
Not long ago a colleague emailed me for some advice. An article manuscript she had sent to a journal had come back with the editorial suggestion that she incorporate an analysis of masculinities into her work. Knowing that I had written on the subject, she asked me to direct her to the basic works in the field, hoping for a one-stop solution to satisfy her assessors. My response to her query satisfied neither of us. Well, there isn’t any, I fumbled, at least not in the way you’re thinking about it. While the critical study of masculinities evolved in the wake of the women’s movement in the 1970s, it has always been examined from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. If some social scientists identify their work as contributing to “men’s studies,” their approach to men and masculinities often differs, conceptually and methodologically, from that adopted by the many humanities scholars who have also gravitated to this topic. Moreover, each of these approaches differs considerably from the reductive and essentializing claims made by evolutionary psychologists, sociobiologists, and religious fundamentalists, many of whom express little interest in how society, politics, and culture also shape masculinities.2 What one critic predicted a decade ago – that “masculinity studies” is “a critical school fast approaching the status of a discipline” – has simply not taken place.3 It was thus impossible for me to provide the “quick fix” my colleague was seeking.

Since the study of men and masculinities in the English-speaking world is nearly as diverse and complex as the subjects it examines, this chapter does not provide a quick fix either. My aims are rather more modest. After outlining some of the main conceptual developments that have shaped scholarship on men and masculinities since the 1970s, I present a broad overview of how scholars in the humanities and social sciences – especially historians – have engaged with these topics. In addition to examining how researchers have probed the relationship between masculinities and “the feminine,” I confront ongoing scholarly debates about a “crisis of masculinity” and continuities in male behavior over time and across national boundaries.

**Conceptualizing Masculinities**
Speaking in general terms, the critical study of men and masculinities may be characterized by two broad theoretical approaches. According to Chris Haywood and Máirtín Mac an
Ghaill, the difference between these approaches may be described as a tension between “materialist and poststructuralist critiques of gender identity formation.” Scholars who subscribe to a “materialist” model identify more or less stable social and institutional bases for the promotion of normative masculinities, while those espousing “poststructuralist” theories are more concerned with teasing out the ambiguities, instabilities, and contradictions in the articulation of such norms. When taken together these conceptual models may provide a rich and complementary way of approaching “the material, cultural, and psychic practices and constraints that produce formations of masculinity” and some studies propose to do just that. In practice, however, the tension between “materialist” and post-structuralist perspectives is loosely mapped onto a division between the social sciences and humanities that often hinders dialogue across the disciplines.

Early critiques of male domination emerged from the decidedly “materialist” theories of “patriarchy” popularized by second-wave feminists in the 1970s. From this perspective a need to dominate women was viewed as being deeply ingrained in maleness itself, with patriarchy identified as the transhistorical expression of an essential male compulsion operating through economic, political and social structures. Marxist feminists more fully developed this model by emphasizing how under capitalism men dominated both industrial production and female reproduction. “Men and masculinity were defined as a unified force of oppression,” the Portuguese gender theorist Sofia Aboim explains, exercising dominance over women through the independent yet mutually complicit systems of capitalism and patriarchy. Although subsequent scholars would develop more sophisticated theories of patriarchy – and some today call for a rejuvenated version of the concept – many feminists have found this category too reductive to account for the subtleties of gender interaction on a micro level or the ability of many women (as well as men) to struggle against such apparently monolithic power structures. Based on a “juridical” notion of power as embodied in formal social and political structures, the theory of patriarchy subsumed the fluidity and instability that one often encounters among masculinities into a monolithic argument about men and structures of male domination. “Masculinity” was thus reduced to the “fact” of male domination itself, which trumped most attempts to argue for complexity and nuances in actual male behavior.

A more sophisticated engagement with masculinities emerged out of the critique of sex-role theory that American psychologists had developed since the 1930s as a way of understanding normative male and female behavior. Further refined through the 1950s and 60s and enhanced by new scholarship emphasizing a distinction between biological sex and
“gender,” sex-role theory came in for serious criticism during the 1970s, not only by feminists but also by a number of men, some of whom were connected with the “men’s liberation” movement. Patriarchy, these men claimed, was detrimental to males as well as females. According to the psychologist Joseph H. Pleck the typical male sex role was especially unrealistic, placing strain on boys who were expected to manifest physical strength, sexual prowess, and power. To illustrate this point Pleck posited a historical shift in American ideas about masculinity: if in the past “traditional” masculinity demanded displays of physical strength, aggression and impulsiveness, since the 1950s a “modern” form of masculinity emphasized the need for self-control and economic achievement. Instead of a deceptively stable “male sex role identity,” then, Pleck emphasized tension, contradiction, and anxiety in the formation of masculine identity, and charged psychology itself with reinforcing normative ideals that were out of step with modern realities.

