Abstract

The axiomatic nature of hegemonic masculinity in the Critical Studies of Men (CSM) continues to come under increased scrutiny. In particular, the issue of how hegemonic masculinity bridges the space between men and masculinity, practice and identification, real and symbolic and particular and universal remains open to much interest and debate. This article contributes to this debate. In particular it sets out to re-emphasise the importance of hegemonic masculinity in the process of understanding how and what men do with how and what men identify as by introducing to CSM a postmarxist approach to masculinities and gender. This article will argue that through a postmarxist approach hegemonic masculinity comes to represent an empty signifier within gender politics. Developing hegemonic masculinity in this way is a radically new approach in the theorisation of masculinities but one that is able to incorporate poststructuralist imperatives such as, moving beyond assumptions about fixed character types but also, build on the need to maintain the analysis of hegemony in gender relations. As such, this article presents new possibilities in theory and thereby, contributes to the re-thinking of how both men and hegemonic masculinity become important parts of the process of producing and reproducing hegemony.

Keywords:
Hegemonic masculinity, contradiction, dialectic, hegemony, postmarxism, empty signifier
Deconstructing Hegemonic Masculinity: Contradiction, Hegemony and Dislocation

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Introduction

Recently, the concept hegemonic masculinity has been subjected to a sustained critique that focuses on concerns associated with essentialism, reification and slippage. These concerns have led to attempts at re-thinking the concept as well as, attempts to move away from it. As a result, discussions continue about how best to approach hegemonic masculinity. In particular, in a way that enables resolution of some basic questions that hegemonic masculinity throws up such as, understanding the difference between what men actually do and what men think they should do or identify masculinity as. This in turn raises questions about the efficacy of hegemonic masculinity to address differences between dyads such as, men/masculinity; practice/identification, real/symbolic, inclusion/exclusion, particular/universal.

The aim of this article then, is to develop a theoretical argument that has two objectives. First it seeks to re-emphasise the importance of hegemonic masculinity in the process of understanding how and what men do with how and what men identify as. However, re-emphasis requires re-thinking and so this article will take the position that a post-marxist approach to understanding hegemonic masculinity is particularly useful because it is grounded in an effort to understand the conditions of social life as framed by hegemony. Further, postmarxism identifies within hegemony the existence of contradictions as antagonisms that in turn, express the impossibility of totalising social relations and identities as well as, a desire for equivalence that expresses attempts to overcome this impossibility. Methodologically, postmarxism seeks to not just develop descriptions of social categories but uncover the conditions of their existence. Postmarxism also enables the second objective that is, to offer a deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity that focuses on the movement from formal logic to contradiction and then to analysis of the problematic of the dialectic expressed through antagonism and dislocation understood through the connections between Marxism, hegemony and poststructuralist theories. This approach allows closer examination of the emergence of the hegemonic and how this expression mediates the antagonisms between what is being done with what should be done. What becomes apparent is that although the dialectic is a key constructive force in hegemony,
dialectical synthesis remains complex and ultimately unachievable. This suggests that attempts to link the existing definition of hegemonic masculinity as configurations of practice with its potential as an aspirational frame remain crucial (see Wetherell and Edley 1999, 337). To do this the following argument will begin to develop hegemonic masculinity as the expression of an empty signifier (see Laclau 1996, 2005) of gender. In other words, the task will be to examine how hegemonic masculinity comes to assume the signification of synthesis and order even though such an outcome is shown through a post-marxist deconstructive method as impossible. This impossibility is in turn, the basis of social dislocation obfuscated by the process of constructing complicity. Developing hegemonic masculinity as an empty signifier is a radically new approach in the theorisation of masculinities but one that is able to incorporate poststructuralist imperatives while building on Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005, 854) rejection of usages that “imply a fixed character type” or “conflicts with the analysis of hegemony in gender relations”. As such, this article seeks to add to the debate about hegemonic masculinity by introducing new possibilities in theory and thereby contribute to the re-thinking of how both men and hegemonic masculinity become important parts of the process of producing and reproducing hegemony.

Slippage, Reification and Subjectivity, The Ongoing Critique

In an important chapter in Manning the Next Millennium, Studies in Masculinities, Michael Flood (2002) identifies a series of problems associated with the use of the term masculinity in the masculinities literature. Flood argues firstly, that masculinity is prone to a “slippage” between what is understood to be masculine and the practices and relations of actual men that in turn leads to a “reified” representation of masculinity and makes its pluralisation problematic. Second, within this pluralisation the designations “masculinity” and “hegemonic masculinity” represent either an “ideal” or “power” and very often both. Further, they are often at odds. Third, neither the category masculinity nor that of men can and should be “taken as given” and the link between them needs to be questioned. In other words, Flood begins to articulate a critique of the taken-for-granted connection between masculinity in particular, hegemonic masculinity and men, between masculine identification and men’s practices but most importantly, this critique begins to expose the inherent weakness of conceptualising hegemonic masculinity as a configuration of practice.

