

GENDER AND EMBODIMENT IN WORLD SOCIETY

Raewyn Connell

ABSTRACT

Feminism contested conservative gender ideologies by emphasising the social construction of gender; but this risked treating gender as disembodied. Gender is indeed fully social, but it is also embodied; it concerns the way reproductive bodies enter human history. The steering of the process of social embodiment is inherently political; it is affected by recent changes in the institutional world. Notably, gender relations are re-shaped in colonialism and post-colonial globalization, themselves gendered processes. In the reconfiguration of power, a new kind of ruling class, organized on a world scale, has been emerging; its masculinized leadership is articulated with local patriarchies in the new economy. Unrestrained neoliberal power leads to new levels of commodification of bodies and new patterns of gendered violence. Resistance and opposition will also require new political configurations.

KEYWORDS

Gender; embodiment; power; colonialism; globalization

When bodies are brought into debates on gender issues, it is usually to put people in their places. Men, we are told, are urged by their bodies to be out hunting mammoths, while women are condemned by ours to sit in caves knitting baby shoes from mammoth fur.

These ideas deserve to be ridiculed. But they also have to be taken seriously, because they have serious consequences. The idea that women are by nature incubators is not far below the surface of conventional thinking in the Catholic Church, as well as Islamist militancy, and drives state controls imposed on women's bodies.

It's not surprising then that second-wave feminists often fought against biological myths about women by insisting that gender is socially constructed. Feminists insisted that we learn our sex roles socially, from our parents, churches, mass media and peer groups. Boys learn aggressiveness by being taught football, girls learn nurturance by being given dolls. And what is socially constructed can be socially re-constructed – it is open to change. Sociology and psychology reveal the process of defining and learning gender norms, while anthropology and history reveal that different societies have produced different gender orders.

That argument was profoundly important in changing the common-sense understanding of gender. We have passed what I call the horizon of historicity, the moment when it is deeply understood that our gender arrangements are not our unchanging fate. Rather, gender arrangements are achieved by human action; and like all things human, they will in the storm of time pass away.

A striking example is provided by masculinity. In the popular media there is now a widespread view that masculinity is in crisis. Journalists and psychologists restlessly search for new models of masculinity: Metrosexuals, New Lads, the Caring Father, and more. Some governments have diverted education funds from programmes for girls to programmes for boys: some good programmes, many dismal ones, yet all revealing an underlying awareness of change.

The feminist argument for the social construction of gender was incomplete. Often it simply walled off an unchanging realm of the body from the changing realm of society. And this left space for a right-wing reaction which has re-asserted gender dichotomy. Anti-feminist ideologues have searched for a new scientific justification, and there are some biologists - usually men who know little about the real world of gender relations - who play along, making pronouncements about "the male brain" or "the female brain".

But this reaction is not driven by science. It is driven by social anxiety. Partly by anxiety stirred up by the success of feminism itself. Anxiety arises mainly among men, though also among women. Since the debt crisis of the 1980s, this anxiety has been massively amplified by other anxieties, that grew from the rise of market fundamentalism, the re-shaping of economies by Structural Adjustment, and the new economic order of global capitalism.

In the unstable and threatening new world of the new deregulated capitalism, it is not surprising that some groups reach for what they are told is certain: an unchanging gender order, God-ordained or Science-ordained, fixed in male and female human bodies. That is a shallow belief, built on anxiety rather than cultural consensus, but it can be politically powerful - and some women die because of it.

These problems have been greatly clarified in the last few decades, as it has come to be understood that gender is a social structure as well as a feature of personal life (Barbieri, 1992). Gender can be seen, in a first approximation, as the way social conduct, interactions and institutions become organized in relation to human reproduction. To put it another way, gender processes are those that bring reproductive bodies and reproductive distinctions into history. Gender patterns change historically, and change in major ways. Gender arrangements are actively produced, in new arenas as new institutional patterns come into existence. The computer industry, for instance, is notoriously gender-unequal, a fact of importance given its centrality to 21st century economies. But it hardly existed sixty years ago.

