discuss the economy enough which seems rather strange to me, and nature and environment not enough too which are all obviously material, and in some senses independent of human’s descriptions; back to my early background in Geography. This is talking about both humans and non-humans, and the range of material phenomena; and that way of looking at things is also for me quite clearly linked to what can be called as a shorthand a queer way of looking at things where you don’t take for granted the categories of analysis.

I think one of the implications of debates around ‘New Materialism’ is that it is quite possible to accept that, with the multiplicities of living and non-living, there are very different theories that, do I dare to say, are true, or relevant, but may be contradictory, at the same time paradoxically. Of course, paradox is an old old theme. The idea of women’s experience, or men’s, or male or female, or various trans experiences, might be relevant at least to understand what is going on in some situations. So the notion that some kinds of experience are linked to certain categories, such as females and males, seems accurate, if you wish, but I



don't see that in an essentialist way. Both things, first, what you can call performativity, and, then, what I might refer to as body-based experience and practice, can be true at the same time, as can different, differing theories be true. This also relates to transversal dialogues.

**HR:** I would like to connect the dots between 'New Materialism' and the notion gex even further. I find the concept intriguing because it seems to hold power to merge the notions of gender and sex; the social and biological. Vicki Kirby (2011) has argued that for the sake of the argument Second Wave feminism conflated the female body with biologism to insert a stable *a priori* category which could be resisted, combatted, and eventually outwitted. Constructivism has offered critical and efficient means for feminism by which essentialism's misogyny, racism, and homophobia could be fought (e.g. Ortner 1974; Rubin 1975; Weedon 1987; Young 1999). Criticizing the Beauvoirian legacy, in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) Judith Butler has argued that rather than being prior to intelligibility the notion of sex has a history as yet another socio-cultural construction. In this sense, the notion of sex comes to address similar analytical concerns as does the notion of gender, namely, socio-cultural, political, and economic constructions of bodies. In Butler's work, sex is absorbed by gender and the analytical attention directed towards the performativity of the body (Butler 1989, 1990, 1993, 2004). The body as a material foundation beyond performativity, though, is somewhat circumvented in Butler's optic. Could the notion of gex offer a conceptual integration of physiology and constructivism to eschew a Cartesian dichotomy?

**JH:** The materiality of body and gex, it is really still a very uncertain notion, but it feels like a really good idea to me. I haven't written very much on it, except for a few bits, for example, on the body. It is a term that I have been thinking about and working on, slowly, for a few years now. I think slow research is a good idea.<sup>9</sup> Gex is intended as an attempt to avoid prioritizing either sex or gender. It comes from being dissatisfied with both terms; I know you have written that both terms have their limitations (Rydstrom 2002, 2003). For a long time, it has seemed to me that both terms were flawed. They do not seem to fit exactly the realities, of material experience; so in that sense I see gex as an empirical notion.

Because in the 1960s, the sex and gender debate was really important, and then there has been the critique of gender as well, as the notion of gender has not necessarily been solving problems, but introducing new ones. Liz Bondi (1998), the social geographer, wrote a very good piece in which she was critical of gender as a concept, as it is not necessarily more

liberatory than sex as an essentialism. It was a very interesting chapter, I liked that argument. To put this another way, the concept and construction of gender is not necessarily radical, its conceptualization and construction can easily become part of the maintenance of inequalities, as an inequality in itself. And there has been queer critique, and transgender critique, but not neatly sequentially. In English the notion of gex works well; it combines the words neatly. It just happens to be so. This might not be so in other languages. In Swedish, gex would work differently, beyond *genus* and *kön* (meaning something similar but different from sex), and in Finnish it is different too, a language with no gendered pronouns and the word, *sukupuoli*, that embraces aspects of both sex and gender, albeit heteronormatively. This is perhaps an Anglo attempt to just talk about a certain kind of complexity.

I suppose that what I am trying to say is that the relationship between what is called in English sex and gender and sexuality has been *specified*, whether it is by biologicistic or whether it is performative, sometimes in very complicated ways and sometimes paradoxically in somewhat absolutist ways, which is ironic, I mean it is really ironic. And then we have the Butlerian (1990, 1993) notion of gender, or at least her earlier work, arguing that what we call sex is also part of gender constructions, and the materiality of sex is part of discourse, so you are never outside discourse. Butler appears to address different problematics at different times, as might be expected, but her analysis can be seen as somewhat prescriptive in analyzing gender. I am actually a bit dubious about approaches that are based on specifying and specifying what gender is, in a way that might aspire to cut across culture and history, rather than being sociologically founded.