Notwithstanding this weakness, hegemonic masculinity continues to assume the position of an epistemological axiom within masculinities studies. Thus Juanita Elias (2008, 386) in her study of the global politics of gender and power, claims that “the study of hegemonic masculinity has become central to how we theorise, recognize and understand power in a complex yet thoroughly gendered world”. The reason for the centrality of he-
gemonic masculinity to theorizing, recognizing and understanding power though, has been and continues to be grounded in the assumption that hegemony and therefore the hegemonic, represents domination. Again, Elias (2008, 384) sustains this position when she argues that in the Critical Studies of Men (CSM) there is a “concern to identify how dominant forms of masculinity – in particular, notions of hegemonic masculinity – are enmeshed in contemporary international politics” and expressed as androcentric configurations of practice. However, Elias’ claims about how the centrality of hegemonic masculinity sit at odds with other critical approaches to men and masculinities in which the nature and operation of hegemonic masculinity and its nexus with domination have become increasingly problematic. This in turn has opened hegemonic masculinity up to increasing scrutiny and critique (see Petersen, 1998; Flood 2002; Hearn 2004; Howson 2006; Beasley 2008).

The poststructuralist turn, as Alan Petersen (1998) argued in Unmasking the Masculine, offered a new approach to theorizing, recognizing and understanding how identities are constructed and power operationalised. It questioned the essentialist notion of masculinity that is, that masculinity is a “fixed” identity expressed by men and that leads to “fixed, uniform outcomes” (Sayer in Petersen 1998, 4). Hegemonic masculinity was the central mechanism in this fixity as it defined men and distinguished them from women. Further, the pluralisation of masculinity to “masculinities” that R W Connell (1995) articulated is also rejected within the poststructuralist turn because it continues to effect an essentialised reification of masculine identity through hegemonic masculinity that effectively overlooked historical, social and subjective contexts. Most importantly, this expression of hegemonic masculinity makes it the objective, legitimate and ideal form and practice of masculinity that obfuscates heterogeneity within men. A point Flood (2002) would later highlight and develop. The concern over essentialism and reification has led some writers to question not just the value but reality of masculinity and hegemonic masculinity. Jeff Hearn (2004) in particular, argued that central to the CSM is the need to understand men in the context of social relations that take the form of gendered power relations. And crucial to this is the concept “hegemony, and its major uses in recent theorising on men” for example, “as in hegemonic masculinity in the analysis of masculinities [emphasis in original]”. This return to hegemony is an important epistemological shift and one that resonates with postmarxism. Nevertheless, Hearn (2004, 58) argues that while hegemony remains useful within the CSM, “the concept has generally been employed in too restricted a way because the focus on masculinity is too narrow”. In effect masculinity, and in particular hegemonic masculinity, can only ever give a partial understanding of what men think and do. As a result without a focus on men we fail to draw out and articulate “the presence of ambiguity and subtlety, even contradiction, in the self-construction of masculinity and the masculine, hegemonic or not” (Hearn 2004, 59).

But more importantly, it is unable to attend to one of the subtleties of hegemonic mascu-
liness that is, “its very elusiveness and the difficulty of reducing it to a set of fixed positions and practices” (Hearn 2004, 59). As a consequence of this critique Hearn argues that “it is time to go back from masculinity to men, to examine the hegemony of men and about men”.

In Challenging Hegemonic Masculinity (Howson 2006) a similar critique was offered, although here the task was not so much to expose the problematic nature of the nexus between masculinity and men or to question the application of hegemony to masculinity but rather to critically explore the way hegemony was being applied and in particular as a system of domination within the CSM. Through a close analysis of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony it was shown that hegemony cannot be simply expressed as domination. Further that this focus on hegemony’s theoretical and practical fixity to domination does not distinguish it from concepts such as patriarchy even though the differences are important. This in turn exposes many of the current difficulties in the application of hegemony to gender.

In this context, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, 830–831) claim that the six pages in Gender and Power (see Connell 1987, 183–188) are “the most cited source for the concept of hegemonic masculinity”. Yet the discussion offered in these pages indicates that hegemony “does not mean total cultural dominance, the obliteration of alternatives” but rather, “ascendency achieved within a balance of forces, that is, a state of play” (Connell 1987, 184). However, in the same pages hegemonic masculinity is argued to express a “fundamental asymmetry” between femininity as the symbol of the “subordination of women” and other “subordinated masculinities” (Connell 1987, 186–187). A consequence of this type of application is ambiguity between the clearly Gramscian understanding of hegemony with its emphasis on a “state of play”, “consensus” and “cultural ideals” (Connell 1987, 183–188) and hegemonic as an asymmetrical configuration of practice. This is not simply semantics. The concept of hegemonic when applied following Gramsci both generally and also more recently to masculinity can be expressed as a system of normative practices and signification. Certainly in the literature hegemonic masculinity has been understood primarily, as a static and asymmetric norm imposed through “the maintenance of practices that institutionalise men’s dominance over women” (Connell 1987, 185 my emphasis) within a particular hegemony. But attempts to explain how the hegemonic comes to represent a consensual as well as, dominative category always already in a state of play suggesting symmetry but also dominatively stable suggesting asymmetry has become effectively mute and overlooked in the literature. This disconnection between hegemony and the hegemonic underpins the critiques of hegemonic masculinity in the CSM literature. It was something that Connell and Messerschmidt gave some attention to, albeit implicitly, when they stated,
[h]egemonic masculinities therefore came into existence in specific circumstances and were open to historical change. More precisely, there could be a struggle for hegemony, and older forms of masculinity might be displaced by new ones. This was the element of optimism in an otherwise rather bleak theory. It was perhaps possible that a more humane, less oppressive, means of being a man might become hegemonic, as part of a process leading toward an abolition of gender hierarchies (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 833).

This type of statement did not exist in the pages of Gender and Power and yet is significant because it begins to articulate the instability of hegemony that in turn exposes the dislocation between hegemonic masculinity and men, between identity and practice, the symbolic and the material. But more, it indicates that there is a politics involved that constantly must address contradictions expressed as antagonisms directed towards the struggle for power that in turn, always has the potential for ethico-political change. However, Christine Beasley (2008) quite rightly points out that what has happened is that hegemonic masculinity is now assumed to represent an abstracted “political mechanism” through which gender relations are reconfigured around a dominant version of masculinity within particular national and transnational contexts. Furthermore, it slides between a universal or transnational ideal and the particularities of national and even more localised expectations. What is important about Beasley’s argument is that it continues to expose the problematic application of the hegemonic to both universal and particular configurations of practice.

These various critiques now present a series of questions. How do configurations of practice specifically, become legitimate and then produce homogeneity and stability across universal and particular identities? If there is complicity why is it that men don’t actually engage the hegemonic configurations of practice completely and directly? Most crucially, how can we begin to explain this complicity as well as, this simultaneous disenagement from hegemonic masculinity?

Contradiction and the Nature of Dialectics

Henri Lefebvre in Dialectical Materialism (1968, 21) argued that formal logic seeks to determine the workings of intellect independently of the contingent content of any situation. Formal logic studies purely analytical transformations and inferences where thought is concerned only with itself and as such, it obeys only itself and its “central laws”. These are represented by the law of identity that claims if something is, then that some thing is (If H, then H); the law of non-contradiction that makes the claim, if some thing is and can be shown to be true then it is impossible to argue that at the same time the same some thing isn’t or is not true (Not both H and not-H). Further, the law of the
excluded middle states that some thing either is or it isn’t, there can be no middle position (so Either H or not-H) (Clark 2008, 26). Notwithstanding the analytic purity of this formalism and its concomitant inability to support the existence of oppositions and their mutual interpenetration, it remains influential in maintaining inter alia an androcentric framework for the understanding of identity (see Plumwood 1993). In other words, the nature of classical logic has inherent two disquieting considerations for knowledge and meaning about identity. First, it is never satisfied with a result that is partial or contingent, that is some thing always is and second, it will not tolerate a contradiction or inconsistency, in other words is and isn’t are mutually exclusive. In the Science of Logic (1969) the German political philosopher G W F Hegel (1969, 439) went against the prevailing formalism claiming that “everything is inherently contradictory” [italics in original]. The implications of this statement are immediate and important for our understanding of domination and more broadly, hegemony.

Through the law of contradiction, Hegel (1969, 439) put forward the idea that opposition and the resultant contradiction are central to the meaning of identity and that the classical mutual exclusivity of is and isn’t in logic represents a negative form. This negativity though, ignores the positivity of negation for example, to claim some thing is requires a simultaneous claim to isn’t and therefore identity will always be expressed as a “negation of the negation” (Hegel 1969, 416). In other words, the negation or antithesis is as real as the first term or thesis. It operates in the same sphere of thought and completes the thesis by showing its one-sidedness. But ultimately the negativity of antithesis can only complete itself and the contradiction within the positivity of the thesis and begin a new determination (Lefebvre 1968, 32–33). In this way negativity is part of the creative process and posits contradiction as the “profonder determination … of essence” and the “root of all movement and vitality” in life (Hegel 1969, 439). Thus contradiction rather than being seen as logically impossible or where it exists acting as a negative force, now assumes a positivity that enables identity to transcend its components or limits expressed as oppositions and produce a synthesised identity. Synthesis represents completeness of the dialectic that in turn, represents a resolution of contradiction upon a higher plane of thought (Grier Hibben 2000, 12).

Hegel believed that the dialectic was the method through which could be achieved the movement towards order, clarity and completeness that transcends the chaos, ambiguity and incompleteness created by the immediacy of particular sensations, perceptions and feelings. From this dialectical movement the truth of consciousness becomes the Idea. In other words, from, (1) the Idea as life (Das Leben) representing the idea in its simplest state that is, individuality as immediacy, to (2) the Idea as knowledge (Das Erkennen) representing a state of mediation or differentiation that produces a definite consciousness of its characteristics and relations that is, itself as particularity, to (3) the Absolute Idea (Die absolute Idee) that represents the final synthesis of knowledge so that all imme-
diacy and particularity are embraced in the one, the Absolute Idea as universality. In its simplest form the living body embraces the three moments of the Idea, immediacy, particularity, and universality as a complex system exhibiting a negative unity, that is, a unity that combines within itself differentiated, opposed, but at the same time essentially related parts; it is a unity in the midst of difference (Grier Hibben 2000, 139–140). However, for Hegel the fundamental problem of existence is that the Idea and its reality do not correspond and so the process of life must consist of overcoming this alienation between particularity and universality to reach the stage of absolute consciousness.

The proposition that identity and meaning can only find their fullest expression in knowledge transcending real life was criticised by Karl Marx in his social analyses of the individual caught in the developing capitalist mode of production. This critique centred on inter alia Hegel’s fundamental assertion that all contradictions are merely oppositions that can be resolved on the basis of positivity and progression (Lefebvre 1968, 46). Further, that real social relations are just the crude ground from which the relations between ideas become synthesised as truth and thereby, dominative. This dominative expression takes the form of the State or political society expressed as the universal and Absolute “ethical Idea” (Hegel 1967, 155). In contrast, Marx showed, while retaining more of the Hegelian dialectic method than some of his adherents would like to admit (Wilde 1997, 278), that particularly in the new capitalist mode of production the knowledge that produces meaning and identity always has a material base that is, the real actions between worker and capitalist negotiating the real relations of labour in production, from which is sourced the “essential contradiction” (Wilde 1989, 21). More importantly, this essential contradiction is not merely opposition that can be dialectically overcome within the capitalist system. It cannot be synthesised to produce the Absolute ethical Idea because the material reality of the contradiction is that it expresses an antagonism that is internally incommensurable and irreconcilable. Marx (1975) argued that capitalism fell outside of the Hegelian dialectic paradigm and so although “the proletariat can and must emancipate itself” it cannot do this “without abolishing the conditions of its own life”. In other words, the dialectic movement that transforms real relations into systems of ideas represented by the State leads to a social unity between State and people that cannot be supported because it does not fit with or ameliorate the social reality. The best that the Hegelian dialectic can produce within the capitalist system is State mediation of the market and the people and of course in Marxism real emancipation can only be realised through “non-mediated reconciliation” (Laclau 2000, 46).

Thus, mediation is a crucial point of departure to understanding the nature of the hegemonic because it exposes the task of overcoming the impossibility produced by antagonism and therefore the incommensurability of social identities operating within a dialectic system. Marx developed this process of mediation in *Capital Volume I*, where he analysed the nature and operation of the commodity because it more than anything else
represents the embodiment of capitalist dislocation. Marx (1974, 47) referred to commodities as “masses of congealed labour-time” and in so doing introduced the process of mediation within this essential contradiction. The point of departure for mediation is the commodity as value but where value represents labour as manifest in the opposition between use and exchange. In effect a commodity comes into the world with a “physical or natural form” that expresses a usefulness or use value [UV]. But as a commodity its character is two-fold and so it is also a “depositor[y] of value” expressed as a “value-form” or exchange value [EV] (Marx 1974, 54). In exposing the dualism of labour and value within the commodity Marx is also alluding to the impossibility of the commodity. In other words, a situation in which EV must work to negate the evidence of UV but this does not happen with the positivity of Hegel’s negation of the negation because the product does not represent the Absolute but rather money. It is money that supplies “commodities with the material for the expression of their values” and “represent[s] their values as magnitudes of the same denomination, qualitatively equal and quantitatively comparable” (Marx 1974, 97). Thus money acts as a mediator, forcing commodities to take on its own form/value as a “price or money-form”. This new money-form does not equate to the physical or natural form of the commodity but reflects an “ideal form” (Marx 1974, 98). Thus money transforms the products of real activity that emerge from real social relations into an exchange process that creates a negative reality (Wilde 1989, 70) in which EV and UV are caught in an “alienated form of differentiation” (following Plumwood 1993, 443).