The *steering* of those changes is inherently a political process, and it is in this process that power becomes clearly visible as a dimension of gender. The power dimension of gender relations is not a stark dichotomy, with men in one bloc here and women in another bloc there. There are multiple masculinities and multiple femininities in social life; this is a major finding of empirical research on gender by sociologists (see e.g. Olavarría, 2009). Gendered power relations are woven through a complex terrain of institutions and cultural processes. Gender is in no sense segregated from other aspects of social life. So economic transformations, such as the creation of industrial economies or global trade networks, involve reconstructions of gender divisions of labour. And major cultural changes reconstruct gender ideologies, sometimes dramatically.

Political institutions, from international diplomacy to electoral processes and bureaucracy, always have gender dimensions. This was not highly visible when cabinets, armies and managements were all men. But in fact an all-masculine institution *is* highly gendered, and that becomes visible when the first woman walks in the door. The advent of Australia's first woman Prime Minister, Julia Gillard (2010-13), triggered a shower of misogynist abuse from politicians, media, demonstrators, cartoonists and others, that did not stop until her own party abandoned her.

It is now a cliché that the institutional world of government, business and media is a scene of globalization. The term was popularized in business journalism in the 1980s, to describe the strategies of what were then called multinational corporations — global sourcing, global financing, and global marketing. In the 1990s the term became popular in social science, to describe what was usually seen as a novel and rapid world-wide homogenization of culture. Feminist critique and research soon began to explore the gendered character of globalization (Chow, 2003).

Most accounts of globalization have played down the continuities with the earlier history of European and North American imperialism. Strangely the main centres of globalized culture happened to be the old imperial powers, and the old inequalities of wealth persisted. With them, came gender patterns. Historical research in the last thirty years has shown abundantly that imperial expansion was a strongly gendered process, and the colonial societies created in its wake were also markedly gendered (e.g. Morrell, 2001; Reid 2007). Modern race divisions, a distinctive feature of the history of imperialism, were produced in close interaction with gender arrangements (Viveros, 2007).

Resistance to colonialism also took gendered shapes. Nationalist movements often relied on mobilizing women, but were usually led by men; and post-colonial regimes often took the form of a re-invigorated patriarchy (Mies, 1986). Not surprising, then, that women were prominent in the “Arab spring” of 2011, at a time of multiple risings against neo-colonial dictatorships across the Arab-speaking world.

The gendered character of the contemporary world economy and political system, then, is not accidental. It grows out of a long history of gendered power relations, embedded in the institutional structures of imperial and post-colonial societies. It also grows out of a history of struggle, because none of these arrangements has been instituted without conflict.

In our generation, the most powerful group of men in the world are no longer kings, bishops or prime ministers. Rather, they form an international corporate oligarchy, floating on the unbelievable profits of global capitalism, accountable to no-one but themselves. Their neoliberal ideology provides the framework of public policy in most parts of the world.

This is not a ruling group like any that has existed before. Its power and wealth are essentially the same thing. Its leading members are not idle rentiers. They work continuously, as transnational corporate managers, though on a scale of wealth that allows many of their family members to live in idleness. The new elite's revenues filter upwards from a heterogeneous array of industries — mining, oil, computers, banking, shipping,

land ownership, arms, construction, media — linked through conglomerate corporate structures, portfolio investment and an ever more intricate finance industry.

This is neither modern nor postmodern, industrial nor postindustrial. It is, rather, trans-industrial, based on the active linking of heterogeneous sectors and economies into configurations that yield a flow of revenue to ownership. It has broken free of the religious ideologies that formerly provided both legitimation and restraint for local patriarchies: it is deeply secular and completely ruthless.