In the late 1970s Pleck sought a non-normative sex role theory that left room for gender non-conformity, but by then the limitations of sex role theory had become obvious to many, not least because of its inability to account for power. Beginning in the early 1980s the Australian sociologist R.W. (Robert William, now Raewyn) Connell developed a way of theorizing diversity among masculinities that went beyond sex role theory while remaining firmly connected to the concept of patriarchy. In his most influential statement on the subject Connell defined “masculinity” as “simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality, and culture.” Building upon Antonio Gramsci’s concept of “hegemony” Connell proposed the idea of “hegemonic masculinity” to describe “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.” A certain form of masculinity may become “hegemonic” when there is a “correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power,” but is capable of being undermined if there are changes in the current ways of legitimizing the male domination of women. Thus while hegemonic masculinity refers to a “historically mobile” system of relationships, it is firmly anchored to the overall structure of male-female relationships at any given time. It provides the framework through which men evaluate and relate to each other, generating dominant ideals as well as a range of “subordinate” and “marginal” masculinities that fall short of the standard, as in the case of gay men and men of other races and classes, respectively. Despite the fact that masculinities are more often performed for other men rather than women, patriarchy remains at the heart of
Connell’s concept. Even profeminist men who eschew hegemonic masculinity are “complicit” in patriarchy because they enjoy symbolic and material advantages simply by being male in a world that devalues women, what Connell calls the “patriarchal dividend.”

Extensively employed in the social sciences, the idea of hegemonic masculinity was an important step forward in the critical analysis of men. Unlike the concept of patriarchy, it offered a more nuanced view of a spectrum of competing and hierarchically-organized ways of being masculine. Yet hegemonic masculinity has also been criticized on a number of fronts, notably because it presents the dominant form of masculinity at any given time as a monolithic and homogenous bloc without accounting for internal differences and contradictions. In this respect it ends up replicating the concept of patriarchy. Stephen M. Whitehead concludes that while Connell’s idea remains “a useful shorthand descriptor of dominant masculinities . . . its overuse results in obfuscation [and] in the confusion of fluid masculinities with overarching structure.” Registering similar misgivings, Jeff Hearn suggests that the concept might be more useful if we focus on hegemony rather than masculinity, and proposes that future scholarship should emphasize the power exercised by men in the social world. Hearn thus suggests that the familiar couplet “men and masculinities” can be analytically broken apart.

The analytical disconnection of men and masculinities was more fully developed by proponents of post-structuralism, who challenged the idea of hegemonic masculinity around the same time that the latter was being developed. Beginning in the 1980s scholars from across the English-speaking world adopted and extended a number of theories emerging from France, especially those of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan. This loosely-connected collection of thinkers distanced themselves from the formal analysis of underlying linguistic, semiotic, and cultural “structures” that some perceived as hinging on elemental and universal binary categories, such as distinctions between male/female, black/white, nature/culture, raw/cooked, etc. Producing in Australia/New Zealand, Britain, and the United states what has been variously termed a “linguistic” or “historical” turn in the humanities and social sciences, post-structuralism effected a formidable and controversial transformation of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences. If early work on masculinities emerged from clearly delineated disciplines like sociology, the post-structuralist turn heralded a more pronounced emphasis on transdisciplinary methodologies.

Gender scholars found much that was useful in post-structuralism. In addition to Derrida’s deconstruction of binary oppositions between “male” and “female,” Foucault’s decentered conception of “power” worked well with feminist claims that “the personal is
political,” just as his analysis of “knowledge” as always-already embedded in dispersed (rather than centralized) power relationships strengthened the critique of the scientific truth-claims made about women and homosexuals in variety of scholarly discourses. When viewed through a post-structuralist lens the 1970s understanding of “gender” as a set of socially-created scripts overlaying a more or less stable biological “sex” emerged as naïve and reductive. For the very influential feminist theorist Judith Butler not even the apparently stable foundation of “sex” could be said to stand outside of gender; rather “perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.” Rather gender is conceptualized as a “performative” act, a “doing” that brings about the “masculine” or “feminine” identity it supposedly expresses. But this is accomplished only in partial, incoherent, and incomplete ways, not least because gender performances can never fully convey the ideals contained in the “scripts.” If in academic parlance “gender” now functions more like a verb than a noun, the term has so fully eclipsed “sex” in English-speaking contexts – both within and outside the academy – that it even contains some of the substantive qualities hitherto assigned to “sex.” Indeed, gender has now become so divorced from “material” social and biological determinants that some have theorized masculinities without men, as Judith Halberstam famously did in her work on “female masculinity.”

Post-structuralism has fundamentally and controversially altered the humanities and social sciences in English-speaking countries, notably in Britain and the United States. Connell’s own engagement with post-structuralism acknowledged its usefulness for thinking about the interrelatedness of symbols in a semiotic network, but registered concern about its seeming neglect of relationships based on production and consumption and localized in institutions and natural environments. Without a concrete theory of the social, Connell submits, such theorists act as if “discourse is all we talk about in social analysis” and thus cannot conceptualize “the full range of issues about masculinity.” Yet this assumption that discourse is separate from the material realm misrepresents the thrust of post-structuralism, which literary scholar Todd W. Reeser sees as not so much refuting Connell’s basic idea of a spectrum of masculinities as drawing attention to “the fluidity or the instability of these relations, on the cracks and fissures in these relations, or on the successful and unsuccessful attempts by hegemony to hide itself as dominant.” Rather than rejecting the material realm, post-structuralism insists upon the materializing potential of various discourses. Today more sociologists embrace post-structuralism’s decentered approach to power as part of a “third
wave within the critical study of men/masculinities.” Wishing to avoid sociological reductionism without relinquishing the concept of the social, Haywood and Mac an Ghaill propose that future work should bring together “the categories of social and cultural as mutually constitutive elements, into a productive dialogue.” A recent move in this direction has been made by Sofia Aboim, who proposes that when we speak of “masculinities” we need to remember that plurality does not simply refer to empirically differentiated masculinities. Having taken on board Butler’s notion of gender instability Aboim insists that plurality must be considered “an intrinsic feature of any masculinity. It is its formative and generative principle. Therefore any masculinity is always internally hybrid and is always formed by tension and conflict.” An emphasis on plurality and contradiction represents the current state of play in the field.

**Historicizing Masculinities**

Historians have been at the forefront of scholarly interest in men and masculinities, often developing innovative ways of bringing theoretical analyses to bear on contextual developments. As the discipline itself is often said to straddle the division between the humanities and social sciences, historians who engage with masculinities do so from a wide range of perspectives on both sides of the “materialist”/post-structuralist tension described above. Where some display a greater attachment to “patriarchy” and embrace the concept of hegemonic masculinity, others explore masculinities as more polyvalent and fluid, and generally avoid social scientific models altogether. If at times these variations produce topics and approaches that are diverse to the point of incommensurability, such diversity may simply reflect the richness of the terrain rather signal cause for alarm.

“Materialist” perspectives are especially evident in the early histories of masculinity, which emerged as the claims of male liberationists started to be aired and the women’s movement began its slow alteration of social life. In the 1970s Natalie Davis famously urged women’s historians to “be interested in the history of both women and men,” claiming “that we should not be working only on the subjected sex any more than an historian of class can focus exclusively on peasants.” Yet this invitation was largely ignored as “gender” continued to function as a synonym for women. Around the same time that Pleck was critiquing the male sex role and Connell’s first articles on gender appeared, the social historian Peter N. Stearns published *Be a Man! Males in Modern Society* (1979). Without the luxury of an established body of secondary sources, Stearns worked with existing social histories to sketch changing masculine ideals in Europe and North America since the
industry. Arguing that gender is “a valid, though not exclusive, means of social analysis,” Stearns traced the contemporary “crisis of masculinity” to long-term social structures associated with “the broad process of change associated with industrialization and the rise of cities, and the development of modern society and a modernized outlook from the late eighteenth century to the present.” After describing the general challenges that industrialization posed to traditional forms of masculinity, Stearns outlined broad categories of men who, despite hailing from different national cultures, shared certain general characteristics.

This creation of sociological ideal types provided an important starting point for more focused studies, which is precisely what Stearns had hoped to achieve. In time similar categories would shape early histories of masculinity in America. In the early 1990s E. Anthony Rotundo argued that in the United States traditional “communal” forms of manhood were overshadowed in the early nineteenth century by a new emphasis on the “self-made man,” a bourgeois model that was extended and challenged around 1900 by a more aggressive “passionate manhood.” Rotundo’s basic typology was extended in Michael Kimmel’s *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. Surveying masculinities from the colonial era to the present, Kimmel shows how the aristocratic “Genteel Patriarch” and working-class “Heroic Artisan” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were challenged by the rise of the bourgeois “Marketplace Man” around 1900. A sociologist who just happens to write good history, Kimmel employs the notion of hegemonic masculinity for political as well as methodological reasons. Like John Tosh, who is known for similarly pioneering work on the history of British masculinities, Kimmel maintains that the concept allows scholars to remain firmly connected to the feminist critique of patriarchy. Now in its second edition, Kimmel’s work remains an essential starting point for the historical study of American manhood.

For social historians “gender” was firmly anchored to other social structures and institutions; yet with the rise of post-structuralism many historians became more attuned to the role of discourses in creating gender ideals and identities. This new direction was most clearly articulated by Joan Wallach Scott in her 1986 article on the “usefulness” of gender as a category of historical analysis. Based upon Derrida’s deconstruction of binary oppositions and Foucault’s analyses of dispersed power, the two central propositions of Scott’s definition of “gender” have been taken seriously by many historians: “gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power.” Scott called upon historians to be
attentive to how the language of sexual difference subtly structured a wide range of concepts, relationships, and institutions. By offering a range of new methods and objects of historical study as well as a more sophisticated approach to power, Scott extended the reach of the feminist critique beyond the descriptions of patriarchal oppression and the unearthing of female historical actors that characterized much of women’s history. While not universally appreciated by feminist historians, many of whom felt that a focus on gender distracted attention from the oppression of women, Scott’s intervention helped pave the way for more fluid historical analyses of masculinity.³⁴ In a related vein, historians of sexuality found their work rejuvenated by Foucault’s analysis of knowledge about sexuality in the context of power relations that could not be reduced to formal political and social institutions.³⁵

The impulse to treat male behavior and ideals as tied to shifting historical contexts encouraged historians to map masculinities according to distinct periods. Among historians of American masculinities the first extended meeting of social history and post-structuralism took place in Gail Bederman’s *Manliness & Civilization* (1996), which combined an analysis of the discursive intersection of gender and race with an interest in defining masculinities according to different periods. Bederman shows how in America the term “masculinity” only came into currency around 1900, partly as a reaction against the largely moral connotations of the Victorian notion of “manliness,” which she describes as a middle-class moral ideal stressing politeness, gentility, and religiosity. If in the early 1800s “masculine” was at best a “relatively empty, fluid adjective” that generically differentiated men from women, by the 1930s “‘masculinity’ had developed into the mix of ‘masculine’ ideals more familiar to twentieth-century Americans – ideals like aggressiveness, physical force and male sexuality” that had been hitherto linked to working-class men.³⁶ Thus if the concept of “manliness” defined more genteel, polite, and religious ways of being a man, “masculinity” expressed a more modern fascination with aggression, sexuality, and “primitivity” ideally shared by all males. This, Bederman proposes, is the kind of masculinity that dominates American life in the present.

There is a great deal of truth in the historical changes that Bederman describes, and not just for the study of American history. In the early nineteenth century most Anglophone countries experienced a middle-class emphasis on “godliness and good manners” that gave way to demands for tougher forms of male expression through team sports, “muscular Christianity,” and combat.³⁷ In *A Man’s Place* the historian John Tosh makes broadly similar claims about manhood in Britain, where an early nineteenth-century discourse that sought to define men as breadwinning heads of the household was eventually eclipsed by a fascination
with adventure culminating in a “flight from domesticity” manifested in adventure fiction, colonial engagement, and enlistment in the Great War. Tosh does not link this endorsement of aggressive male styles to a semantic change, but claims that “masculinity” only emerged as a popular term in Britain in the 1970s. Indeed, Tosh accords the concept of “manliness” greater latitude than Bederman, observing that in addition to “godliness and good manners” it also had “bodily associations” including physical robustness, self-defense and readiness for combat, as well as participation in “manly exercises” (like cricket, fox-hunting and rowing) as well as physical bearing and sexual potency. It could even imply participation in boxing and dueling, which, though most often practiced by proletarians and aristocrats, were also described as “manly.” At least in Britain, then, “manliness” was capable of expressing many of the qualities that Bederman attributes to “masculinity.”

Post-structuralism rightly draws our attention to the importance of key words and to their changing meanings over time and in different contexts. Nevertheless there is no reason to insist dogmatically upon semantics. Bederman does not demand that scholars studying earlier periods should eschew “masculinity” as an analytical term and Tosh warns that when it comes to examining male ideals and behavior a narrowly semantic focus “offers no easy answers.” For obvious reasons, scholars working in languages where a single term is used to denote “masculinity” have not engaged with the manliness/masculinity distinction observed in English. In Germany « Männlichkeit » encompasses both “manliness” and “masculinity,” even though there too middle-class male ideals shifted during the nineteenth century from a gentle and quiet Pietism to more aggressive displays around 1900. Although in France « la masculinité » was coined in the seventeenth century, « la virilité » was most often used to describe a variety of male qualities, from the polite and gentlemanly to the sexual and aggressive. Anne-Marie Sohn shows how the latter term could encompass two competing ways of being masculine in the nineteenth century, where she claims that a style of “offensive” manhood founded on courage, honor and violence was gradually eclipsed by one focused more on a refusal of violent confrontation. For a time at the end of the century these « deux regimes de masculinité » uneasily coexisted without requiring a terminological shift.

Semantic distinctions aside, recent histories of Britain and the United States have complicated some of the sweeping changes sketched by Bederman and Tosh. In the same period that Bederman describes a toughening of male ideals the literary scholar Jennifer Travis reveals a growing emphasis on psychological vulnerability and injury, with many men claiming the right to display publicly “masculine” emotion rather than “feminine” sentiment. Similarly Tosh’s description of a wholesale “flight from domesticity” around the
1890s has been qualified by new work showing men’s continuing investment in the home, thus revealing greater subtlety and tension within supposedly unified gender ideals. Just as the umbrella concept of hegemonic masculinity is a useful but ultimately constraining way of addressing behavioral differences within dominant groups, categorical period-based generalizations are also unable to account for inconsistencies and continuities in male behavior. This reflects what Aboim calls the “dubious character of categories, which are both reductionist and necessary, not only for reasons of intelligibility but also for the pursuit of justice through the politics of identity.” In practice as well as in representations, masculinities often prove to be messier than the categories used to contain them.

This cursory engagement with important histories of masculinity illustrates the growing complexity that has accompanied the emergence of men and masculinities as an object of study. What historians have done with “masculinity” since the 1990s has proven quite diverse. In their survey of the British field Karen Harvey and Alexandra Shepard observed numerous divergences among historians, some of whom analyze patriarchal relations between men and women and the intersection of codes of masculinity with class and status, while others probe the subjective experience of being male and how representations of masculinity are bound up with social and political codes. “Not only do these approaches therefore pose different questions,” the authors observe, “but the differences and tensions among these social, psychological, and cultural approaches also produce a range of subjects of historical enquiry that are sometimes incommensurable.” The diversity that Harvey and Shepard observe among British specialists may be found in American historiography as well.

