

### **The Gun Lobby: Defending Hegemonic Masculinity**

In 1987 a particularly frightening multiple murder by a young man in Melbourne led to a public outcry in Australia against automatic weapons, and guns in general. Opinion polls supported tighter gun control. The new Labor Party premier of the neighbouring state of New South Wales, a machine politician who needed a popular mandate, brought in strict gun control legislation and early the next year went into an election. He was defeated. Conventional wisdom attributed this to a vigorous campaign in support of gun ownership that gained wide support, especially in country areas.

This was the first time Australia had experienced such a campaign. The 'gun lobby' is familiar and powerful in the United States. It has become particularly influential since 1977 when a right-wing mobilization threw out the old leadership of the National Rifle Association and converted it to a mass organization actively promoting the ownership and use of guns. In struggles over gun control legislation the NRA routinely outspent the gun control lobby by ten to one. In a remarkable book, *Warrior Dreams*, William Gibson has traced links between the NRA, the gun industry, and a variety of paranoid groups training in violence and promoting 'New War' myths – articulated in fantasy, but with all too real consequences.<sup>10</sup>

It is a cliché that the gun is a penis-symbol as well as a weapon. Gun organizations are conventionally masculine in cultural style; hunting and gun magazines dress their models in check shirts and boots to emphasize their masculinity. The gun lobby hardly has to labour the inference that politicians trying to take away our guns are emasculating us. At both symbolic and practical levels, the defence of gun ownership is a defence of hegemonic masculinity.

Most of the time, defence of the patriarchal order does not require an explicit masculinity politics. Given that heterosexual men socially selected for hegemonic masculinity run the corporations and the state, the routine maintenance of these institutions will normally do the job. This is the core of the collective project of hegemonic masculinity, and the reason why this project most of the time is not visible as a project. Most of the time masculinity need not be thematized at all. What is brought to attention is national security, or corporate profit, or family values, or true reli-

gion, or individual freedom, or international competitiveness, or economic efficiency, or the advance of science. Through the everyday working of institutions defended in such terms, the dominance of a particular kind of masculinity is achieved.

Yet crisis tendencies in the gender order do emerge, and in response to them hegemonic masculinity is likely to be thematized and a 'gun lobby' type of politics arises. The interplay between routine maintenance and explicit masculinity politics can be followed in different arenas of practice. I will briefly discuss three: masculine violence, the promotion of exemplary masculinities and the management of organizations.

I have already noted the mixture of open violence and low-level harassment involved in straight men's subordination of gay men. It is clear that the men involved in gay-bashing often see themselves as avengers on behalf of society, punishing the betrayers of manhood. Research on domestic violence finds something similar. Husbands who batter wives typically feel that they are exercising a right, maintaining good order in the family and punishing their wives' delinquency – especially wives' failure to keep their proper place (e.g., not doing domestic work to the husband's satisfaction, or answering back).<sup>11</sup>

Violence on the largest possible scale is the purpose of the military; and no arena has been more important for the definition of hegemonic masculinity in European/American culture. The imaginative literature of combat is very clear on this role, from its endorsement in *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) to its terrible refutation in *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929). The figure of the hero is central to the Western cultural imagery of the masculine (a point reinforced by the 'warrior' and 'hero' archetypes in the current wave of neo-Jungian books). Armies have freely drawn on this imagery for purposes of recruitment. 'The United States Army builds MEN', proclaimed a recruiting poster of 1917, showing an Aryan mesomorph simultaneously as athlete, craftsman, crusader and private soldier.

Yet we would be sadly misled if we believed military operations actually work on the basis of crusading heroism. Another document of the same war shows the distance between image and practice. James McCudden, the greatest British air ace with 57 German aircraft shot down, finished an autobiography shortly before his death in 1918. He started with aircraft as a mechanic. His book reveals an intense interest in technical aspects of flying, a

respectful attitude to the Germans, and a cautious, calculative approach to battle. Nothing could be further from the public image of fighter pilots as hyper-masculine knights of the air – the ‘fighter jocks’ of Tom Wolfe’s *The Right Stuff* – an attitude McCudden himself contemptuously dismissed as ‘cavalry tactics in the air’. Yet the patriotic publishers of his book called it *Flying Fury*.

McCudden’s caution was shared by the troops in the trenches below him. A remarkable piece of research by Tony Ashworth has shown that for much of the war, on many parts of the Western Front, the troops operated a ‘live and let live’ system, limiting the actual violence. Tacit agreements with enemy troops, and grassroots social controls, resulted in truces or ritualized aggression that was easily avoided – to the fury of the high command. Paul Fussell’s research on American frontline soldiers in the Second World War confirms the gap between media imagery and the daily reality of boredom and petty tyranny (nicely called ‘chickenshit’ by the troops). For the minority in actual combat the daily reality was extreme fear, chancy outcomes and disgusting deaths – being dismembered by artillery was the commonest way to die. The techniques of industrialized war have almost nothing to do with the conventions of individual heroism.<sup>12</sup>

Yet the imagery of masculine heroism is not *culturally* irrelevant. Something has to glue the army together and keep the men in line, or at least enough in line for the organization to produce its violent effects. Part of the struggle for hegemony in the gender order is the use of culture for such disciplinary purposes: setting standards, claiming popular assent and discrediting those who fall short. The production of exemplary masculinities is thus integral to the politics of hegemonic masculinity.

The importance of exemplary masculinities has probably increased over the last two centuries with the decline of religious legitimations for patriarchy in the West. Some of the major genres of commercial popular culture centre on exemplary masculinities: the pulp Western, the thriller, the sports broadcast (increasingly orchestrated as a spectacle centring on millionaire stars) and the Hollywood movie.

The symbolism of masculinity in these genres is by no means fixed. Joan Mellen, studying American film, traced a narrowing of the emotional range allowed to masculine heroes from early in the century. Hollywood concentrated increasingly on the proof of

masculinity by violence. Mellen's book was published in the late 1970s, just as Stallone and Schwarzenegger were becoming major stars: this trend continued. With the gradually increasing pressure for gender equality, it seems, a market was created for representations of power in the arena men could still claim as distinctively their own, plain violence.

There is a sense, too, in which exemplary masculinity became collectivized. The rise of *Playboy* magazine in the 1950s was a striking example. The readership of this magazine was positioned as a corporate sexual hero, consuming an endless supply of desirable 'girls'. The Playboy corporation managed a double commercialization of this fantasy in 1960 with the opening of the first Playboy Clubs. A readership was converted into a membership, with women employees grotesquely subordinated as 'Bunnies'. The growth of the video pornography industry suggests this collectivization is still going on.<sup>13</sup>

The corporate activity behind media celebrities and the commercialization of sex brings us to the third arena of hegemonic masculinity politics, the management of patriarchal organizations. Institutions do not maintain themselves; someone has to practise power for power effects to occur. Historians provide excellent accounts of this. Chapter 1 mentioned Michael Grossberg's research on the formation of the legal profession in the United States; another example is Michael Roper's analysis of the changing character of masculine authority in British manufacturing companies.

The fact that power relations must be practised allows for divergence in *how* they are practised. Chapter 8 discussed the divergence between masculinity strategies emphasizing command and those emphasizing expertise. This is familiar in business and politics as the conflict between line management and professionals, between hard-liners and liberals, between entrepreneurs and bureaucrats. It appears even in the management of armies, between blood-and-guts generals and technocrats.

Such divergences can make it difficult to see the gender politics involved. There is no Patriarch Headquarters, with flags and limousines, where all the strategies are worked out. It is common for different groups of men, each pursuing a project of hegemonic masculinity, to come into conflict with each other. A classic example is the annual fight between police and bikers at the Bathurst motorcycle races in Australia.<sup>14</sup>

It is important, then, to acknowledge that there is an active defence of hegemonic masculinity and the position of economic, ideological and sexual dominance held by heterosexual men. This defence takes a variety of forms and it often has to yield ground or change tactics. But it has formidable resources, and in recent decades, in the face of historic challenges, has been impressively successful.

The consequences of this defence are not just the slowing down or turning back of gender change, as in the eases of parliamentary representation and the breakdown of guarantees for women in Eastern Europe. The consequences are also found in long-term trends in the institutional order that hegemonic masculinity dominates. These trends include the growing destructiveness of military technology (not least the spread of nuclear weapons), the long-term degradation of the environment and the increase of economic inequality on a world scale. The successful maintenance of a competitive and dominance-oriented masculinity, in the central institutions of the world order, makes each of these trends more dangerous and more difficult to reverse.

### **Gay Liberation**

The main alternative to hegemonic masculinity in recent Western history is homosexual masculinity, and the most explicit political opposition among men was articulated by the Gay Liberation movement.

Most forms of political action by homosexual men over the last hundred years have been wary in style and severely limited in their goals. Magnus Hirschfeld's pioneering Scientific-Humanitarian Committee, set up in 1897, relied heavily on Hirschfeld's status as a doctor and on claims to be advancing a scientific discourse. A second generation, working through organizations such as the Mattachine Society in the United States (1950) and the Homosexual Law Reform Society (1958) in Britain, used discreet lobbying tactics to influence the state. Jeffrey Weeks remarked of the latter that it was 'a classical middle-class single-issue pressure group', marked by caution and a desire for respectability.<sup>15</sup>

These were not the only attempts to pursue a politics of homosexuality, but they were characteristic in their restraint. There was even a trend away from gender issues (most of the late nineteenth-