The corporate mega-rich do not need to exert state power personally, though occasional members, such as Berlusconi, decide to do so. The global oligarchy's political position, rather, rests on another heterogeneous array, of local patriarchies who have done deals with transnational capital. Some of these elites run authoritarian bureaucracies, some run fragile post-colonial states held together by violence, and some run liberal states which have been relentlessly restructured to the point where no electable government will oppose corporate interests.

The leadership of the corporate oligarchy is masculinized. About 96% of the CEOs of the top 500 transnational corporations are men. In the "rich lists", all the active accumulators of very large fortunes are men; women appear on these lists when they have inherited wealth. Some of the supporting local elites are absolute patriarchies: the Saudis, the Chinese, the Russians. Others are modified patriarchies, in which individual women can gain institutional power, but women in general do not.

The dynamic that distinguishes the neoliberal era from welfare capitalism and import replacement industrialization development strategies (i.e. the CEPAL strategy) is the relentless expansion of the sphere of the market, overwhelming the different logics that formerly characterised the state, religion, community life, and the person. All are now colonized by market forces and re-organized to yield profit or support the extraction of profit.

Bodies are not so much regulated — that's nothing new — as colonized and mined for profit-yielding potential. Thus, organ and tissue harvesting for private medicine; corporatisation of food; and of course the commodification of death, through the arms industry and the military expenditure that has, miraculously, survived the end of the cold war. On a vast scale, there is a colonization/commodification of women's bodies, as labouring bodies, sexual bodies and reproductive bodies (Harcourt, 2009).

There is now research from many parts of the developing world about the new capitalist strategies that have come to be summarized as "neoliberalism" (Connell and Dados 2014). Neoliberalism is not homogeneous globally and its gender effects are complex. The export agriculture of Chile, expanded by neoliberalism's comparative-advantage strategy, drew many rural women into paid labour for the first time and upset domestic patriarchy. Domestic labour has become an export industry. Filipina and Indonesian women have become breadwinners for their families as maids, housekeepers, childcare and elder-care workers in south-east and east Asia and the Gulf states. Brutal neoliberal restructuring and the social tensions created by labour migration, predatory elites, lack of infrastructure and international trade, both legal and illegal, can create social violence of the devastating kind experienced in northern México (Cruz, 2013).

International violence, too, has taken on new gendered forms. ‘Western’ governments, notably those of the USA and Britain, and their supporters such as the Murdoch television and newspaper empire, have frequently made the emancipation of women from misogynist regimes a justification for military interventions into Muslim countries, notably Afghanistan and Iraq. Women are almost completely absent from the top economic and military decision-making of the countries launching such interventions. The invasions are accompanied by rhetoric constructing an image of strong, protective masculinity for the political leaders (Messerschmidt, 2010). The irony of men from different patriarchal regimes killing each other in the name of women’s rights is almost unbearable.

How can the new global power structure be overthrown? Given its heterogeneity, there is no privileged gravedigger. There can only be alliances; and that fact mandates an ethic of inclusion, not exclusion. Vanguardism is obsolete; a purified feminism, in the contemporary world, will create its own limits. Impure feminisms are needed! And centrifugal at that. If the dynamic of global patriarchy now is integration and subsumption, the dynamic of opposition is mobilization in the peripheries, drawing inspiration from union women, indigenous women’s movements, land rights movements and other social movements not well known in the elite circles of the metropole.

I want to finish with an observation on the global politics of feminist intellectual work (Connell, 2014). The concepts and analyses about gender that circulate internationally mostly come from thinkers in the global North. That is where most of the funding, skilled labour and institutional support for gender research are located. The global North is also, as part of a longstanding global division of labour, the source of almost all internationally-circulating gender *theory*. This is a problem; because intellectual frameworks grow out of the social experience of the regions the theorists come from and work in. And the majority of the world’s people live in other parts of the world, and have different social and historical experience.