To me, the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality, or for instance men, male, or masculine, and sexuality, is much less clear cut. They are not necessarily equivalents to each other, they are non-equivalents. When we think that way, the mixing, and even confusion, of what is a sex and what is a gender is such that I prefer to talk of gender/sex, or simply the umbrella category of 'gex'. Some people talk about sex-gender system (e.g. Rubin 1975), others talk about gender/sex (e.g. Lykke 2010a), but that still retains this binary, so to me the concept of 'gex' is useful, in English at least, because it says one could talk about different variations within this umbrella. The notion of gex is a shorthand for non-integrated non-equivalences. It is a very open concept. I want to take seriously the complex, historical and non-hierarchical intersections of gender, sex and sexuality. What I want to write about is: how is it possible for the gexual system, to arise historically?

In some ways this is all in keeping with the history of materialism, of course in large part from Marxism and also feminism and critical race theory; to me these things are closely connected. I can say going back a long time to the 1970s, I always thought that Marxism, feminism and ethnomethodology were very closely connected as well because they are all about the nature of everyday reality of doing; even though ethnomethodology has followed a linguistic tradition, it is about the same thing, I am interested in how these apparently different traditions or trajectories actually are about the same thing.

**HR:** Your critique of binary oppositions does not encourage you to integrate the categories of sex and gender into one concept; gex as an alternative to Butler's inclusion of sex into gender?

**JH:** I don't want to integrate the categories or merge them, they may not be equivalent; sex and gender may not be in a direct relation to each other, and also may not be the most salient concepts for the realms of body experience and body power and body politics. I want to have a category that allows you to talk about the different possible ways these things either are connected or disconnected, it is like an umbrella term. I don't want to merge them. Or rather, merging is one possibility. But sex and gender are not necessarily equivalent.

I think my very provisional attempts to develop the notion of gex might link to a more anthropological way of looking at these issues; it is a matter of not taking for granted the division between sex and gender and sexuality, the way it appears to be set out. I think here of anthropological texts, such as Anna Meigs' (1990) work, on how in some societies gender/sex appears to change partly with ageing. In contrast, even in some very critical texts, you get very definitive descriptions actually, of 'this is sex', 'this is gender' and very specific 'diagnosis', so to speak, of the relationship between sex and gender and the critique of that in some 'post' texts, which is a kind of a paradox. The gex perspective is a way of trying to look at all of this a bit differently, but after all I am not really sure about it. But it is worth trying and it also is linked to language. It might not work that well in other languages.

**HR:** The volume edited by Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna (1978), I think, offers an early illustration of what you are referring to, while the studies of Anne Fausto-Sterling (e.g. 2016) and Jack Halberstam (e.g. 2012) provide more recent examples of the incongruence

between the categories sex, gender, sexuality, masculinity, and femininity. In regard to the fluidity of the categories, I am curious to hear your thoughts on what we might gain analytically and materially by engaging with the notion of gex. To me, it seems that gex as a notion rejects falling into biological essentialism while at the same time insisting on physiology as a realist foundation configured under the frame of socio-cultural, political, and economic structures. For example, in regard to physical violence, the body is a very palpable reality upon which harm is inflicted. This body cannot be reduced neither to sex nor gender analytically or concretely.

**JH:** Yes, I agree about the non-reduction, and I see what you are raising, but I have never really thought of the notion of gex as a merging. I was coming from a non-essentialist angle. I wasn't making the assumption that the notions could be merging, I thought of it more like a fragmentation, as I have discussed in the piece on the body in the *Routledge Handbook of Body Studies*.<sup>10</sup> Here I was assuming a non-essentialist approach.

