

# Masculinities and Violence

Richard Collier describes the theories analysing male violence.

It has become a truism that acts of violence are overwhelmingly conducted by men; that men constitute the vast majority of all reported (and unreported) violent offenders; that a criminal justice system dominated by men, from the upper echelons of state bureaucracies to the police and prison service, is marked by cultures of violence which are distinctly masculine; and that, to a large degree, the well-documented public fear of violent crime can itself, in effect, be understood as a fear of men. Male violence, the response of the state to that violence, the fear of violence - each are bound up, inextricably linked, to this pervasive and seemingly ubiquitous sense of the more general 'maleness' of crime itself. The question which has been asked in recent years can be simply put: what does this knowledge tell us about 'crime'? What, importantly, does it tell us about men?

## Accomplishing masculinity

Among academics there has been a belief, at least on the part of criminologists working from within 'a pro-feminist position', that something might be gained by, in Walklate's words, 'gendering the criminal' through questioning the interconnections between masculinities and violence (1995). Accordingly, a number of attempts have been made to explain the violences of men via an engagement with the concept of masculinity and, more recently, masculinities. There exists a rich and diverse library of scholarship

on the topic, the complexity of which it is not possible to do justice to here, but it is possible to identify a number of strands of thought, or approaches, within this work in the way in which it has sought to conceptualise the violences of men.

Influenced notably by the work of Bob Connell, and perhaps encapsulated by the 'structured action theory' of James Messerschmidt (1993), violence has been understood by some writers to be an important resource in what has been termed the situational 'accomplishment' of a masculine gender. Racially motivated crime, rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment and youth delinquency have each been approached as illustrations of men 'doing gender' by accomplishing masculinity, understood as a behavioural response to the

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particular conditions and situations in which we participate. In a similar vein, both interpersonal violence between men and urban disorder have been seen, albeit in different ways, and from markedly different political positions, as examples of violence as a way of 'doing' masculinity within particular social, economic and gendered contexts. Central to this approach has been an attempt to conceptualise social relations in such a way that class, racial, ethnic and generational differences (that is, the diversity of men's lives), might be addressed whilst also recognising a culturally exalted form of masculinity which somehow influences men's actions in such a way as to result in violence.

Notwithstanding the many insights of this work, a number of

concerns have been expressed about attempts to understand violence through the idea of accomplishing masculinity. In this argument the concept of masculinity appears as both a primary and underlying cause (or source) of violence whilst, simultaneously, appearing as something which results from (is 'accomplished through') violence. What also remains unclear is how masculine culture (assuming such a thing exists) impacts on particular men in the way it does. Why do some individuals respond to social situations by engaging in acts of violence, and not others? What is the place of individual biography in such accounts? Is masculinity to explain all of men's violences, from sexual abuse to the pub fight, from the spree killing to consensual (but illegal) sado-masochistic practices? Or is it of analytic use in accounting for just some acts of violence (Collier 1998)? What, ultimately, is the relationship between these diverse 'structured' masculinities? Two recent contributions to the literature on men and violence point towards a rather more complex picture.

## The violences of men

Based on interviews with sixty men who have been violent to women they knew, Jeff Hearn's *The Violences of Men* (1998) presents an exploration of (amongst other things) the rationales deployed by men when accounting for their violence (techniques such as repudiation, justification, excuses and confession). In a similar manner, Dobash et al (2000) have recently sought to engage with 'the primary source of the problem', the men who perpetrate violence, by studying the accounts of men who have experience of court mandated 'abuser' programmes. What emerges from the 'complex, explicit, vivid, tragic' testimonies contained in both these texts are the 'alarming inconsistencies' which can frequently appear in interviews with violent men (Hearn 1998). As has been the case with studies of men in other areas, derived from different disciplines and



perspectives, 'what men say' about masculinity is frequently pervaded by considerable ambivalence, ambiguity and paradox about what it means to be 'masculine'. To make sense of these contradictions and inconsistencies one other strand or approach within the masculinities and violence literature has evolved.

In seeking to theorise men's (gendered) social subjectivities in such a way that a more complex psychosocial account of men's experiences might emerge, Jefferson (1994) has argued for the need to recognise a psychologically complex 'masculine' subject. This is a man for whom the meanings of masculinity cannot be confined to (let us say) any generally oppressive and negative list of traits deemed masculine in a particular cultural context. In seeking to reconfigure the relation between the social and subjectivity, what becomes at issue in this work is the way in which men come to take up certain 'subject positions'. Presented by Jefferson as a 'third stage' of thinking about masculinities and crime, in contrast to the (stage one) singular masculinity and (stage two) masculinities work, this attempt to explore the psychological roots of men's violence has informed a number of engagements with the links between men and violence.