Connecting different feminist experiences from around the world, and linking different conceptual approaches, is difficult — but it is being attempted (Bulbeck 1998). To educate ourselves for this means recognizing a wider history of thought about gender, including pioneers like Kartini (2005) in the Dutch East Indies, or He-Yin Zhen in late imperial China. It means paying serious attention to powerful recent gender theorists such as Fatima Mernissi (1985) from Morocco, Heleieth Saffioti (1969) from Brasil and Bina Agarwal (1994) from India. It is from these richer resources that a more adequate understanding of gender and embodiment, power and resistance on a world scale can be built.

REFERENCES

- Agarwal, B. (1994). *A field of one’s own: gender and land rights in South Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Barbieri, T. de. (1992). Sobre la categoría género. Una introducción teórico-metodológica. *Revista Interamericana de Sociología*, 6, 147-178.

- Bulbeck, C. (1998). *Re-orienting western feminisms: women's diversity in a postcolonial world*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Chow, E. Ngan-ling. (2003). Gender matters: studying globalization and social change in the 21st century. *International Sociology*, 18 (3), 443-460.
- Connell, R. (2014). Rethinking gender from the South. *Feminist Studies*, 40 (3), 518-539.
- Connell, R.; Nour D. (2014). Where in the world does neoliberalism come from? The market agenda in southern perspective. *Theory and Society*, 43 (2), 117-138.
- Cruz Sierra, S., (Ed.) (2013). *Vida, muerte y resistencia en ciudad Juárez*. Tijuana/México D. F.: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte/Juan Pablos Editor.
- Harcourt, W. (2009). *Body politics in development: critical debates in gender and development*. Londres: Zed Books.
- Hyde, J. S. (2005). The gender similarities hypothesis. *American Psychologist*, 60 (6,) 581-592.
- Kartini. (2005). *On feminism and nationalism: Kartini's letters to Stella Zeehandelaar, 1899-1903*. Clayton: Monash University Press.
- Mernissi, F. (1985). *Beyond the veil: male-female dynamics in modern muslim society*. Revised edition. Londres: Saqi Books.
- Messerschmidt, J. W. (2010). *Hegemonic masculinities and camouflaged politics: unmasking the Bush dynasty and its war against Iraq*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.
- Mies, M. (1986). *Patriarchy and accumulation on a world scale: women in the international division of labour*. Londres: Zed Books.
- Morrell, R. (2001). *From boys to gentlemen: settler masculinity in colonial Natal 1880-1920*. Pretória: University of South Africa.
- Namaste, V. (2005). *Sex change, social change: reflections on identity, institutions, and imperialism*. Toronto: Women's Press.
- Olavarría, J. (Ed.) (2009). *Masculinidades y globalización: trabajo y vida privada, familias y sexualidades*. Santiago, Red de Masculinidad/es Chile: Universidad Academia de Humanismo Cristiano and CEDEM.
- Reid, K. (2007). *Gender, crime and empire: convicts, settlers and the state in early colonial Australia*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Saffioti, H. I. B. (1978) [1969]. *Women in class society [A mulher na sociedade de classes]*. Nova Yorque: Monthly Review Press.
- Viveros Vigoya, M. (2007). De diferencia y diferencias. Algunos debates desde las teorías feministas y de género. In LG Arango and Y. Puyana (Eds), *Género, Mujeres y Saberes en América Latina* (pp. 175-190). Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

Raewyn Connell is Professor Emerita at the University of Sydney, and one of Australia's leading social scientists. Her most recent books are *Southern Theory* (2007), about social thought in the postcolonial world; *Confronting Equality* (2011), about social science and politics; and *Gender: In World Perspective* (3rd edn, with Rebecca Pearse, 2015). Her

other books include *Masculinities, Schools & Social Justice, Ruling Class Ruling Culture, Gender & Power*, and *Making the Difference*. Her work has been translated into eighteen languages. She has taught at universities in several countries in departments of sociology, political science, and education, and is a long-term participant in the labour movement and peace movement. Details can be found at her website www.raewynconnell.net.

E-mail: raewyn.connell@sydney.edu.au

Faculty of Education & Social Work University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia