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4. The Politics of Absent Men or Political Masculinities without the Polis¹

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Abstract

This chapter interrogates political masculinities as agents for change through the prism of absence, without the polis. Following an initial discussion of political masculinities in relation to, first, mainstream politics, and, then, feminism, possible changes in political masculinities formed through absence, and their implications for profeminist men's politics, are interrogated. Three main forms of absence are examined: absences by transnational/global processes, beyond the nation; technological absences, of virtuality and disembodiment in cyberspace; and bodily absences, as, for example, with ageing. These changes, and moreover their interconnections, are seen as creating new gender power structures, but also offering some signs of hope, with greater transnational connections, collaborations and indeed new subversive political masculinities.

Keywords: absence, age, bodies, feminism, globalization, masculinities, men, polis, political, transnational, virtualization

4.1. Introduction

Men and political masculinities appear *all too present* in many political arenas – but what happens when we highlight *absence*?

Whether seen historically or within contemporary contexts, much of mainstream politics has been constructed as largely by men and about men, with men coming together to discuss public matters in specific spaces, whether in public meetings or behind closed doors. The images of Kim Jong-un and Trump, and Trump and Putin together say it all, as do almost all press photographs of the mass of world leaders. It is not difficult to see why malestream political

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dominance has been subject to stringent challenge from feminism and postcolonialism (see Clark & Lange, 1979; Shanley & Pateman, 1991; Escobar, 1995; Santos, 2014).

Mirroring the social movement forms of politics in Second Wave feminism, the early development of profeminist men's politics in the 1970s and 1980s initially meant men coming together to face the personal as political, in ambiguous intermediate zones at the interface of the public and private. Meanwhile, on one hand, public man/men have, if not fallen (cf. Sennett, 1977; Fraser, 1990; Hearn, 1992), then at least tripped over, becoming privatized, individualized, dispersed, hidden from public view, and, on the other, and paradoxically, all is now public, increasingly seems to be in the "public eye" through technological and related social innovations. In this situation, men's profeminist politics now seem to be less about meeting in public, in private or even in intermediate zones, but are now more dispersed, more virtual, (dis)embodied, through various forms of absence. Such absence may be in the form of spatial absence, as through globalization, embodied absence, as in virtualization, or the absence that easily occurs through age and ageing. And indeed, such absences have also been reproduced in the range of critical studies of men and masculinities. Yet either way, it is clear that power remains concentrated in the hands of certain groupings of men with their associated political masculinities.² Accordingly, political masculinities are now often without the polis, not located or locatable in a single place – and perhaps time too. In short, political masculinities are not fixed; rather, they are affected by wider historical, societal and trans-societal changes; however, such contextualizations have not been a major focus of concern within most Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities.

In this current historical situation, the power of men often seems "somewhere else", not in the room or even clearly in public space. What I will call these politics of absent men take various, and sometimes contradictory, forms, through, for example: *absences by transnational/global processes*, beyond the nation; *technological absences*, of virtuality and disembodiment in cyberspace; and *bodily absences*, as, for example, with ageing and disability. These various

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absences seem of growing importance to understand the current state of gender politics around men and masculinities – as powerful, as invisible, as off the agenda, absent from accountability, without the polis. With these structural absences, specific forms of political masculinities are enacted, and the power of dominant men is generally reinforced, whilst at the same time certain other men and masculinities, as well as women and children, remain relatively absent(ed), in a different sense. As such, new challenges, both reactive and proactive, face counter-politics, such as profeminist men’s politics – in working against dominant, concentrated, yet often dispersed political masculinities, and promoting different kinds of political masculinities.

In this chapter, I begin by discussing the notion of political masculinities with particular reference to, first, mainstream politics, and, then, in relation to feminism, as agents for change, before outlining some implications for possible changes in political masculinities by way of absence, without the polis. These urgent contemporary questions are examined through a focus on intersectional gender politics and political change, in both mainstream settings and through what has been called counter-publics. Political masculinities are often now being formed through absence, and this equally applies to profeminist men’s politics, where there are also some signs of hope, with technological developments also enabling greater transnational connections, collaborations and indeed new political masculinities. So what political masculinities are agents of change – bearing in mind that agents of change are clearly not only progressive but can just as easily be regressive, sometimes catastrophically so?

4.2. Political Masculinities in the Mainstream

To be primarily concerned with *political masculinities* might seem to suggest a focus on a very specific topic, what might be called political masculinities in mainstream representative politics (see Starck & Sauer, 2014). Political masculinities recur in mainstream politics, at the local, national and international (or transnational) levels. In mainstream politics, party politics, business politics, social movements and so on, men are often unnamed as such, even though much of mainstream politics is in practice effectively ”men’s politics”, with men seeking to

interact with and influence other men. In these activities, the social category of men is still often not noticed in mainstream politics and commentaries (academic or not), often not even in critical gender commentaries (though for different reasons), or when it is it is usually seen as natural, non-problematic and taken-for-granted. Here, the political is translated largely in terms of the public domains of governmental, administrative, institutional and party politics.