And yes it might be good to look at it in relation to violence specifically. It makes me think that in some situations of violence, making a separation of sex and gender could be very, very difficult experientially for both women and men. It also reminds me of the category sexual violence, as discussed by Sue Wise and Liz Stanley (Wise and Stanley 1984; see also Stanley and Wise 1983), how could I put this, sexual violence isn't only actions that involve penetration, something could be experienced as sexual violence such as a push in the street, so we could make a distinction between 'sexual sexual violence' and the more generic term 'sexual violence'. So the separation of these things may get difficult experientially, or meaning wise. It could be interesting to use violence as a test case; violence is often a good test of theory. To me, gex is like an umbrella idea to see the ways in which these other concepts are linked to each other. This is as far as I got. But I think, to look at this in terms of different kinds of violence could be quite interesting to do, which I haven't done yet properly I am afraid.<sup>11</sup>

**HR:** For the study of physical and gendered violence, could gexual be applied as a notion to capture human corporeality rather than its sexed and gendered dimensions?

**JH:** Possibly, but it is not one unified notion.

**HR:** Why would you then want to integrate gender and sex into one notion?

**JH:** I don't want to integrate sex and gender. But yeah, why do I need a word for this realm of happenings and experiences? Maybe to talk about the different ways in which these elements are either related to each other or totally irrelevant. You do not need to start from the assumption that there is this sex and this gender. You could start from gex and then look at different possibilities about how this works.

**HR:** So gex cannot help us to eschew the Cartesian distinction between sex and gender; the dichotomy between biological sex and social sex?

**JH:** I think that may be the wrong question; I don't want to say that gender and sex are the same, no I don't want to say that.

**HR:** Would you prefer to keep the dichotomy between sex and gender for analytical purposes?

**JH:** No, I do not want to keep the binary there. I want to look at the many possibilities. I want to imagine that you might not need this binary, at least not in all situations.

**HR:** I see. Should gex rather be understood as a prism through which specific sexing and gendering instances and moments are projected?

**JH:** Yes, but it is still making the assumption that you would want to use the terms gender and sex. I don't want to begin from that assumption that sex is part of gender actually, you are pushing me more than I would like in being precise on this.

**HR:** Sorry, I just find the gex idea fascinating as a notion which could make more sophisticated our analytical tools and enhance current debates in feminist and gender studies as well as critical studies of men and masculinities and maybe even inspire policy development on the ground.

**JH:** But that is all right, but more than what I have really thought through. The common way is to think of gender and sex. I don't want to begin from there, certainly not empirically, from

the assumption that there is sex and gender. I think there is a need for something which is more open-ended, non-decidable, undecidable, partly because people don't want to identify in certain binary ways, and not just queer people, so called, but also certain further identifications, movements, which are happening online. Virtuality and the impact of ICTs have major long-term implications for constructions of gender/sex/gex. Specifying what exactly is sex online and gender online is certainly often difficult, as for example, in online sexual sexual violence. It is quite hard to say is this sex or gender construction, I just want to have a word to thinking about all this.

### **Gex, an Open-Ended Notion**

**HR:** Is your goal by launching the notion of gex to grasp conceptual fuzziness? Is gex in your understanding a notion which implies an inherently open-ended analytical process composed of a range of independent yet interacting categories including genders, sexes, sexualities, races/ethnicities, ages, **able-bodiedness**, and classes (see e.g. Kulick and Rydström 2015)?

**JH:** Yes, non-equivalence is what I keep talking about, but merging is certainly one possibility. To use the expressions gender and sex as they usually are used, well you have the binary of sex and gender, and putting sex before gender, which is problematic. Then sex as part of gender, as gendered. Also one can problematize the gendering of sex [drawing various sex-gender combinations on paper]. Try to begin somewhere else it might be helpful. As we discussed, the example of violence, as we talked about, would be interesting. I have to write an article on this particular notion. I have written three or four things.<sup>12</sup> I need to try to write about this a bit more. I have been planning this for a long time. A few scholars have shown interest in it, interestingly some non-Anglo scholars, for example, in Turkey.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps we could think about it in this way: First, we have merging as one possibility, then fragmentation as another, third separation, and another is the non-applicability of gender at all; this is a bit similar to the masculinity discussion. Some people would use masculinity as only linked to males or to men, some people specifically don't do that in not connecting female masculinity to biology, and then there is a third position where people argue against binaries, regardless of how people determine or present themselves as feminine or masculine.<sup>14</sup> Most of what Connell writes links masculinities to men. Not all, but most of it, though, there are little bits in the 2005 *Gender and Society* article with Messerschmidt that refer to the possibility of hegemonic masculinity being taken up women. I guess this could be

thought of in terms of powerful women who might take up a hegemonic masculinity. So we could talk about several different positions, merging, fragmentation, non-binary, non-applicable.

### **Gexing Studies on Men and Masculinities**

**HR:** Your efforts to develop an alternative notion, gex, then relates rather directly to a critical dialogue in which you are engaged with current research on men and masculinities?

**JH:** Yes, perhaps I should say that the motivation for thinking about and developing this concept of gex comes from practice and trying to change men and masculinities, and the category of men in a deep structural way, to go beyond the comfort, complicity and category of 'men', what I've sometimes referred to as the abolition of 'men'.<sup>15</sup> And so when I urge a focus on men, which you mentioned at the beginning, this is to deconstruct men as with any other social form, and not to accept men as a fixed category. This has led to some misinterpretations of what I've been trying to say, by the hegemony of men, as if I think men are fixed; I actually think the opposite. I do think that there are rather even very stable gender-class or gex-class type relations, but they are in relation to or tension with gender/gex as not fixed. This is itself linked to a more general sociology of superordinates, the rich, white people, metropolises, centre, or superordinate studies. Male, men, masculinities, and masculine are not at all the same. Specifically, I see a broad trend in feminist and related critical debates recognizing that male, men, masculinities, and masculine are better seen as non-equivalences. I have long argued that to analyze masculinities without paying attention to the power of men within societal, often patriarchal, relations is a mistake, even though masculinities are not necessarily linked to men. I see a key task as recognizing and naming men, the social category of men, and at the same time problematizing, deconstructing, the category of men, taking it apart.

**HR:** Feminist and gender studies have been drawing profoundly on the part of Butler's work which has been inspired by Michel Foucault's unravelling of the powers of discourses (e.g. 1978) and less on her recent work on conflict, war, and violence (Butler 2004, 2009) including the politics of vulnerability (Butler et al. 2016). In regard to global and postcolonial studies, the ways in which parameters such as genders/sexes, masculinities, femininities, sexualities, ethnicities/races, ages, classes, and 'etc.' dynamically engage with one another to condition injustice, misrecognition, impunity, and the sidestepping of rights for specific

groups I find urgent and pertinent to address, as Butler has done in her dialogues with and reading of amongst others Giorgio Agamben (1998, 2005),<sup>16</sup> Talal Assad (1996),<sup>17</sup> Achille Mbembe (2003), and Saba Mahmood (2005).<sup>18</sup> What do you make of the emphasis on discourse and representation, which has dominated feminist and gender studies for decades?

**JH:** I will try and respond to some of what you raise, especially last point, in relation to men and masculinities. First, the impact of discourse and discursive approaches has clearly been tremendous, and I have used them myself in a variety of ways. And this is a vital part of the critique of men and masculinities. But I am concerned about attempts to see all as discourse, and especially so if discourse is not seen materially or even as material. I recall an interview with Raewyn Connell (1988) who spoke of this in terms of how while the category of gender is constituted in discourse, it is not constituted only in discourse, as gender relations also involve much more that is not only discourse, material inequality, violence, markets, and so on. It's partly for this reason that I've argued for materialist-discursive analysis for rather a long time, which seemed a bit strange at first, but much less so now.<sup>19</sup>

Important, I have become very concerned about the danger of focusing on masculinity, singular, or indeed plural, out of context, sometimes seen just as a matter of local, loosely agentic performance in the broad sense. I do think that the focus overly on the specific element of performativity, or perhaps discursive performativity, as only one particular part of Butler's very extensive writing, rather than other major parts, has in some respects taken some scholars back to micro-sociological and identity approaches that have been popular, and then seen as limited, in sociology a long while ago. I do think it is odd that that one element has been prioritized by some analysts above all her other insights, as well as sometimes being interpreted as just meaning 'performing' or 'doing performance', which performativity doesn't simply mean, but of course maybe I'm wrong. I do agree that some of the more globally-orientated themes are very important indeed.

There are two further issues here: one is the question of the broader societal context, what is simply called social structure; the other is the relation, the contingent relation, of masculinity and masculinities to men. On the first I do think it is a bit cheeky, even bourgeois, to deny social structure. If you've ever studied poverty, or the wage relation, or educational attainment or class mobility, you soon know about social structure – that which cannot all be seen or known directly. That's also where critical realism comes in. In the early formulations



of masculinities theory, including hegemonic masculinity, by Connell and colleagues,<sup>20</sup> there was a clear location of such masculinities in relation to men and gender relations within, contextualized by and usually reproducing the wider societal gender order, as a shorthand, patriarchy, along with a Gramscian framing of contested dynamic shifting political practice.

The second point about the connection of masculinity and men is a bit more complicated. Masculinity makes social sense *in relation to* men, and also males, but this is a contingent, not an absolute, relation. If masculinity is understood as free floating, just performed, and not in relation to something anchored in the gender system, the gender order, then the association with power and gender power is easily lost. However, as this is not an absolute relation, but a contingent relational relation of difference, there is not an equivalence between male sex, men, and masculinity. These terms are in relation to each other, but are not equivalents. That is why I think there is a need for a category of gex that refers to *different* associations of sex, gender and also sexuality. This fits with a range of contemporary developments which suggest different post-poststructuralist or post-constructionist<sup>21</sup> understandings of men/males/masculinities and bodies, both material and discursive.

### **Gex and Intersectionality?**

**HR:** It sounds as if you are interested in unfolding the analytical contingencies which inform the configuration of those born as men, those who identify as men, masculinities, and maleness in regard to *any body*. Could gex be seen as an analytical notion which simultaneously embraces and expands an intersectionality approach? On the one hand, recognizing the intersectionality legacy of, amongst others, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1993), Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), Paulina de los Reyes and Diana Mulinari (2005) and, on the other, centring the analysis on men, maleness, and masculinity? Gex might in this sense offer an analytical tool to identify the spaces and horizons of a rhizomatic network, to borrow an image from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2002); these demarcations truncate agency but are even escapable due to the fragility of and fissures in the network. Your ambition with gex seems to be to develop a concept by which the volatility of entanglements can be identified? Could you exemplify how the notion could be applied and might contribute new insights? And how do you see this as linking to other debates around gender?

**JH:** It's interesting you bring in the language of rhizomes and entanglements. I've found some uses of that kind of language a bit vague. I guess some things can be seen that way; it all

depends what questions you are interested in. If you're interested in intersectional identity construction maybe rhizomic entanglement is a useful framing; if you're concerned with do wars kill people perhaps less so. More specifically, the notion of gex might be useful around transgender studies, as the strict division of sex and gender can then become difficult in some processes of confirmation. Actually I see this debate of trying to move beyond sex and gender as very much part of the concerns of Second Wave feminism. I don't think Second Wave feminism only prioritized gender, as some retrospective accounts suggest.<sup>22</sup> Some people identifying with or as gay, lesbian or queer, in their broadest senses, were trans, in its broad meanings, that is included transvestites, transsexuals, transgender people. That was certainly the case with the GLF, radical fairies, anti-sexist men's movement, and so on. These issues have been very much part of my concerns throughout my engagement with what can now be called critical studies on men and masculinities from the late 1970s. They were part of the backdrop to the landmark Carrigan, Connell, and Lee article that was published in 1985, but was circulating in earlier drafts from about 1983. That work was influenced by Tim Carrigan's doctoral work on different theories and tendencies in gay liberation.

In all of this, I was especially influenced in thinking on the problem of words and concepts by Mike Brake, who was a very important colleague to me when I joined Bradford University in 1974, and who sadly died prematurely. His paper, 'I may be a queer, but at least I am a man' (1976) charted some of these various gender/sexual personal-political, and indeed performative, positionings, and struck an important chord. When I started teaching masters students in Social and Community Work Studies on men and masculinities initially, I think, in 1984, and then the following year also Masters students in Women's Studies (Applied), I usually began with the question "What is a man?" I think it's a good question to ask, the answer is not so simple. It forces engagement with issues of intersex and transgender immediately. I often used the *Vogue* film that begins with the Madonna track in teaching, as a way of engaging with sex, gender, sexuality, race, class, and location, amongst other intersections directly, including visually, before I knew it was being used and analyzed elsewhere by Butler and others.

