

Cultures of Masculinity.

By Tim Edwards

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Reviewed by:

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Critical studies of men and masculinities today can be divided into two main strains of analysis. The first emerged in the 1980s, as a critique of the sex role paradigm, with works by pro-feminist writers such as Connell and Kimmel, who concentrated mostly on hegemony and power relations. The second strain, largely influenced by post-structural theory and cultural studies, looks mainly at questions of representation, performativity, and sexuality. A more substantial divide is found in the recent debate over what some call "the crisis of masculinity". Populist figures (such as poet Robert Bly) and more political ones (e.g. Christina Hoff-Sommers) argue forcefully that masculinity is under attack in areas such as work, education, the family and the media. However, most masculinity scholars reject these claims, which they see mainly as an anti-feminist backlash.

Tim Edwards' *Cultures of Masculinity* situates itself within these two debates. First, Edwards states that his selection of topics was made in order to interrogate "cultural, poststructuralist or more media-driven studies, on the one hand, and those studies now defined as pro-feminist, critical studies of men and masculinities or more simply sociological, on the other" (p. 4). Secondly, he takes a stand on the crisis thesis, which is concerned with men's loss of power and privilege in domains such as the workplace, the educational system, the family, sexuality, health, crime, and representation. Edwards agrees with most masculinity scholars that in all of these domains there is little evidence

for a true crisis of masculinity. At most we may talk about *tendencies* towards crisis for *some* men. However, he claims that the crisis of masculinity exists in a different level, that of the term itself; masculinity as a male sex role "is not *in* crisis, it *is* crisis" (p. 17). In other words, Edwards takes the position asserting that masculinity is constituted as crisis, because it is largely fictional – a social construction or even an invention.

In successive chapters, Edwards offers a wide overview of issues that stand in the forefront of masculinity studies today: the relations with feminism, violence and power, race and ethnicity, sexuality, fashion, cinema, and the body. For each he surveys the main strains and approaches, demonstrating an impressive range and intimate familiarity with canonical writers such as Fanon, Foucault and Bourdieu, prominent feminist writers such as Hooks, Bordo and Butler, and many of the premier masculinity scholars of the last three decades.

The chief strength of the book lies in scope, presenting a myriad of different views and setting them up against each other. Edwards' writing is clear, and allows even the dilettante a glimpse into otherwise abstract theories and ideas. He adopts a critical view, providing sharp and insightful analytical observations on the merits, but also on the weaknesses of different theories. What's more, he shares a few of his own experiences, providing the book with a more personal and intimate texture.

While the book's scope is certainly impressive, it also prevents it from developing any deeper discussions and understandings. Edwards devotes a short chapter to each issue, but the chapters do not offer much more than a critical literature review of each sub-field. When he does take a stand, he offers little new research to back up any of the claims he makes. In the few instances where he presents his own research, the data remain

anecdotal, taken either from personal experience and introspection or from a narrow and incidental sample. For example, in the chapter on masculinity and the cinema Edwards analyzes in detail three contemporary films, but neglects to explain why these particular films were chosen and why he believes that they are representative of wider strains.

The main weakness of the book lies in Edward's failure to present a more thorough theoretical portrait, which might have connected the different chapters of the book into a coherent whole. The "crisis question", which makes the beginning of the book so intriguing, is soon discarded for a thorough, but seemingly random, literature review, which lacks any theoretical backbone. The reader is left with an array of topics, which are all interesting and important; but each is reviewed briefly only to be left behind when the next chapter moves to discuss a different sub-field. Thus, the different themes remain in void of a tying thread, a hand that would gather them all together and provide the reader with a less amorphous proposition than general statements such as "The picture is incomplete, the story half told, the sight only partial in either case." (p. 163).

Finally, I found Edwards' disregard for all non-English-speaking cultures disturbing. Although the book is ambitiously titled "cultures of masculinity", it talks in fact of only two similar cultures –Britain and North-America. He makes an effort to include "other" masculinities (black and gay most notably) in the analysis, but makes no reference to non-western cultures. Thus, his conclusions and assertions often seem too inclusive and lack sensitivity to inter-cultural differences and diversity.

Despite these shortcomings, *Cultures of Masculinity* might prove useful for those who wish to enter the field of masculinity studies, and get acquainted with some of the main current debates and controversies in this young field. The book's wide scope, the

clear and concise way in which it presents central theories and its sharp critical observations may serve to provoke interest in the field. Those who look for deeper and more comprehensive accounts on the different issues that the book touches upon, or, alternatively, new and revealing data, would have to look elsewhere.