To state the obvious, much of mainstream politics has historically been constructed as largely by men and about men (Clark & Lange, 1979; O'Brien, 1981; Lloyd, 1984; Hearn, 1992), with men coming together to discuss public matters in specific spaces, whether in public meetings or behind closed doors. This applies especially to mainstream political leaders, but also in a different way to political followers and forms of political followers, and thus leader-follower relations. Masculinism has a strong history in mainstream politics across the political spectrum, right and left, and whether in the guise of individualism or collective solidarity. Much of this continues.

Popular images of political masculinities are varied, yet all reference power in some way: the strong man, the authoritarian, the national leader (nationalistic, fascist, liberatory?), the showman, the smooth operator, the fixer, the revolutionary, the statesman, the misogynist, the hero, even the post-heroic. These mainstream political masculinities are not mere image-making; indeed, they have dramatic material forms and consequences, as, for example, with militarism. To use a simple example: in 2016 over a third of the world's military expenditure was by the USA (36%); together with China (13%), making up almost half the world's expenditure (Tian, Fleurant, Wezeman, & Wezeman, 2017). For the last 10 years up to 2014, world military expenditure has been over 1500 billion US\$ (Perlo-Freeman, Fleurant, Wezeman, & Wezeman, 2015), while overseas development aid to developing countries has been around 130 billion US\$ (OECD data, in Murphy, 2015). This is of course not to equate militarism and masculinism; both can exist without the other. Less dramatic, but still immensely powerful, are various forms of "soft power" and post-heroic political leadership.

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Having said this, mainstream political masculinities recur not only in mainstream representative politics but in all fields of social life – a distinction framed by Starck and Luyt (2018) as between “Political masculinities” and “political masculinities”. After all, what is not to be included in the political? So, what are political masculinities? And which masculinities are to be said to be ‘not political’? These questions are of clear relevance, if one conceptualizes masculinities as (centrally) about power and politics, as has been foregrounded in much scholarship within critical studies of men and masculinities over the last 40 years or more. In this view, masculinities are generally or almost always or always to be understood in relation and with reference to power and politics (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985; Connell, 1995). Political masculinities are material and discursive constructions, practices (both individual and collective) and subjectivities that implicitly or explicitly *do* power, not only in formal political arenas but also more broadly in society. Moreover, while masculinities, political masculinities, are clearly often connected and referenced to men, they do not only concern men; they remain of relevance to (some) women and (some) further genders, if only indirectly.

4.3. Political Masculinities in Relation to Feminism

The “man question” has long been part of feminisms, as in the question: what to do with men? That story goes back many centuries. Malestream political dominance has been subject to feminist and other challenges. This critical focus on men entails and operates across many dimensions. The Second Wave slogan “the personal is political” can be expanded to “the personal is political is theoretical” and “the personal is work is political is theoretical”. Each of these aspects tends to be most visible and recognizable in certain social contexts and institutions (for example, the theoretical dimension is developed particularly in academic contexts), but all are relevant all the time. Men’s (broadly progressive) politics³ can be conveniently understood in terms of personal/activist politics, policy politics, and theoretical (research, academic) politics, amongst other politics (see Hearn, 2015b for further exposition), with many overlaps and interconnections between these three realms, even if they are analytically distinct.

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The development of such politics may also bring some dangers, in terms of a recentring of men; instead, men need to be decentred, or put this another way the dominant needs to be deconstructed, made Other (Hearn, 1996), not affirmed. Indeed, far from all of men's politics developed in relation to feminism are progressive. There are many forms of men's activism, in mainstream politics, business politics, social movements, and so on, that are unnamed as such and are not gender-conscious (Egeberg Holmgren, & Hearn, 2009). In terms of gender-conscious men's activism, men's movements and related activity, many different strands can be identified. Gender-conscious politics that is concerned with changing men and masculinities, whether progressively or regressively, range from anti-sexist, profeminist, gay, queer, transgender positionings to mythopoetic and men's rights politics, as well as various composite, ambiguous, and unnamed positions. In these processes, there is always the danger of raising the topic of men as part of a politics of progressive change, but then rather swiftly shifting to a recentring of men, especially if men are not seen in relation to and in the context of gender power relations. This is not inevitable, power generically, not oppressive Power, has an uncanny ability to reincorporate resistance and opposition into respective and unfolding mainstreams, but not in an absolute and determined way (see, for example, Sargent, 1981).

There has been a long debate on positive reasons for men to engage in gender change. In 1987, Connell in the book *Gender and power* gave several reasons to detach men, especially heterosexual men, from defence of patriarchy against entrenched interests maintaining it: oppressiveness and unjustness of gender-unequal systems, wish for a better life for women, girls and other men around them in life. Also in 1987, I concluded *The gender of oppression* with "material reasons for men to change against patriarchy": possibilities of love, emotional support and care for and from men; privilege and emotional development that may come from contact/work with children; improved health; transforming work under capitalism; avoidance of other men's violence; reduction of likelihood of nuclear annihilation. Looking back, there are

some obvious omissions from these lists, notably environmental questions, questions of race, ethnicity and racism, and information and communication technologies (ICTs).