This discussion on gex also links to patriarchy, which seems to be coming back in favour a bit as a concept, with realization that it never went away; it's helpful as a notion because it makes you think of structures outside the individual and immediate interactions. A key question is whether, or to what extent, patriarchy relies on female and male bodies, which is a bit of a

futuristic notion; and it might not be the case. It seems to me that there are some possibilities of what you might call patriarchal relations being continued without male bodies. This also fits with shifts between what Judith Lorber (2005) calls resistance feminism and rebellion feminism. I see the uncertain relation, and perhaps tension, between feminism based on resistance to patriarchy, on one hand, and rebellion feminism that is resistant to given gender categories, as very important: naming and deconstructing at the same time.

As you know, I've written, in *Men of the World* (2015) and elsewhere, about transnational patriarchies, which I find is a quite helpful term to raise both the extension of patriarchies beyond borders, and this problematization of patriarchies as not necessarily linked directly at least to male bodies. Moving beyond national, societal and cultural contexts has, for me, been prompted by immersion in various transnational researches and projects over recent years. This also follows a long interest in imperialism, colonialism and postcolonialism. In the British context, you cannot get away with not being involved in those things. Partly through this empirical work, I have found it useful to see gender hegemony in terms of not just patriarchy but transnationally, as transnational patriarchies, or transpatriarchies for short. This talks simultaneously about patriarchies, intersectionalities, and transnationalizations, the structural tendency and individualized propensity for men's transnational gender domination, as non-determined structures, forces and processes, not totalizing unity. It's for this reason that a move from intersectionalities towards transsectionalities, as relations of relations of social categories, rather than just their mutual constitution, may be worthwhile.

### **Globalization, Ontology, and Epistemology**

**HR:** The Department of Gender Studies at Lund University has a global profile, as you know, so transnational patriarchy reminds me of the work of Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large* (1996) and Aihwa Ong's *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (1999). While Appadurai has proposed an alternative way of thinking about the ways in which deterritorialization, global flows, and, what he by drawing on Benedict Anderson (2006) has referred to as, imagined worlds or communities generate various kinds of 'scapes', Ong has stressed the significance of situating transnational processes in cultural practices to grasp the specificities of the shaping of global networks in the local. Are your studies of transpatriarchies, intersectionalizations, and transnationalizations in any sense inspired by Appadurai and Ong and other globalization/transnationalism studies?

**JH:** I would say, yes, in a rather roundabout way, rather than directly in terms of initial reading off from them. It is more that I am inspired by a whole wave of postcolonial thinkers and activists, from Fanon to Said to Spivak, and how there is a need to decentre the centres, centres of various kinds, the need to deconstruct what can be called the global North, as a shorthand. I became more strongly interested in transnational flows and processes from around the mid-1990s, as a coming together of globalization and postcolonialism, and Appadurai and Ong are very helpful for that, along with many others, to take one example, Carla Freeman (2001).

**HR:** Speaking about Appadurai and Ong inspires me to reconnect to our discussion of epistemology and ontology which is intertwined with a postcolonial critique. With Butler's (1990, 1993) unmasking the dichotomous axiom underpinning de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1974 [1949]) at a time when James Clifford and George Marcus (1986) in *Writing Culture* inspired by Foucault called for critical investigations of the "discursive aspects of cultural representations" (Clifford and Marcus 1986:13) epistemological and discursive concerns came to dominate the scholarly paradigm. Postcolonial scholars' increased questioning of a Western epistemic dominance as put forward by, for instance, Lila Abu-Lughod (1991); Homi Bhabha (1994); Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2014); Saba Mahmood (2005); Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003); Kirin Narayan (1993); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988, 2016); and Trinh Minh-Ha (1989) has fuelled an 'Ontological Turn' in anthropology and generated attention to ontological matters in the social sciences more widely. By thinking ontology rather than epistemology, Global South perspectives—in all their varieties—on being and becoming contest a pervasive epistemological paradigm concerned with representation. What are your thoughts on the current debates on discourses, epistemology, and ontology?