What emerges are the psychological complexities and 'seductions' of violence, understood from a perspective which takes individual life history seriously whilst also recognising that violence is, as Connell suggests, socially structured and mediated in all kinds of ways (not least by class, age, race, sexuality). This work calls, in the end, for a closer relationship between psychoanalysis and social theory which sits uneasily with the sociological bearings of much criminological thought. Yet what it shares with the accomplishing of masculinity thesis is the view that a particular gender(ed) identity might usefully be understood by reference to the concept of 'masculinity' itself.

### From masculine violence to men's violence

Both of the above approaches continue to use the term masculinity or masculinities in their analysis. And yet, Hearn suggests, the notion of 'male' or 'masculine' violence can itself be misleading, for several reasons. In advocating the use, instead, of men's violences he suggests:

First, it is more precise: it attributes the violence to men. Second, it makes it clear that there

is not any assumption of biological inevitability to the violence or a biological cause of violence. Third, it removes the ambiguity that there might be a special form of violence that is 'male', that is only one part of the totality of the violence of men. Fourth, it acknowledges the plurality of men's violences. (Hearn 1998).

### Transformation

There are signs, certainly, and without overstating the argument, that the British government has become, at least in certain respects and contexts, more responsive to the arguments of feminist research and activism that the problem of violence is, in so many ways, a problem of men. In relation to domestic violence, for example, a strategy framework and campaign has been developed to address men's violence towards women (*Living Without Fear*, 1999, Women's Unit/Home Office, London). More generally, a sensitivity to issues of gender informs the ESRC's 'Violence Research Programme' (elsewhere, this edition), whilst a range of interventions for perpetrators of violence have for some time explicitly engaged with the sexed specificity of crime. Ultimately, Dobash et al (2000) suggest, strategies of engaging with men's violence must work, simultaneously, at the levels of personal transformation (for those who use violence and for those who are its victims); as projects of institutional transformation (for example, for organisations that provide assistance to victims of violence or intervene with respect to those who use violence); and as projects of social and cultural transformation (of public orientation to men's violence and their tolerance of it). In relation to each, perhaps, it is open to question whether the term 'masculinity' might in fact conceal as much as it reveals about the violences of men.

A conversation about 'masculinity' and violence only works in a terrain where masculinity has meaning. Yet in many ways it appears increasingly

difficult to define masculinity. Far from thinking of a (male) subject conceived of as passive recipient of (masculine) gender roles or scripts, or as accomplishing a pre-given notion of a masculine gender, it has been suggested that 'tackling material inequalities in the relative position of men and women is more likely to bring about change (through making it possible for women to be independent of abusive partners, or removing men's power over women which makes their continued abuse possible) than attempts to reform men's selves, personalities or identities to make them less likely to choose to abuse women' (MacInnes 1998). This is not to reject psychosocial accounts out of hand; it is, however, to seek to focus on what men do in approaching the violences of men, rather than any seemingly free-floating, abstract problem of men's gender, whether conceived of as masculinity or masculinities. Contemporary understandings of men's violences reproduce some familiar ideologies of normality and criminality, sanity and madness, good and evil, psychopathology and sociopathology, each of which have constituted the norms by which we judge the conduct of ourselves and others. At the same time however, and in so many ways, understandings of the sociality of men's crimes as the actions of men continues to be routinely effaced within dominant political debates.

**Richard Collier** is a lecturer at Newcastle Law School, University of Newcastle.

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# Violence and the Nocturnal Economy

An alternative 'nocturnal economy' is replacing industry in cities across Britain. Steve Hall looks at violence in the clubs, pubs and streets.

The recent shift from an industrial to a post-industrial mode of capital accumulation has generated a burgeoning nocturnal economy of pubs, clubs, cinemas and restaurants, pioneered in former industrial cities such as Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds and Newcastle upon Tyne and now being duplicated throughout Britain. The municipal-entrepreneurial partnerships that now manage urban areas regard the nocturnal economy as one of the most important areas of economic development. Not only does it energize commercial activity amongst local populations, but it also contributes to the 'imaging' of cities in the contest to attract inward corporate investment and an influx of populations with disposable incomes, such as students, young professionals and tourists.

As the hedonistic forms of consumerism known as the 'leisure industry' displace productive work, the traditional repressive control of public morality and behaviour is being recognized as an impediment to economic development. The nocturnal economy's paradoxical demand for orderly disorder has dumped a difficult conundrum on the desks of the bureaucrats who manage the traditional state-centred institutions of law and social control. How can places be made exciting and profitable, yet safe and pacified, when the market's demand for stimulation works in opposition to the condition of stable equilibrium required by civilized social life?

Just as escalating violence marks zones of rapid capital retraction and unemployment, it also characterises zones of intense capital investment. The pace of development in the nocturnal

economy is almost as remarkable as that of de-industrialisation. The rapid conversion of many of the larger Victorian administrative buildings into places of entertainment has changed the appearance, culture and economic function of Britain's old industrial cities. In 1998 there were 200 million nightclub admissions, and in that year these 'clubs' had a £2.5 billion turnover. The larger city-centre establishments currently boast individual annual turnovers of anything between £250,000 and £3 million, most of which can be attributed to the sale of alcohol. If the nightclub figure is combined with traditional bars and restaurants, the nocturnal economy's annual turnover in Britain can be estimated at about £22 billion. The contribution of the illegal bootleg booze and drugs economies is difficult to estimate, but there is some agreement that this general economy constitutes a significant proportion of GDP (see Hobbs et al, forthcoming, for a more detailed discussion).

The nocturnal economy is also a major source of employment, and the official figure of 500,000 workers could be significantly augmented if informal work was taken into account. Something like 100,000 of these workers are engaged in private security. At a time in Britain when official private security workers outnumber public police by 250,000 to 125,000 (Taylor, 1999), and most police officers patrol during the day, it is not unusual to find the 'nightstrip' in a medium-sized town catering for upwards of 15,000 revellers between the hours of 9pm and 3am. A dozen or so public officers in a tense and reluctant alliance with private doorminders are policing crowds larger and more intoxicated than those



attending most non-premiership football matches.

This rather disorganised and understaffed public-private partnership is achieving little success as a regulator of public conduct in the nocturnal economy. The reluctance of door-minders or young male customers to report violence - for a number of complex reasons centred around the avoidance of legal or informal repercussions (Lister et al, forthcoming) - means that violent incidents are likely to be massively under-represented in official statistics. However, statistics from the Police and Accident and Emergency Departments can be combined with self-report studies and ethnographies (Hall et al, forthcoming) to suggest that almost three-quarters of all violent incidents in urban areas occur during the weekend between the above-mentioned hours. The vast majority of this violence is perpetrated by and against young males who are excessively intoxicated by alcohol or drugs. The typical flashpoints are the queues that form around night-club doors, taxi ranks and fast-food outlets. Accident and Emergency departments in the major towns and cities are treating over 1,000 serious facial injuries per year. Since 1997, serious assaults have risen at a rate of 100 per cent per year (Hobbs et al, forthcoming). Young men are punching, kicking and stabbing each other with alarming regularity (James, 1995; Hall et al, forthcoming).

As always, violence is

becoming a routine part of life in a frontier economy predicated on hedonism, aggressive acquisition and frantic commodity exchange. This is the real face of the minimally regulated capitalist marketplace. The libertarian left's naive rhetoric of 'multi-cultural opportunities' offers ironic support for the Economic Development Corporations' image-building strategies. In Newcastle upon Tyne, whilst corporate outlets spring up like mushrooms, the sole self-owned 'indie' night-spot for young

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people closed down recently because of lack of attendance. Escalating violence also suggests that the cultural climate and functional demands of the nocturnal economy are much more conducive to the reproduction of traditional forms of aggressive masculinity than they are to progressive, congenial forms.

The justifications that dedicated minimalists use for dismantling state authority and abandoning intervention in society and economy look very thin if 'deregulated' spaces are scrutinised honestly by rigorous empirical and

theoretical work. Young working class people might be floundering on the sink estates, but in the city centres at the weekend they are kept afloat by the cheap alcohol and hedonistic illusions of the corporate leisure industry. The inhabitants of both spaces are crying out for better public policing. This can never be a long-term solution to escalating violence in the post-industrial market economy. However, because the liberal right that runs New Labour has capitulated to market forces, and the paranoid liberal-left always chants the mantra of minimalism and personal freedom at a deafening volume whenever collective action looks like it might be needed, the socio-economic intervention that is required for a long-term reduction in violence has been postponed indefinitely. In the meantime, better policing might offer the public a temporary measure of safety and the sort of visible repression that they can at least hold accountable.

**Steve Hall** teaches Sociology and Criminology at the University of Northumbria at Newcastle. He spent thirteen years working with the young unemployed and young offenders in County Durham after the pit, steelworks and shipyard closures of the 70s and 80s. He has published widely throughout the 1990s, and recently co-directed (with Dick Hobbs) an ESRC project on violence in the night-time economy.

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