There are many further reasons why men can be interested in gender politics, again whether progressively or not. These have been summarised by Michael Messner in terms of three distinct, if sometimes overlapping, motivations: stopping men's privileges; highlighting men's differences; and prioritizing the costs of masculinity (Messner, 1997; also see Ashe, 2007). These three rationales exist in a triangular, and indeed dynamic, relation; and each of these can lead to specific forms of men's politics. In the case of the third, the costs of masculinity, *taken alone out of context*, can recentre men, through prioritizing of men's interests certainly within men's rights approaches, but also within much mainstream (especially US) psychological and social psychological literature on men's (gender role) stress, strain or conflict. But the danger of recentring, though reduced from the other two apexes, is still present in shifting from the initial attempts to move and change men.

Having noted some progressive tendencies, male or men feminists or profeminists are a diverse grouping. While most would agree on the centrality of gender justice, social justice, and the stopping of men's privileges, what exactly is the positive political programme beyond that is much less agreed upon. To understand differences within that social justice position needs some further refinements, and here the work of Lorber (2005) is helpful, in distinguishing three broad feminist, and thus profeminist, positions: reform feminism (critique/against/abolish gender imbalance), resistance feminism (critique/against/abolish patriarchy), and rebellion feminism (critique/against/abolish gender categories).

These various positions, that is, those derived from both Messner and Lorber, can also be recognized, or mapped, in policy politics, the enactment of political masculinities in doing policy and resulting from policy, and theoretical politics in research, academia and related locations.

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There are further complications to these schemes, following earlier work on “hybrid masculinities” (for example, Messner, 1993; Demetriou, 2001). For example, Bridges and Pascoe (2014) have described three mechanisms that may obscure gender power and so inhibit social change. These may be summarized as: symbolically distancing from hegemonic, or dominant, masculinities; situating masculinities available to young white, heterosexual men as unmarked, less meaningful, less gendered, than those available to marginalized and subordinated men; and fortifying existing social and symbolic boundaries, thus concealing, in new ways, systems of power and inequality. These processes can operate at both individual and collective levels, even within broadly progressive engagements and positionings, as well as within ambiguous, ambivalent, hostile or non-gender-conscious positionings.

Following these distinctions in personal politics, both policy politics and theoretical politics tend to have their specific, in some ways local, forms. For example, policy development is often presented as gender-neutral, in keeping with neutrality principles in rules grounded in law, even if this is blatantly not so (in its effects); there may also be an elusiveness or reluctance in the specific naming of men and masculinities in policy development. Governmental initiatives are typically ambiguous in relation to (pro)feminism. Even so, there is much implicit policy and some explicit policy on men and masculinities, for example, on: men as workers, breadwinners, and heads of family or household; fatherhood and paternity; family statuses in immigration and nationality; gay and transgender issues; crimes of sexual violence; programmes on men violent to women and children; conscription; and men’s health education programmes.

Varying emphasis between policy fields, for example, anti-violence, fatherhood, conscription would take very different positions on Messner’s triangle. There is often an avoidance of naming men in some policy domains, notably foreign policy, finance, trade, security, defence, militarism, as explicitly to do with men. For example, finance ministers, financial boards, economists, banks maintain a “strategic silence” on gender, uneven gender effects: deflationary policy, male breadwinner policy, and state cuts (rather than higher tax) all having less effect on men than

women (Young, Bakker, & Elson, 2011). Methods such as explicit gender budgeting can raise the form and effects of policy in direct terms that show men's positioning and frequent privilege.

Some of these diverse positionings and dynamics are reproduced within theoretical-academic politics, especially at institutional and policy levels. Political masculinities persist in academia generally, usually without reference to feminism, and sometimes justified by academic autonomy; in addition, different political masculinities can be identified across different disciplines, in studying gender, and in studying, researching and teaching men and masculinities.

4.4. Political Masculinities: The Politics of Absent Men without the Polis

These brief accounts of political masculinities thus far, whether more mainstream or related to feminism, may, however, seem somewhat dated. Political masculinities may now have become more privatized, dispersed, and indeed absent ... yet, as noted, all is now public. Politics is without the polis, even whilst all is public, with major implications for men as agents of change. Many forms of political masculinity are now enacted without or outside the polis, not located or locatable in a single place. In this historical situation, the power of men often seems “somewhere else”, not in the room, and not in in-the-flesh public space.

These politics of absent men take various, sometimes contradictory, forms. Three examples are presented here: *absences by transnational/global processes*, beyond the nation, where politics is done across spatial distances, and also where those “elsewhere” are liable to be subject to political exclusion; *technological absences*, of virtuality and disembodiment of those not in physical proximity, even involving those assumed to be ‘men’ in cyberspace; and *bodily absences*, as with ageing, older men, disability, disabled men, and marginalization by age, ageing, and death. Each of these forms of absence presents reinforcements, challenges and contradictions to political masculinities. These various absences seem of growing importance in social, trans-societal life, in policy development, in critical studies on men and masculinities, and for the current state of gender politics around men and masculinities – as powerful, as invisible,

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as off the agenda, without the polis. Men's politics, whether mainstream, profeminist or anti-feminist, now seem to be not so much about meeting in public, in private or even in intermediate zones, but dispersed, (dis)embodied, formed through absence. Through absences, dominant political masculinities are subject to transformation, and so too are profeminist men's politics – in countering dominant, concentrated, yet often dispersed political masculinities, and promoting positive changing, subversive and what have been absented political masculinities. It is this set of moves that I explore in the remainder of the chapter.

4.4.1. Political masculinities: transnational agents of change

First, let us consider how political masculinities are changing in terms of and as transnational agents of change. Global/transnational processes are major forces in dispersing the polis, and problematizing taken-for-granted local, national, and international gender relations. They lead to a variety of *absences by way of the growing global, colonialist and postcolonial accumulations* of resources elsewhere, away from the point of production, in MNCs and other transnational institutions, through transnational classes, ownership, control, offshoring and outsourcing (Urry, 2014). The transnational capitalist class may be subject to dispersal, but it remains very much a male transnational capitalist class.

The current reality is that there are multiple dispersed transnational arenas of power, men's power, in, for example: business corporations; global finance; governmental organizations; militarism and the arms trade; migration; international sports industries; the sex trade and sexualization in global mass media; work-family/household relations; care chains; bio-, medical and reproductive movements; cultural, political and religious movements; and knowledge and scientific production (Hearn, 2015a). In many of these arenas and processes, the nation-state and the state itself are no longer so autonomous, but are subject to multiple transnational (patriarchal) and global impacts across borders, perhaps most obviously from global capitalism. The dominant form of transnational institutions may be changing from centralized, replicable McDonaldization (Ritzer, 1983, 1993/2011) towards the multiple transnational dispersed centres of FIFAization

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(Hughson & Hughson, 2019), with multiple implications for men, masculinities and gender hegemony (Hearn, Vasquez del Aguila, & Hughson, 2019). These complex changes involve acutely contradictory, multiple forms of difference, presence/absence for men, women and gendered power, for both privileged and dispossessed.

Pessimistically, multiple crises are easily apparent, with the prospect of the worst of worlds, a ‘Lurking Doom’ of: global environmental, fuel, food, water crisis; the post-Cold War geopolitical (dis)order; the crisis of global economy organized “in shadow of” neoliberalization; structural or branch crises in specific sectors, for example, automobiles and agriculture; the crisis of finance-dominated accumulation (Sum & Jessop, 2013), as well as growing inequalities; racialized capitalism; migratory and refugee crises; circulation of “alternative facts” and “deepfakes”; explicit claiming of authoritarianism as positive virtue in what appear nationalistic proto-fascist times (Connell, 2016); and the convergence of economy, business, politics, popular culture, entertainment, and even scandals, crime and corruption (Portillo & Molano, 2017a, 2017b). Recent years have seen a deepening of (trans)nationalistic masculinism in the form of the unpredictability or fluidity of so-called #45, the current President of the USA, in an apparent global ultraconservative transnational alliance, “whose defining characteristics are kleptocracy and dominating masculinity — with the likes of Putin (Russia), el-Sisi (Egypt), Erdogan (Turkey), Salman (Saudi Arabia), Duterte (Philippines) among others.” (Messerschmidt & Bridges, 2017), and perhaps Kim Jong-un (North Korea).

In particular, financialized capitalism is one major driver of inequality, polarization, as capital returns exceed productive economic growth rate. The financial sector itself has mushroomed in recent years, so that size of sector far exceeds, perhaps 12-fold, the world’s GDP; and foreign exchange market of about \$5 trillion per day, with three percent linked to international trade, and the remainder to speculation (Philpponnat, 2014). Across the global economy, “(a)lmost half of the world’s wealth is owned by one percent of the population. ... The bottom half of the world’s

population owns the same as the richest 85 people in the world” (Fuentes-Nieva & Galasso, 2014, p. 2-3; also see Nixon, 2012; Hardoon, Ayele, & Fuentes-Nieva, 2016).

Changing transnational power arrangements are also highly relevant for the structural distribution and constructions of men’s care and caring practices, and frequent unequal avoidance. Indeed transnational arenas can be re-thought within a frame of non-care, and men’s carelessness and carefree-ness (Hanlon, 2012). The relative lack of a globalizing or transnational perspective in policy politics of men and care is mirrored in the neglect of many other issues in the politics of men and masculinities that transcend national boundaries.

More broadly, there are structural tendencies of certain men and masculinities towards domination and exploitation of the planet, with little regard for the effects of actions, bringing in due course crises around environment and climate change. For example, in a given income group, the differences in energy consumption between women and men differences are greatest in transportation (Räty & Carlsson-Kanyama, 2009). Men consume far more energy for transport and travel, and while differences reduce with more income, they do not disappear. Automobility – the material and ideological dominance of and dependence on care and similar vehicles – is heavily linked with certain masculinities (Balkmar & Hearn, 2019; Enarson & Pease, 2016). More positively, this raises the importance, potential and possibilities of anti-patriarchal practices, eco-leadership, not focused on domination. These changing transnational conditions are prompting many new studies using a transnational approach to men and masculinities. Many of these derive from or are inspired by work in the global South (for example, Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1994; Morrell, 2001; Cleaver, 2002; Pease & Pringle, 2002; Jones, 2006; Shefer, Ratele, Strelbel, Shabalala, & Buikema, 2007; Donaldson et al. 2009; Cornwall et al. 2011, 2016; Ruspini, Hearn, Pease, & Pringle, 2011; Hearn et al. 2013; van der Gaag, 2014), and various global North-South collaborations, such as between Nordic countries and South Africa (Shefer, Hearn, Ratele, & Boonzaier, 2018).