**JH:** I've already said a bit about discourse, so I won't repeat. Postcolonial, or decolonizing approaches, are absolutely crucial here; personally this goes back a long way. In my undergraduate degree I focused a lot on African political geography and political history. I realised then what has come to be called the massive colonial abyss, whether people and more, land, live or lived at all, that cannot be bridged so easily; there is some parallel with men and feminism; there is always a gap; or an abyss to use Santos's (2014) term. The turn to ontology is partly about decolonizing, and vice versa. In terms of ontology, I prefer a sociological approach, even if one transformed by these profound fissures;<sup>23</sup> I do not see epistemology and ontology as disconnected, but then neither are they the same. To know

about ontology, does one not need an epistemology or two? I am sympathetic to some current critics of correlationism, not surprisingly if you have studied geology. It's interesting that Quentin Meillassoux is the son of the anthropologist Claude Meillassoux, whose work I admired, along with the feminist sociologists and anthropologists, such as Maureen Mackintosh (1977), Felicity Edholm, Olivia Harris and Kate Young (Edholm et al. 1977; Harris and Young 1981), around reproduction and patriarchy in the 70s and 80s.

More specifically, I **favour** some form of historicism, and that is to say that we should not take for granted what people say, out of historical context whether it is directed to ontology or epistemology. For instance, to use a specific example, in regard to the study of violence, if a man says I hit her so much because I love her so much, you cannot believe that as the whole story as a scholar. The simultaneity of language, or discourse, and materiality is very important here; as I intimated earlier, I see ethnomethodology and materialist feminism as very closely overlapping, and this brings us back to language but not in a micro, or identity-based, sense, but in a more structural way. The resort to culture to explain all has a lot to answer for, politically, even with the superb work of many cultural theorists and cultural studies more generally, and the power of culture. I really like Susan Wright's (1998) view of culture as the power define what culture is. Subsuming gender and gender power relations within culture and cultural formations, or even reducing gender to cultural gender identity is problematic (see Moi 2015).

As mentioned, I'm very inspired by much postcolonial theory and scholarship, including how that body of work problematizes the privileged, whether it is addressed to, for example, global capitalism, development or indigenous knowledge. This goes back to the critical studies of superordinates. I recently read the book, *Heartsick for Country* (Morgan **et al. 2008**), by indigenous teachers and academics in Australia, and I was struck on much of the collection involved the bringing together different genres of writing, sometimes about stories their grandparents had told, sometimes about the land and ancestors, sometimes more on contemporary political struggles or academic analysis – somehow ontological knowledge, simultaneity of discourse and materiality. I think writing together with and across genres can be very good way to do ontology and epistemology differently.

## **The Materialities and Rhetorics of Crisis**

**HR:** I agree. Interdisciplinarity across borders and boundaries is important and a perspective which I see as evident in regard to our initiative ‘Critical Explorations of Crisis’ which I am coordinating and in which you and other of our colleagues are involved (Rydstrom 2014).<sup>24</sup> Hopefully, we will be able to unfold the dimensions and ramifications of crisis as a political strategy, an ideology, a materiality, and as a lived experience. By using gender and masculinity as analytical lenses, we might be able to produce novel knowledge about the asymmetrical ways in which the discourses and realities of crisis operate in regard to first, politics of crisis, definitions, and priorities; second, experiences of harms, ruins, and destruction; and third, coping strategies, agency, and resilience (see e.g. Stoler 2013; Vigh 2008).<sup>25</sup> It is inspiring how the crisis perspective connects to participants’ research including my own on violences, insecurities, and precariousness (e.g. Rydstrom 2012, 2015, 2016, in press and Datta and Rydstrom, forth.). For instance, in a current research project on ‘Climate Disasters and Gendered Violence in Asia’ we focus on the violences imbued in physical and societal disruption caused by catastrophes.<sup>26</sup>

**JH:** The question of crisis is very important, especially now. Not only does crisis, whether more personal or more societal, show up power structures that are often partially or fully submerged, it also brings into sharp focus both real material desperate crises, and “crisis talk” (Hearn and Roberts 1976): the rhetorics of crisis, which may be deployed for all sorts of regressive, sometimes progressive, purposes. Sometimes crisis is only apparent retrospectively.

As it happens, crisis figured strongly in my earliest publishing – partly inspired by the recurring theme of crisis under capitalism, as in the 1970s crises of the state, welfare state and public sector cutbacks, and partly through the emerging crisis of changing, fragmenting and gendered relations to work, employment and career in the same period (Hearn 1977, 1981), that might now be called intersectionality. In one sense, the first was more macro but was examined in terms of micro logics of policy people, and in a way the second more micro but was placed in the context of gendered societal change around work.

Of course, crisis has been part of political economy analysis for a very long time, but perhaps less clearly articulated in gender analysis, though Connell (1995) outlined ‘crisis tendencies’ within the gender order of patriarchy, mirroring to an extent Jürgen Habermas’s (1976) analyses of the contradictions of capitalism. One problem with some engagements with

gender or gendered crisis has been the problematic concept of “the crisis of masculinity”, which is only accurate in a vague sense – and has sometimes been used to re-establish the gender order or been overstated as part of media concerns with **some** men’s uncertainties.

**HR:** Many thanks Jeff for a fascinating conversation, unfortunately we have to end here.

**JH:** Many thanks to you too, it has been very interesting to talk with you about all of this.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.genderportal.eu/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://transrightseurope.com/>

<sup>4</sup> ‘Social and Economic Sustainability of Future Working Life: Policies, (In)Equalities and Intersectionalities in Finland’, funded by the Academy of Finland Strategic Research, with Marjut Jyrkinen, Director, and Jukka Lehtonen (both Helsinki University), Anna-Maija Lämsä (Jyväskylä University), and Charlotta Niemistö (Hanken School of Economics).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ipsp.org/>

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Hanmer 1990, citing 56 feminist publications “providing the ideas, the changed consciousness of women’s lives and their relationship to men – all available by 1975.”

<sup>7</sup> See O’Brien 1981, 1990; Delphy 1977, 1984; MacKinnon 1982, 1983.

<sup>8</sup> CROME was an umbrella for the EU FP5 Thematic Network, The European Research Network on Men in Europe, ‘The Social Problem of Men: the Social Problem and Societal Problematization of Men and Masculinities’, that was funded 2000-2003, coordinated by Keith Pringle (Sunderland University), with Ursula Müller (Bielefeld University), Elżbieta Oleksy (Łódź University), and myself (Hanken School of Economics) as Principal Investigators.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Jackson 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Hearn 2012b.

<sup>11</sup> JH: In this and many other arenas, I see the need to develop analyses that are both more materialist and more discursive (Hearn 2012c); this is certainly so in working on violence, where discourse can be part of and lead to life and death.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Hearn 2011a, 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Burr 2015; and in Turkey, Akşit and Varışli 2014, 2015, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> See Hearn 1996 for an early critique of some interpretations of masculinity/ies.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Hearn 2004, 2012a, 2015; see also Wittig 1992.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s07xFdD-ivQ>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWfgpQ4-2J8>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySu0HYfx2VY>

<sup>19</sup> See Hearn 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Connell 1979, 1983, 1995; Carrigan et al. 1985.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Johnson 1987; Hearn 1998, 2012a; Lykke 2010b.

<sup>22</sup> JH: Another example here is how what is now called intersectionality suffused Second Wave feminism, at least in the circles I moved in. It is quite easy to relate masculinities theory directly to what is now called intersectionality. See, for example, Christensen and Larsen 2008; Hearn 2011b; Christensen and Jensen 2014.

<sup>23</sup> See, the recent issue of *Sociology* (Bhambra and Santos 2017).

<sup>24</sup> After the interview was conducted, the ‘Critical Explorations of Crisis’ initiative was granted funding from the Sandblom fund to organize a Symposium and more recently selected to become an Advanced Study Group at the Pufendorf Institute. Besides Helle Rydstrom and Jeff Hearn, the core group consists of Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen, Mo Hamza, Vasna Ramazar, and Annika Bergman Rosamond. This group refers to a larger national and international network of scholars.

<sup>25</sup> HR: Crisis is a perspective which is broad in scope. Conceptually, socio-politically, and phenomenologically, we study crisis as referring to wars, conflicts, catastrophes, violences, migration, and global health as shaped in regard to genders, masculinities, races/ethnicities, sexualities, ages, bodyableness, and classes globally and in particular contexts.

<sup>26</sup> Project title: ‘Climate Disasters and Gendered Violence in Asia: A Study on the Vulnerability and (In)Security of Women and Girls in the Aftermath of Recent Catastrophes in Pakistan, the Philippines, and Vietnam’ (funded by Vetenskapsrådet) Helle Rydstrom is

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coordinating the project in which Catarina Kinnvall and Huong Nguyen (both at Lund University) also are involved.