The proliferation of historical studies of masculinity has not been without its detractors. Some feminist criticisms reflect lingering dissatisfaction over the explosion of interest in gender, which many see as eradicating the basis upon which feminist politics stands. From this perspective the study of masculinities threatens to blunt feminism’s political edge by “downplaying men’s power over women” Thus John Tosh has reiterated his call for historians to embrace “hegemonic masculinity,” claiming that the “virtual absence of ‘patriarchy’ from the scholarly lexicon at the present time points to a disconcerting shift away from those deep-set and enduring inequalities between men and women which informed scholarly work in the 1970s and 1980s.” As explained above, however, such monolithic concepts cannot account for the subtleties of gender images, identities, and practices. Rather today most scholars studying men and masculinities are more interested in “deconstructing the masculine/feminine binary in its various forms,” and many would concur with Mrinalini Sinha that “histories of masculinity can be – and, indeed, should be –
more fundamentally about relations of power: a network variously criss-crossed by hierarchies of race, class, caste, gender, and sexuality. It is to this tangled web of discourses and power relations that we now turn.

**Relationality and “the Feminine”**

Despite their differences “materialists” and post-structuralists agree that masculinities must be treated as fundamentally *relational* constructions, and examining how masculinities are articulated across a variety of discourses has been a dominant approach in Anglophone scholarship on gender. While a fundamental differentiation of men and women is obviously crucial, in practice masculinity is more often animated by what Michael Kimmel calls “the ‘idea’ of women, or femininity – and most especially a perception of effeminacy by other men.” Thus when the Australian-born psychologist Lynne Segal explained that the attempt to achieve a “pure” masculinity “depends upon the perpetual renunciation of ‘femininity,’” her understanding of “femininity” includes women and those individuals and groups that are *likened to women*, but also qualities and yearnings that are *culturally encoded* as “feminine” and thus capable of being observed *within a man*: “the capacity for sensitivity to oneself and others, for tenderness and empathy, the reality of fear and weakness, the pleasures of passivity – all, of course, quintessentially ‘feminine.’” The production of masculinities thus entails a two-front struggle to contain, marginalize, or exclude “the feminine” *within* as well as “the feminine” *without*, thus linking the formation and maintenance of male selfhood to wider social structures of control and domination. Because “the feminine” is articulated across a number of other categories of difference, masculinity finds itself implicated in issues of race and class as well as gender and sexuality. Exploring these interarticulations has been of special interest to scholars in the humanities who analyze the relationship between male subjectivity and socio-political structures.

For many men the most intimate sources of the “feminine” lurk within the body itself, which has been typically viewed in the West as the seat of unruly passions and sensual distractions as well as a reminder of vulnerability, animality, and mortality. Anglophone feminist theory has often observed how the Western intellectual tradition marginalizes the body and the passions, erecting a tradition of rationalism that implicitly equates reason with disembodied masculinity. Identifying this tension between a “masculine” mind and a “feminine” body has not only been crucial for feminist epistemology, as in Susan Bordo’s analysis of the “masculinization of thought” in the philosophy of Descartes, but has informed interrogations of the “doctrine of separate spheres” that, by the beginning of the
nineteenth century, promoted the bourgeois male engagement in the public world while seeking to restrict women to the household. Before Carole Pateman showed how social contract theories of politics grounded sexual difference (and female exclusion from the public sphere) in the bedrock of “nature” rather than the vagaries of custom, Jean Bethke Elshtain proposed that this spatial division of the world into “public” and “private” domains was replicated in individual psychologies. Among men this provoked a splitting of the male ego into a “disembodied” moral and rational (public) self and a passionately carnal domestic (private) self. “The problem, then,” Elshtain suggests, “isn’t simply between the sexes but internal to the minds of both sexes, particularly that of the male.” The same “rational” institutions that legitimated the bourgeois male control of women also fractured the male self into warring and potentially irreconcilable parts.

The most controversial and disturbing analysis of this bifurcation of the male psyche was offered by the German scholar Klaus Theweleit, whose two-volume Männerphantasien (1977-78) was translated into English in the late 1980s to become a key text in theoretical analyses of masculinity, especially among scholars of film, literature, and cultural studies. Drawing upon the diverse disciplines of literary studies, history, sociology, and psychology, Theweleit probed the disturbing fantasy world of “fascism” through a close reading of 250 novels and memoirs written in the 1920s by members of the Freikorps, German soldiers who refused to lay down their arms after the armistice of 1918. Rather than reading these texts for that they had to say about Jews, Theweleit examines their statements about women and femininity, both of which stood in a particularly tense relationship with the sanitized “hardness” that defined warrior manhood. Theweleit shows how “the feminine” was fantasmatically located within these men as well as in the social imagination, generating anxious responses to a menacing emotional and sexual “fluidity” that threatened to engulf men from within and from without. The incorporation of Jews and Communists into these fantasies allowed fascist fears of “the feminine” to coalesce around perceived enemies of society: “Fascism, then, waged its battle against human desires by encoding them with a particular set of attributes: with effeminacy, unhealthiness, criminality, Jewishness – all of which existed together under the umbrella of ‘Bolshevism.’” Since many of the things encoded as “feminine” – messiness, penetrability, vulnerability, animality, mortality – are inescapable aspects of human embodiment, the ultimate “other” of such male fantasies may be human existence as such. The fascist fetishization of death seems to support this conclusion, as does continuing male fascination with violence and aggression in other times and places. Theweleit’s refusal to draw sharp distinctions between fascist and non-fascist
masculinities has proven especially provocative, prompting some to propose that potentially fascistic male anxieties continue to circulate in the West, notably in the United States.60

Theweleit sketches a portrait of male subjectivity that, in its most extreme formation, sought to eradicate “the feminine” at all costs, whether it was attributed to dangerous “others” located outside the self or identified with “softness” within men. Although Theweleit says rather little about homosexuality, most scholars agree that gay men are typically identified as the most vivid example of “feminine” males, socially positioned “at the bottom of the gender hierarchy among men”61 while fantasmatically functioning as disavowed aspects of a man’s psyche, producing what Judith Butler sees as an unconscious “melancholic” incorporation of a repudiated object choice that continually haunts heterosexual subjectivity.62 Far from being an historical constant, however, the presumed “effeminacy” of men who love other men has clearly changed over time. Foucault’s analysis of the nineteenth-century distinction between the “sodomite” and the “invert” – whereby a traditional concern with forbidden acts gave way to an emphasis on pathological individuals63 – has led scholars like David Halperin to argue that, strictly speaking, the term “homosexuality” cannot be employed prior to the mid nineteenth century without essentializing a historically specific construction.64 In his important social history *Gay New York* (1994), George Chauncey has shown how in nineteenth-century New York immigrant and working-class men could have sex with other men without fearing being labeled “effeminate” so long as they were the active, insertive partner. The denigration of all male-male sex as “effeminate” did not take place until the first third of the twentieth century, when an anxious middle class tried to bolster its own shaky claims to manhood by separating itself from “fairies.”65 The effeminacy label was vigorously refuted with the appearance of the macho gay “clone” of the 1970s, which manifested a pronounced contempt for “the feminine,” including the marginalization of “soft” gay men. In this way certain attempts to refute the feminizing stereotypes of gay men risked reinforcing dominant images of masculinity, regardless of sexual orientation.66

Representing “feminine” males as congenitally or culturally different from “normal” men has played a central role in structuring Western images of race as well as in legitimating the imperialist project. If Joan Scott turned a Foucauldian analysis of power to the study of gender, the Palestinian-born literary critic Edward W. Said was pivotal in demonstrating how power-knowledge relations were at work in the production of race and empire. Although gender occupied a small place in Said’s work, he observed how Western scholars used gender to frame countries in the “Orient” as supine, sensuous, and “feminine” lands populated by exotic women and “effeminate” men – and thus places to be “ravished and won by the
Orientalist hero.”67 Subsequent research sharpened and extended Said’s intimations of a
gendered view of empire, and if most early studies emphasized the role and representations of
women in colonial contexts, in time more scholars would come to agree with literary scholar
Joanne de Groot that “Manliness and empire confirmed one another, guaranteed one another,
enhanced one another, whether in the practical disciplines of commerce and government or in
the escape zones of writing, travel, and art.”68 Insights like these would help to promote
closer examinations of the intersection of empire with a spectrum of dominant and
marginalized masculinities, in the colonies as well as in the metropole.

The Indian psychologist Ashis Nandy was among the first to describe how the British
consistently feminized their colonial subjects on the subcontinent, arrogating to themselves a
domineering masculinity that belittled the natives and legitimated their governing presence.69
A detailed historical portrait was offered a decade later by Mrinalini Sinha, who showed how
the language of gender was used in colonial India to structure and signify the relationship
between the “manly Englishman” and the “effeminate Bengali.” What was perceived as an
indigenous inability to rise to a British standard rendered the population incapable of
managing its own affairs and thus fit for conquest by stronger races.70 The literary scholar
Revathi Krishnaswamy dubs this a strategy of “effeminism” – “a racialized pathologization
of ‘femininity-in-masculinity’” attributed to colonial peoples that is not such much “wrong”
or “false” as it is “a distorted and misvalued recognition of an alternative ideal of
masculinity.”71 Effeminism could generate a number of effects, compelling some
“effeminate” Indians to engage in gymnastics and bodybuilding to transform themselves into
a “martial race” like their British colonizers.72 The legitimation of racial hierarchies was thus
partly effected through the systematic internalization of effeminacy that in many cases
generated defensive strategies to disprove what colonizers claimed about indigenous
manhood.

A similar strategy of effeminism has been employed outside of colonial contexts.
Drawing upon the cutting-edge work by German feminist historians on masculinity as well as
historian Sander Gilman’s important analyses of race and gender,73 George L. Mosse
explained how the eighteenth-century formation of a “masculine stereotype” based on health,
beauty, strength, and heroic self-sacrifice demanded the parallel identification of a fluid
“countertype” consisting of “outsiders” (especially homosexuals and Jews) who were deemed
weak, diseased, mad, or cowardly.74 Tracing the origins of such gendered anti-Semitic
stereotypes to ancient times, Daniel Boyarin sees in the studious and pacifist rabbi of the
Talmudic tradition “a principled and deliberate refusal and rejection” of the warrior ideals
that have predominated in the West, and a basis for creating an alternative masculinity in the present. Thus the call for the creation of “muscle Jews” around 1900 – which has borne fruit in the militaristically macho state of Israel – may be seen as an explicit rejection of perennial charges of Jewish effeminacy.

A more complex situation has been observed among African-Americans, who have been historically aligned with the polarized extremes of cowardice/weakness or savagery/animality, each of which is capable of being aligned with some version of the “feminine” (whether in the sense of timidity or an irrational lack of self-control). Many black men thus concur with a wider culture which “conceives African American society in terms of a perennial ‘crisis’ of black masculinity whose imagined solution is a proper affirmation of black male authority.” As with the case of proletarian men who use masculinist strategies to overcome their marginal socioeconomic status, the African-American quest for dignity and equal treatment at times reduced the future of the group to the position of males only. As the social activist bell hooks notes, many people of color seem to accept and even perpetuate dehumanizing stereotypes of black men “as a mark of distinction” that gives them an “edge” over the white males who dominate them politically and socioeconomically. By encouraging marginalized males to beat white oppressors at their own (gender) game, the “crisis” of black manhood subtly authorizes a reactivation of male control over women. As the following section discusses, however, the very idea of a “crisis of masculinity” has been a subject of considerable controversy.

“Crises” and Continuities

The notion of “crisis” implies a deviation from a previous state of health and stability as well as a desire for therapeutic measures to restore that earlier condition. Yet a major problem with thinking about a “crisis of masculinity” historically is that there seems to be no stable period prior to the disarray being described at any given moment. Some men wax nostalgic about how much better things supposedly were in the 1950s; yet while white, middle-class men were surely in a position of dominance at that time, historians nevertheless reveal considerable anxieties about manhood during these putatively stable years. Moving further back in time offers no solutions: eruptions of male anxieties about masculinity are evident in the 1930s, 1890s, 1850s, and 1780s. When Peter Stearns observed that “maleness has long been in crisis” he cited the industrial revolution as a watershed between traditional manhood and bourgeois variations. Yet even this cannot be counted as the “origin” of the malaise, for there were also anxieties in Britain stemming from the 1690s. The Middle Ages was no stable
period either, judging from recent scholarship. In fact history reveals a seemingly endless series of “crisis moments” extending back to antiquity, where even the Greeks and Romans complained about how “luxury” threatened to “soften” manhood. Trying to think about gender “crisis” historically is an exercise in nearly infinite regress in which fantasies of past stability are usually dispelled by facts.

Distrusting allegations of male crisis, a number of scholars have inquired into the strategies behind such repeated anxieties about gender disorder. Viewing the rhetoric of “crisis” as a “performative” strategy that seeks to bring about the condition that it merely purports to describe, the literary critic Sally Robinson observes that “the reality of a particular crisis depends less on hard evidence of actual social trauma . . . than on the power of language, of metaphors and images, to convincingly represent that sense of trauma and turning point.” Robinson shows how contemporary American crisis discourse represents white men as having been victimized by the modest gains of women, gays, and people of color since the 1970s, the logic of which positions white men as “wounded” so they may struggle to recover and reassert their privileged status. From this perspective crisis discourse is part of a conservative “backlash” against challenges to white, heterosexual male domination. Yet one may also approach the issue from a sociological rather than discursive perspective. “Is there a crisis of masculinity?” Jeff Hearn and Keith Pringle ask in a recent study, “Or is there a crisis of men in a more fundamental way?” The latter question is crucial for approaching some of the health issues facing men today, where in Europe they suffer from poorer health than women, with lower life expectancy and higher rates of accidents, illness, and suicide. While such problems are more pronounced in certain countries, across the board they typically attract minimal media attention, with most men found to be overoptimistic about the state of their health. No doubt the health problems that many men face stem from issues pertaining to masculinities that promote risk-taking, irresponsibility, substance abuse, and a reluctance to admit vulnerability that would otherwise have them seeking medical help. Similar arguments can be made about the diminishing educational performance of boys and the problem of violent crime. Here it is not “masculinity” per se that is in crisis, but men who are in crisis partly because they adopt certain forms of masculinity.

Whether or not perceptions of gender crisis square with the continuing facts of white male socioeconomic power, the interrogation of “crisis” necessarily raises questions about the continuity of identities and ideals across time and place. Contrary to claims that “traditional” forms of rough manhood gradually yielded to softer “modern” models, recent histories of
British masculinity suggest interplay between continuity and change that does not neatly correspond to conventional divisions between historical periods. According to Harvey and Shepard, historians offer two interrelated views of masculinity over time: “First, there are processes that follow a tidal or cyclical pattern, as in the shifting balance between hard and soft features of masculinity. These processes are embedded within a second, more general pattern of continuity.” Even if rougher forms of masculinity seem to have diminishing usefulness in the “developed” world, following Robinson we might inquire into the function that repeated appeals to physically robust, aggressive, and sexual expressions of masculinity have played in modern times. Rather than being consecutive to one another, as the linear movement from “traditional” to “modern” suggests, models of “hard” and “soft” masculinity are discursively intertwined and dialectically interrelated, with each functioning at various times as the prescribed corrective of the other. This dynamic is evident in a variety of national cultures. Recent work on Russia, for instance, shows how a “tough” masculine style rooted in traditional patterns of behavior (which often privileged drinking and aggression) was repeatedly challenged from the eighteenth century onward by “new” refined forms of manhood partly informed by models emerging from western Europe and formally sanctioned by the Westernizing state. Rather than a single moment of “crisis” the Russian scene reveals “a constant negotiation between official and unofficial, long present and newly emerging models of masculinity.”

This ongoing tension between “hard” and “soft” masculinities is indicative of a broader phenomenon occurring across the West, and the fact that “newly emerging” masculinities are often perceived as corrupting “foreign” imports highlights the transnational factor in the formation of modern masculinities. After all, if the adult male population is often analogically construed as being synonymous with the “nation,” then shifts in prevailing gender practices and ideals necessarily affect how the body politic is perceived. Historians have shown how crises of gender have been readily translated into challenges to the nation itself. In eighteenth-century Britain rough and aggressive forms of masculinity existed in a state of tension with more polite and cultured gentlemanly ideals being promoted in France, making it possible to view “politeness” itself as both effeminate and un-British. A similar anxiety has accompanied past (and present) American anxieties about “Europeanization,” where the adoption of more “civilized” overseas practices risks further diminishing a national manhood built on aggressive military and economic expansion. If masculinity can be said to be in “crisis” it is partly because such claims condense and displace a diverse array of changes taking place, some of which are local and national while others spring from the
border-crossing disruptions of modernity itself. From a scholarly perspective the concept of “crisis” may indeed appear redundant, anachronistic, or ideological, but it is often perceived as real by historical actors. At the moment it is not a concept we can really do without.

**Conclusion**

All of these scholarly developments emerged against a backdrop of growing anxieties about masculinity in the West, notably in the United States, where demands for the rights of women, homosexuals, and people of color seemed to exacerbate the blow to national self-esteem dealt by the Vietnam War. This has generated nostalgic appeals to manhood lost and ongoing anxieties about how a nefarious yet nebulous “feminism” continues to diminish “true” masculinity, a sentiment that has been expressed in a variety of cultures. These form part of the problem that many engaged in the study of men and masculinities seek to understand and, where possible, change for the better. Wherever one stands on the subject of masculinities, Anthony Synnott is probably right to observe that in the present cultural landscape images of men are often simplistically divided into the unsatisfactory categories of “heroes,” “villains,” and “victims.” If the truth no doubt falls somewhere between these labels, at the end of the day the critical study of men and masculinities must be seen as an indispensable extension of the feminist project, a point that has been forcefully made by Sally Robinson: “the reason we study masculinity at all – or, in a different vein, the reason that others mourn the death of ‘true’ masculinity, or seek to recover a lost male essence – is that feminist critiques of masculinity have deeply infiltrated academic and cultural life. . . . The ‘masculinity’ that is lately subject to so much scrutiny is the ground of so much feminist theory that the answer to the question ‘What has masculinity to do with feminism?’ must be, ‘Everything.’ Feminist thinking has created this masculinity that we now study, deconstruct, and work to reconstruct, and this masculinity is anything but invisible.” Such an argument is invaluable for those who seek to change rather than merely interpret the world.
1 I thank Robert Nye and Karen Downing for critiquing an early version of this chapter, and Jean-Jacques Courtine for inviting me to submit it.


26 Aboim, *Plural Masculinities*, p. 3.


29 Stearns, *Be a Man!*, p. 60.


31 Kimmel, *Manhood in America*.


46 Aboim, *Plural Masculinities*, p. 35.


49 John Tosh, « Hegemonic Masculinity and the History of Gender », in Stefan Dudink, Karen Hagemann, and John Tosh (dir.), *Masculinities in Politics and War*: 


52 Kimmel, Manhood in America, p. 5.


61 Connell, Masculinities, p. 78.


64 David Halperin, One Hundred Years of Homosexuality, New York, Routledge, 1990.


74 Mosse, *The Image of Man*.


88 Harvey and Shepard, « What Have Historians Done with Masculinity? », p. 279.


90 Christopher E. Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West: Gender, Civilization, and the Body*, Basingstoke, UK, Palgrave, 2008. Kam Louie demonstrates a broadly similar vacillation in China, where masculinity has traditionally comprised mental and civic qualities of (wen) as well as physical virtues (wu). The difference is that whereas a balance of wu and wen has often been promoted – and in different periods one or the other quality may be more demanded – both are considered equally manly. Louie, *Theorizing Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

91 « It is now common to say that gender « intersects » – better, interacts – with race and class. We might add that it constantly interacts with nationality or position in the world ». 


93 Badinter, *XY*, p. 37.