Some studies are comparative in nature. Holter's (2014) macro-comparative study shows how greater gender equality tends to be associated, for men, with: more health and well-being; more happiness; less depression; less divorce; more sharing of care; less death by others' violence; and to some extent less suicide. He argues men gain more from gender equality, maybe even more than women. A different approach is that of the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES), beginning in 2009, and initially in Brazil, Chile, Mexico, India, Bosnia, Croatia, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda, but now in many other countries. This takes a more individualist, micro-approach to data gathering to analyse comparative societal patterns. From the initial study, predictors of men's gender equality attitudes were: men's own education attainment; mother's education; men's reports of father's domestic participation; background with mother alone or joint decision parents; and not witnessing violence to mother (Levtov, Barker, Contreras-Urbina, Heilman, & Verma, 2014). Men's self-reported gender equality attitudes were, in turn, a predictor of: men's gender equality practices; more domestic participation and childcare; less interpersonal violence; and satisfaction with their primary relationship. More recently, the results of the IMAGES studies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have been reported (El Feki, Heilman, & Barker, 2017). Such studies have various direct policy implications, for example, the enactment of: programme approaches that change attitudes; policies and changes in structures that promote and create lived experiences of gender equality for boys and men; and promotion of equitable caregiving, as early childhood experiences influence men's adult attitudes and practices (Levtov et al., 2014).

Similarly, while most activism is local and nation-based, increasingly activism on and by men and political masculinities, progressive and regressive, are taking transnational forms, across borders and boundaries. To deal with these contemporary realities means building on (pro)feminist and other liberatory work, but in new, and far from simple, ways. As agents of positive change in policy across borders, political masculinities need to become more transnational and more dispersed in form, and probably content too – that is, not formulated in only one dimension, stressing international, transnational cooperation, global North-South

collaboration, and giving more attention to location. They also need to make environmental concerns central and more urgent. Refugee movements also impact on political masculinities, activism in highlighting resource inequalities, dealing many practicalities, progressive alliances, and engaging with very different masculinities, for example, the complexities of migrant men, and not assuming hegemonic masculinity as the only framework of oppositional politics.

Despite the enormous challenges of the state of the world transnationally, there are signs of hope, for example, the campaigns of such organisations and networks as: White Ribbon Campaign; Promundo, a Brazilian-originated non-governmental organization (NGO), now based also in the US; the South African-born NGO Sonke Gender Justice; Men's Action to Stop Violence Against Women; and the Institute for Development Studies, Sussex University, UK. Peacock and Barker (2014) summarize some of the key elements of these activist political masculinities: engaging men as part of the solution; gender equality work with men; drawing on positive evidence of work with men; developing global commitments, political advocacy; increasing men's support for gender equality laws and policies; acting against boys' and men's exposure to violence, alcohol, drugs, and guns; engaging men via women's empowerment.

Building on a multitude of local, regional and international activisms, interventions and projects, a very important and broadly profeminist transnational umbrella organization of men and women that has developed since 2004 is MenEngage. Its aims are: to provide a collective voice on the need to engage men and boys in gender equality, to build and improve the field of practice around engaging men in achieving gender justice, and advocating before policymakers at the local, national, regional and international levels. The first Global Symposium was held in 2009 in Rio de Janeiro, and the second in November 2014 in New Delhi over 1,200 people and 400 abstracts from 94 and 63 countries respectively. The New Delhi gathering also produced the 'Delhi Declaration and Call to Action', which sets out profeminist goals for men and boys in a global context (see: <http://www.menengagedilli2014.net/delhi-declaration-and-call-to-action.html>). Over 700, mainly group, members, with national networks in Africa (17),

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Caribbean (5), Europe (16), Latin America (10), North America (2), and South Asia (5). What is most interesting and important here is their global reach and their strong bases in the global South, in the creative development of a complex network of actors, that is not simply without a polis, but rather acts as an emerging transnational polis – if the "polis" is taken to be a conditional community rather than located in a certain fixed territory.

4.4.2. Political masculinities: virtual agents of change

One very significant aspect of transnational absence, transnational change, and transnational political masculinities concerns the impact of ICTs and related socio-technologies; indeed, its importance is such that it deserves some further comments in its own right regarding the production of political masculinities. Even withstanding earlier analytical and political critiques, the established dichotomy of the public sphere, as the sphere of (male) politics, and the private sphere has certainly become much more blurred and complicated; public political man/men may be, in some senses, becoming more privatized and individualized, while the private is ever more in public view. As noted, on one hand, public man/men have been becoming individualized within neoliberalism, making for "autonomous" entrepreneurial agents; on the other, and paradoxically, all is now technologically public, all is in the "public eye". At the same time, ICTs and indeed some aspects of neoliberalism clearly produce large new conditional communities of men, for example, entrepreneurial agents whether in Silicon Valley, the media industry or the financial sector, where men, especially relatively young men, may feel united in relation and sometimes opposition to others in their gender and sexual ways (see Hearn, 2014).

Contemporary politics and political masculinities are enacted not only in transnational settings *per se*, but very much in the (transnational) virtual world. In this way, political masculinities are formed by absences in terms of physical proximity made possible by new technologies and the power of virtuality and disembodiment, including of those assumed to be 'men' at the other end of cyberspace. This is no more clear than in the unknowability of such personas and processes in social (political) media and elsewhere.

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To appreciate this realm of possibilities, it is worth considering some of the key affordances of ICTs: instantaneousness, near-instant image transfer and circulation, time/space compression, potential for centralized technological controls, creation of virtual bodies, virtual reproducibility, blurring of “real” and “representational”, wireless portability, globalized connectivity, personalization, conditional communality, unfinished undecidability, pervasiveness (Wellman, 2001; Hearn & Parkin, 2001; Hearn, 2014). These affordances open up many new possibilities for political masculinities, some progressive, some deeply regressive. Thus, in virtual political realms, (technological) presence and embodiment (and absence) can easily lose or at least substantially change their meanings, with profound implications for gender/sexual politics.

Technological-driven absences operate at very different scales, from the fingertips, the embodied, personal and intimate to the global. At the latter level, they involve remote globalizing power, geographical and other surveillances, and the increasing power of technocratic political masculinities. This links with transformations in the global economy, through new forms of techno-masculinities, with “... several tiers of info hierarchy: ICT entrepreneurs, engineers, managers, service workers” (Poster, 2013), through which the physical location of male power is reorganizing. Key features are: job polarization; the impact of ICTs on both high and low skill jobs (the Moravec paradox [1988]: contrary to some assumptions, high-level reasoning requires very little computation, while low-level sensorimotor skills require large computational resources); and the use of disembodied automated algorithmic transactions in currency speculation, financial markets and law, with, for example, automated trades accounting for at least 70% of Wall Street stock market (O’Hara & Mason, 2012). As such, these changes offer alternative narratives of globalization, not least through the reworking of ethnic-racial male power (Poster, 2013).

Such technological absences present new political challenges, as well as some political opportunities for linking up with like-minded political activists in ways hardly imaginable a few

decades ago, as in the example of MenEngage noted above, and the online activities of the #MeToo and related movements. Meanwhile, the affordances of ICTs also facilitate populist political masculinities, feeding nationalism, racism, authoritarianism, neo-fascism, including some ‘old questions’ about masculinity, along with renewed online misogynist, hate speech, alt-right, men’s rights and nativist movements (Lilly, 2016; Ging, 2017; Nagle, 2017): in part a revival of the earlier 1990s culture wars, but now reinforced and elaborated via the internet. In recognition that political masculinities are strongly affected by wider societal and trans-societal changes, it is now obvious that there is a need for progressive political masculinities to engage much more in virtual/online politics. This includes most obviously opposition to anti-feminist online masculinities and new or enhanced forms of online violence and violation, for example, through AI, robotics, stalking and surveillance, and virtual hate speech.⁴

I will take just one example here of virtual politics and online violation in particular, that popularly is known as “revenge porn(ography)” – “posting of nude or sexually explicit photographs or videos of people online without their consent, even if the photograph itself was taken with consent” (US National Conference of State Legislatures, 2014) – or more accurately, online violation by the non-consensual distribution of sexual images. These regressive political masculinities are enacted by uploading sexual images and texts by ex-partners, partners, or hackers with the intention to taunt, shame, embarrass or seek revenge or response to or from the person concerned; most are mundane and everyday in tone (although some are directed to high profile and celebrity targets). These online non-consensual violating practices can even entail an inverse self-victimization by the poster as a way of legitimizing their activity, along with highly abusive, blaming or justifications texts, with dire harmful effects on the targeted persons, usually women (Hall & Hearn, 2017).

To counter this online activity demands a mixture of interventions: national/international legal or regulatory controls of both specialist and more general websites used in one country, but hosted in another, and with global reach; technical fixes, for example, whereby websites could be

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legally required to collect posters' details before they post explicit images and/or remove any inappropriate conduct; media, education, campaigns highlight personal testimony, high profile victims, notions of self-control/dignity; preventive work; and political outrage, together with tech-savviness (see, for example, Women Against Revenge Porn website). But progressive political masculinities also need to be directed to ICTs and virtuality as a more general, shifting, gender/sexual forms of power and a political problem in themselves, as well as being alive to building up positive (pro)feminist online presence and politics. Here, clear models are feminist initiatives, such as 100 Women Wikipedia takeover, #MeToo, and the many feminist sites, such as: Crash Override network, Gadette, Women, Action and the Media (WAM), TrollBusters, End Revenge Porn, Cyber Civil Rights Initiative, Without My Consent, Army of She, feministcurrent.com, and everydayfeminism.com, which provide both a variety of practical advice and broader political opposition to online violation and abuse, most of which can be understood in terms of inegalitarian and blatantly misogynist masculinities.

4.4.3. Political masculinities: ageing agents of change

A third and rather different form, or rather set, of absence from those of transnationality and virtuality concerns bodily absence, in politics, by age, disability and indeed death. Bodily absences take various forms, as, for example, in slavery, in refugee movements, and their associated absent, dispossessed political masculinities, with disabilities of many kinds, and in the fundamental marginalization that comes by death. Here, for reasons of space, I focus on the absences of age, ageing and old(er) men, at a time of ageing populations. Indeed some estimates suggest that by 2020 about as much as a quarter of Europe's population will be over 60, with greater relative increases amongst men than women, and amongst the older old (80+) than the old more generally (*Population ageing in Europe ...* 2014).

The place of age and ageing in the construction and enactment of political masculinities is highly contradictory, in terms of absence and presence. Older age can mean a continuation or entrenchment of men's power, for example, the gender pension gap is greater than the gender

wage gap, or it can mean entering an ageing culture of dispossession, especially for the older old. Older men tend to participate strongly in elections with relatively high levels of voting, and also tend to vote more for conservative and far-right parties (Spierings & Zaslove, 2015). In many societies, perhaps most obviously in East Asia, but also more widely, it is old and very old, often clearly patriarchal men who hold the reins of political and economic power – age is at the base of the patriarch and patriarchy. Yet, at the same time, there can also be a strange invisibility to old(er) men and being an old(er) man. Older men surely dominate much of global politics, but somehow this is often modified by appeals to “youthfulness”; appearing “too old”, as a public mainstream politician or even a non-mainstream activist, is unlikely to add to credibility in the light of the pervasiveness of ageism.

This latter relative absence also manifests, at least symbolically, in the (re)presentation of dominant political masculinities in the public domain, and in different ways in wider political discourses around age and ageing. Consider, for example, the earlier representations of Kennedy and Blair, and now those of Macron, (Justin) Trudeau, Putin, as well as Trump’s bizarre bodily efforts, in terms of “more youthful” physical and visual presence and appearance. Old political men often want to look young(er). Similarly, within the knowledge and scientific production, medical knowledge on ageing men is vast, but in both mainstream and critical studies on men and masculinities ageing has often been ignored or played down old(er) men in preference for a focus on boys, younger men and men of middle years. Men and ageing has been a relatively neglected theme in both progressive politics around men and masculinities and critical studies on men and masculinities, certainly so until recently, even with the need to place questions of care, self-care, and care for others as a higher policy priority. Some of this neglect reflects the fact that some of the obviously harmful social consequences of certain ways of being men and of certain masculinities, for example, interpersonal violence or gang culture, are associated with younger men; yet it is men of middle years and the younger old who retain resource, managerial and structural power and privilege, and enact structural harm and damage that is less immediately visible and less amenable to control by state policy.

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In developing the personal, policy and theoretical politics around ageing men and old(er) men, ambiguities and contradictions persist. Age may bring (male) authority, but ageism is certainly rife, and new social trends, such as the digital divide, create further difficulties for many older people. So, in this contradictory set of circumstances, what is (to be) the place of age and older political masculinities, and specifically older (pro)feminist political masculinities? This perspective raises some new questions for (pro)feminist political masculinities: should the focus be on immediate and changing older bodily experiences, or structures, unequal resources, and men's (polarising) power with age, or indeed both body and structure? How is it possible to acknowledge the place of age in patriarchy and patriarchal authority, and yet to develop, to do, non-patriarchal ageing? What does an older age consciousness bring to the question of the relatively hidden yet emerging older men's political masculinities, in which marginalization by ageing is to some extent countered? All this suggests a different kind of politics and different kinds of political masculinities, what I will call the *slow politics* of ageing political masculinities, in which there is a different kind of non-dominant, non-centred and anti-ageist political presence, rather than the conventional form of absence noted above.

In developing this approach, I have found the work of David Jackson, especially inspiring. He has written variously of the significance, with ageing, of: shifting embodied knowledge, autobiographical fragments, non-heroic representation, placing the biographical in historical context, surprising moments of intimacy with own body, self-caring, men-men friendships, between grounded activity and self-reflexiveness, re-integrating "my fragmentary body-selves" (Jackson, 2001, 2003; also Jackson, 2016). In this spirit, he, I, and another ten older men (who have been active in men's progressive politics) have over a 13-year period been part of the Older Men's Memory Work Group, inspired in part by the work of Frigga Haug and colleagues (1987; also see Blake et al., 2016 on method).

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In the group, we have written and analysed memories on many topics, some very personal, some more public, for example: a time when you became conscious of your age; men's hair; intimacy between men; acting actively politically; clothes; food; sisters; peeing; disruptions of the male body; saying goodbye to mother; a time you were conscious of your power; sport; schooling; sex; violence; work. This has led to the collective book, *Men's stories for a change: ageing men remember* (Barber et al., 2016). The process of memory-writing, combined with critical discussion, has given us much opportunity to re-evaluate our past and present lives, to change our (political) masculinities, our practices and ways of being men. The struggle for change at the political, structural, economic and ideological levels continues, but more than this is needed, with the inseparability of the personal and the political, of personal, activist, policy and theoretical politics. If men could trust each other more, less violence, abuse and conflict might follow. On the other hand, in the light of the systemic nature of male privilege, complacency in such contexts is unwarranted. Indeed, a possible criticism of this memory work is that we may not have been as challenging as we could have been, in seeking not to damage the warmth and support of the group, a feature often elusive among many groups of men (Blake et al., 2018).

Being in this group has been one of the most interesting experiences I have had within profeminist men's politics; it has been a social space where being old, being men or male, and being present, in very different ways to the dominant modes of doing politics between men, have been nurtured and practiced. It has combined intense reflections on ageing, gender, men and masculinities; it is also difficult to characterise memory work, in that it may bring together, though not strictly be any one of, writing, discussion, analysis, intimacy, care, friendship, therapy, politics, policy, theorising, deconstruction, representation.

Similarly, there are many alternative positionings that are possible in this kind of activity, including: positive and celebratory, restorative, reformist, psychodynamic and therapeutic, political (in many ways), profeminist (in different ways), performative of change, prefigurative, contradictory, intersectional, deconstructive of men and masculinity. For myself, collective

memory work has been a means of representing different ways of being and doing older men, of writing about and representing that, and, at the same time, deconstructing, changing and Othering men, of doing political masculinities.

4.5. Not a Conclusion, and a Further Absence ...

Through various different absences and dispersals, political masculinities can enhance men's power centres; at the same time certain other men and masculinities, and women, further genders, and children, are made absent. This raises new challenges for profeminist men's politics – in both countering dominant political masculinities, and creating new subversive political masculinities. Moreover, the three sets of processes highlighted – globalization and transnationalization; virtualization; and ageing – may interconnect. For example, absence relating to age and ageing articulates with the two other processes, suggesting the need for anti-ageist progressive political masculinities beyond the individual and interpersonal work, in the shape of anti-ageist, transnational, virtual profeminist politics across multiple arenas.

Yet, finally, there is another further, more thoroughgoing, politics of absence to consider, that of the politics of the possible abolition of the social category of “men as a category of power”. This arises from diverse inspirations: moves beyond the two-sex model, beyond gender binary; queering of “men”; multiple gender ideologies; undoing gender; gender pluralism; long-term global, transnational, historical dialectics; socio-technological impacts; and subversion of the hegemony of men through bringing together materialist theory/politics and queer theory/politics. To echo Sky Palace:

“Abolition. Our vision of liberation assumes not equality between genders, sexualities, and races, but the abolition of these identity categories as structural relations that organize human activity and social life. We believe that these identities are the names of real material processes of capitalism — not of something essential or salvageable within us” (Palace, 2012, p. 213)

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Such an orientation combines naming, critique and deconstruction, rather than accepting fixed categories of men and the binaries of materiality and discourse. It is one possible positive way forward for the politics of absent men in several senses, whether powerful or not. It is also a way of rethinking and re practicing political masculinities, without reproducing patriarchal power, in a historical situation that is often, perhaps increasingly, without the polis or without direct representation of certain kind of marked bodies and persons that are thus made less visible.

Notes

1. This chapter is a development of the keynote at the Political Masculinities as Agents of Change Conference, Anglia Polytechnic University, Cambridge, UK, December 2016. I am grateful to Russell Luyt and Kathleen Starck, as conference organizers, Stephen Burrell and Maria Sagmeister (2017) for providing generous commentaries on my presentation, and the editors and anonymous reviewers for multiple helpful comments on earlier drafts.

2. Starck and Sauer (2014, p. 6) define political masculinities as:

... any kind of masculinity that is constructed around, ascribed to and/or claimed by “political players.” These shall be individuals or groups of persons who are part of or associated with the “political domain,” i.e. professional politicians, party members, members of the military as well as citizens and members of political movements claiming or gaining political rights.

Much depends here on different understandings of the political; as such, this is a useful starting point, from which discussion of political masculinities can be extended. Additionally, Starck and Luyt’s (2018) comment that “the concept of political masculinities can usefully be applied in instances in which power is explicitly either being (re)produced or challenged” presupposes an understanding of what is meant by both *power* and its *explicit* reproduction or challenge.

3. In the context here, I use progressive politics as a shorthand for a variety of positions and practices that men adopt favouring, enacting and promoting egalitarianism and feminism.

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4. Some commentators argue that it is difficult or even impossible to distinguish between online and offline politics and movements, as there is such a great convergence between activities, through mobile phone culture and ICTs more generally (Barker & Jane, 2015). This latter position is, however, not so straightforward, as for example, when it comes to how progressive political actors and political movements relate to, and indeed experience, physical violence, its threat, and less directly physical forms of violation.

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