The importance of this analysis by Marx is that it exposed for the first time the impossibility of dialectic synthesis. An impossibility that is inevitable because the nature of contradiction is not just an oppositional reality. Therefore EV cannot simply content itself with defining itself in terms of labour but instead must include in its value-form things such as, subjectivity and desire. However, all things have their meaning but when EV enters, the original meaning is transformed and in the process the value-form is altered. Thus EV no longer exists simply as opposition within the materiality of the base but now must mobilise and engage thoughts, morals and culture and it does this via money. This is precisely a hegemonic process. In other words, EV cannot express itself on its own terms but must use money to become the determiner of other identifications. In this way its relationship with money enables it to become more than just value-labour and thus go beyond materiality. It requires access to and synthesis with the whole of the superstructures. So regardless of its starting point its expansion and ultimately its existence is reliant upon its hegemonic tendency.
The Complexity of Hegemony

In the previous discussion classical formal logic was shown to set the universal abstract parameters from which the process of identification develops. Its laws broached no contradiction ensuring that the logic underpinning the explanation of some thing ensured the purity and truth of that same thing. But the reality of truth is complex and problematic in that it is only what we find ourselves accepting within a particular context at a particular historical moment. So although classical formal logic confirms that everything is what it is and therefore cannot be anything else, self-identity is an example of contradiction. Hegel (1969, 412) argued that “self identity is pure abstraction [my emphasis]” that is, at one level it is abstracted from the world and subjective while at another level it becomes identity and part of the world of interaction, motion and change. So by following Hegelian logic as a point of departure we begin to recognise that self-identification or man-identifying-himself-as-man is always part of a dialectic process through which negation is the positive movement of the identity woman and its expression femininity into man and its expression masculinity. This produces Man as the Absolute. However, as the above discussion of dialectical materialism and the commodity form suggested negation does not in fact produce a seamless and natural synthesis. It produces the appearance of seamlessness and naturalness in which mediation is required to ensure the ongoing management of the dialectic that amongst other things obfuscates antagonism and dislocation to ensure the continuation of the signifier Man as Absolute. This process of dialectic negation has ensured the historical exclusion of women and femininity from the realms of reason, civilisation and ultimately superiority (see Lloyd 1984, Plumwood 1993) that today remains foundational to understandings of gender identification and practice.

Negation and obfuscation become clearer when the gender hierarchy presented as the “Masculinities Schema” in which hegemonic masculinity “asymmetrically” dominates other gender types (see Howson 2006, 59) is deconstructed. A starting point is recognising that within this schema gender is bifurcated into oppositional and mutually exclusive expressions that is, masculinities (= men, whose ideal is hegemonic masculinity) and femininities (= women, whose ideal is emphasised femininity). As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, 848) point out the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity represents the “ideal asymmetry” between masculinities and femininities. To deconstruct this relationship it is instructive to step back from gender momentarily and analyse the identity: human. The assumption drawn from the Masculinities Schema is that whether its natural, physical form is as man or woman (or some combination), human is a thing whose matter expresses both gender expressions (see also Lorber (1994) and therefore it is problematic to assume everyday man or woman represents a totalised and complete gender identity that is, to express hegemonic masculinity or emphasised femininity respectively; there will always exist aspects of both in
each. However, classical logic demands the purity of identity, that is if Human, then Human and so throws up an immediate problem because the assumption is if Human, then Femininity but also, if Human, then not-Femininity (masculinity)\textsuperscript{6}. Therefore, to identify as human is to exist as a gender contradiction that is, with the expression of both femininity and masculinity. To make sense of this \textit{prima facie} contradiction within the Masculinities Schema a suturing of the opposing gender expressions is required. It is here that the hegemonic aspect of gender emerges as a mediating quality and assumes the moment of aspiration of men and women both in signification and practice. However, the nature of this opposition or ideal asymmetry has inherent antagonism making impossible the synthesis of masculinity and femininity yet at the same time requiring it. The outcome of this requirement, the appearance of completeness, is achieved through a \textit{suture}. Michelle Barrett in \textit{The Politics of Truth} (1991, 66) explains that the postmarxist use of \textit{suture} recognises “Derrida’s work on deconstruction” and in particular where the traces of the old cannot be destroyed but remain as sedimentary deposits, even, and indeed especially where the new is trying hardest to exclude the old (deconstruction being the method of uncovering these buried traces).

As in the capitalist mode of production money mediates and sutures the opposition EV and UV but more importantly, it enables EV to become the hegemonic. In gender this suturing task is assumed by a particular form of masculinity: hegemonic masculinity. However, before it is possible to further develop the nature and operation of hegemonic masculinity it is first necessary to explore some aspects of the complicity that is central to hegemony.

Hegemony represents the building and maintaining of a worldview, as “unstable equilibria” (Gramsci 1996, 180), through \textit{authority}; the latter understood as the product of power and legitimacy (see Howson and Smith 2008, 1–15). In other words, hegemony represents the dialectical and historical movement from the economic-corporative or particularity of interests to the ethico-political or universality of interests. In this movement it is imperative that the hegemonic group generates desires, interests and values that are broad enough to gain the complicity of others (Fontana 2006, 56). In the first instance, this process is not imposed aprioristically that is, according to a pre-established plan set over and above or prior to social life. Even though through history it may well assume a priori status and come to express forms of essentialism and reification. When the latter occurs the hegemonic must think and act in what Gramsci (1996, 17) referred to as an “economic-corporative” way that is, to promote its own interests and values above opposing interests that in turn are removed to the realm of the alien and inferior leaving hegemony with the appearance of completeness and stability.

Crucial allies with the hegemonic group in the reproduction of hegemony are the “traditional intellectuals” (Gramsci 1971, 6–7). While the intellectual task is to preside over
historical continuity and tradition, in order to do this they must be able to convert the corporative signification into hegemonic or universal signification that presents authority as the appearance of an ethico-political reality. These intellectuals operate within the institutions where hegemonic authority is embedded such as, religion, the mass media, the work place, government departments and the judiciary (see Connell 1987, 184). The result is that the hegemonic group acts reggressively no longer leading in a moral and intellectual way and seeking consensus but rather, by resorting to coercion, conducted and/or condoned via State institutions. We now have a situation of closure or asymmetry that is no longer able to represent and include the diversity of people and interests. In effect, the intellectuals have effectively mobilised the system to protect hegemony’s “hegemonic principles” (Howson 2006, 23) by expelling opposition and in so doing, disarticulating the people and antagonisms. As a consequence the asymmetry appears stabilised. This situation of coercion and “system closure” underpins hegemony as “dominative” (Howson 2006, 29).

Hegemonic principles play a central role in hegemony. Their objective is twofold. First, they define and describe the hegemony by setting out the broad principles that then determine the identifications, configurations of practice and relationships that in turn become legitimate and ultimately, normative. Second, these principles represent the desires, interests and values that the hegemonic is able to extend into social life and thereby expand the hegemony. Because of this they are also the desires, interests and values that must be protected so as to ensure the continuation of the nature, operation and ultimately the reproduction of hegemony. Hegemonic principles though, are not given aprioristically they are always the historical product of the complex accumulation of contradictions imposed on and being imposed by real social relations, practices and consciousness. Therefore, they are never determined but always “overdetermined” (see Althusser 1969, 97–101; Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 97–105). For example, in the hegemony of men the hegemonic principles that assume centrality are heterosexuality (that involves marriage, reproduction, eroticism etc.), breadwinning (that involves economic autonomy, wealth, paid labour etc.) and aggression (that involves competitiveness, toughness, authoritarianism, sport, warfare, misogyny, etc.) (Howson 2006, 73–76).

Opposed to dominative hegemony is aspirational hegemony (see Howson 2006, 31). The latter begins with a crisis of authority and the mobilisation of organic intellectual activity that seeks to construct a progressive, moral and intellectual hegemonic force or “war of position” (Gramsci 1971). Aspirational hegemony is also tied to the idea of ethico-political described as the “moment of the universal and of liberty” (Boothman in Gramsci 1995, 575). As such, aspirational hegemony is (i) never complete (ii) developed by “organic intellectuals” in such a way that it engages the people in a moral and intellectual way rather than forces people to comply and, (iii) socio-historically articulated around renewal. There are few examples of aspirational hegemony although Gramsci’s
(see 1971, 65–66) discussion of the Jacobin movement suggests its hegemonic principles expressed organic (intellectual/mass) authority. In the same way the solidarity movement in Poland represented a form of aspirational hegemony (see Laclau 2005, 81). Nevertheless, what we can point to as the basis for aspirational hegemony is that its hegemonic principles promote consensus and give recognition to the heterogeneity of the people. Therefore, principles such as self-determination as opposed to nationalism and/or respect as opposed to equality or even justice as opposed to (black-letter) law express dyads whose progressive reconciliation in turn offers the possibility of a new hegemony.

However, it is not surprising that when we think of hegemony we understand it in its dominative form given that the dominative hegemony or worldview is marked by capitalist, Anglo, white, Christian, heterosexual, Western, masculine identifications and practices. All these hegemonic expressions are dominative because they emerge from a corporativist consciousness and must continually reproduce their ascendancy in the face of challenge. However, social democrat, feminist, anti-racist, secular, queer, coloured, humanity identifications and practices are increasingly being exposed as antagonisms to each hegemonic expression producing a crisis of authority albeit at differing levels. Equally it is possible to recognise these antagonisms becoming increasingly organised albeit, again at different levels of complexity and efficacy. Nevertheless, such challenges as they appear are well managed by the traditional intellectuals who are able to keep the potential for a “war of position” (Gramsci 1971, 238) between the various antagonisms disarticulated and fragmented (see also Connell 1983, 182). This system of disarticulated antagonisms represents identity politics.

Hegemonic Masculinity as the Empty Signifier of Gender

So far this deconstructive examination has opened out hegemonic masculinity in a way that emphasises the importance of contradiction, dialectic, antagonism and dislocation to understanding its operation in the gender order. Most importantly, hegemonic masculinity has been argued to assume a mediatory role in gender. A role that is precisely about and for producing and maintaining hegemony whether constructed as dominative or aspirational. Through analysis of Hegel, Marx and Gramsci what becomes central to the projects of action and identification is the need to deal with the always emerging antagonisms and their potential to produce dislocation. Postmarxism takes this analysis further by giving it a contemporary relevance through the development of plurality and instability within equivalence.

In the context of gender, the primary operation of the hegemonic that is, masculinity, understood within postmarxism is to suture masculinities and femininities in a way that ensures the “currently accepted answer” (Connell 1995, 77) or legitimacy of the hegemony of men (see Hearn 2004) across national, international and transnational gender or-
ders. Seen in this way the significance of hegemonic masculinity for gendered social life is made visible not simply by uncovering the configurations of practice it sets out as legitimate and normative such as, heterosexual practices, breadwinning practices and aggressive practices but rather by uncovering the conditions for their existence. This mediatory task resonates with what Fontana (2006, 56) referred to as the “crucial relation” within hegemony that is, between the material/economic and the generation of ideological, cultural and moral/intellectual ways of thinking. The representation and mediation of hegemony is precisely the role of an “empty signifier” (see Laclau 1990, 1996, 2000, 2005, 2006). To refer to some thing as an empty signifier is not to suggest that it is simply a signifier without a signified. In other words, that it represents some thing but lacks any meaning or that meaning is marked by relativism. Following Laclau (2006, 107; 2005, 170) the idea of empty signifier represents a totality that is “literally” impossible but is nevertheless inextricably tied to the process of hegemony through which equivalence can be achieved.

This idea of the impossible totality is important for gender because it challenges the idea that the hegemony of men is natural and therefore complete and unchallengeable. Impossibility also resonates with Connell’s (2000, 54) discussion of gender orders as sets of relationships that represent connections but also, and most importantly, divisions between people, groups and institutions. In other words, no gender order is ever able to complete itself because there is always antagonism and therefore dislocation that in turn limits the real universality of any identity. As such, hegemony can only ever express the appearance of completeness and as the earlier discussion pointed to, this appearance becomes dominative when it is created through coercion and exclusion as a reaction to a crisis of authority and aspirational when it is created from a crisis through moral and intellectual leadership that recognises inclusion through continual change and renewal. Through the Masculinities Schema hegemonic masculinity was shown to represent gender as a whole. It is a representation that is reflected in the CSM literature when hegemonic masculinity is referred to as the ideal. If in fact hegemonic masculinity represents gender as a whole it has to present the hegemonic principles of the hegemony of men as capable of becoming universal principles. To do this it must re-construct itself as an empty signifier and as such, show itself as social but also able to transcend its own corporativist identity to allow the incorporation of other gender identities. However, as Connell’s masculinities theory (1995) and brief development of femininities (1987) shows, such incorporation is conditional on other gender identities aligning not so much their practice but their aspirations and then their practice with the hegemonic. Gender identities unable to align with the hegemonic principles will ensure their exclusion. However, exclusion is a subtle process that moves beyond the exclusion from practice to the exclusion from moral life. For example, gay men currently fight in wars, enforce laws, party in the streets at mardi gras, live with partners and buy houses. So it is not necessarily configura-
tions of practice that they are excluded from but the morality of the community. It is this latter aspect that ensures their ultimate exclusion but most importantly, only when required to maintain the hegemony.

This idea of exclusion born of antagonism is important because while it marks what Laclau (2006, 108) calls “the limit of objectivity” that is, nothing can be explained totally outside of social relations it expresses the “logic of difference” that sutures together social homogeneity through predominantly coercive force. So for example, hegemonic masculinity allows queer celebrations in the streets of Sydney through what Connell (1995, 81) referred to as “authorisation” but once the mardi gras is over, the morality returns to heterosexuality. On the other hand, the “logic of equivalence” gives greater recognition to social heterogeneity by giving a greater emphasis to consensus, change and renewal through an acceptance of historic-social instability (Laclau 2000, 303). The important outcome for hegemonic masculinity as empty signifier is that regardless of which opposing logic is in operation its task is to construct and maintain hegemony through its mediatory task of suturing or chaining equivalences. Equivalence represents a particular identity recognising that it cannot close itself around its own desires, interests and values because of the presence of an antagonistic other and so it must align or chain its content with that of an empty signifier as the representative of the whole. Of course, this is precisely the case for masculinities and femininities through complicity and has significant implications for the ongoing critique of hegemonic masculinity. In particular, the criticisms based on reification and essentialism because as an empty signifier we can now see that the content of hegemonic masculinity while always unstable does not necessarily represent principles abstracted from the content of other gender identities nor practices that are asymmetrically imposed on everyday life. Its principles and practices are also not essentialised but rather represent those from the gender identities it represents. In other words, hegemonic masculinity is fully hegemonic and therefore, most importantly, to refer to it as an ideal is to give it objectivity and a transcendent position that does not match the reality of its own limits.

The limiting of objectivity and therefore the inevitable incompleteness of any order is a central aspect of politics (see Laclau 1990, 89–92). In effect, in any society there is always an “excess of meaning” that hegemony can never master (Laclau 1990, 89). We can of course see this in the structuring of gender identities around hegemonic masculinity and in particular, how this hegemonic structuring today excludes subordinate and marginalised meanings such as, queer, feminine, black, Muslim, effeminate and disabled from its normativity. Thus, to maintain the appearance of stability the hegemony of men must continuously emphasise complicity with its hegemonic principles and in so doing divert legitimacy away from the so-called anti-community and its principles, practices and identifications while simultaneously obfuscating the reasons for this exclusion. The impossibility of a unitary and totalised gender order ineluctably gives rise to the reality of
an antagonistic “frontier” (see Laclau 2000, 302) that acts as a line of delineation between the hegemonic and its antagonistic other. It is at this frontier that the gender order produced from the dominative hegemony of men experiences dislocation (Laclau 1990, 3–84) and as a consequence it is at this point that hegemonic masculinity is required to suture the various antagonistic identities with masculinity. More importantly, the depth of the limit of the frontier or what we might understand as the distance between the included normative and the excluded other also represents the source of the ethical experience (Laclau 2004, 287). And it may be the case that the ability of hegemonic masculinity to suture such a dislocation is impossible and at that moment it will impose complete exclusion. For example, Higate and Hopton (2005, 432–447) argue that “militarism is the major means by which the values and beliefs associated with ideologies of hegemonic masculinity are eroticised and institutionalised” thus the hegemonic principle of aggression exposes the frontier between the hegemonic aggression of the Western soldier and that of the subaltern terrorist. In turn it also exposes the frontier between what is deemed to be ethical in masculine aggression and what is not. At the current moment Western hegemonic masculinity is unable to suture this dislocation.

In the dominative hegemony of men incompleteness is precisely the outcome of the reflexive operation of hegemonic masculinity upon real people. In fact, the appearance of homogeneity produced around hegemonic masculinity is always a contingent reality in so far as, the complicity it requires from the vast mass of men (and women) can only ever be successful if the distinction between the categories hegemonic and other/s is clear (ontic reality) while the conditions for the distinction/exclusion is obfuscated (ontological necessity) (see Laclau 2004, 309). In effect, authority in the dominative hegemony of men is defined more by what it is not, than by what it is. This idea sits at the core of the logic of difference that continues to be operationalised around hegemonic masculinity in national, international and transnational gender orders. In other words, hegemonic masculinity achieves the appearance of homogeneity and stability by producing at best complicity and at worst ambivalence to its hegemonic principles. This order is not produced by correlating directly to the great mass of men’s and/or women’s real bodies, or to their real actions or to their real knowledge of their self, just as money does not represent the real value of something. Instead, the primary task of hegemonic masculinity is to act as the representation of the hegemonic principles of the people thereby enabling them to focus their desire and aspiration and in so doing produce certain hegemonic bodies, configurations of practice and identifications. It is the examining the historical ontology of configurations of practice that is far more important than simply describing the appearance and existence of social categories. Thus hegemonic masculinity as the empty signifier of gender does not set out the practices that men and women achieve but rather, what men and women aspire towards within hegemony.
Notes

1 The term deconstruction rather than deconstruct is used here because the emphasis is not simply about pulling the concept of hegemonic masculinity apart. In other words, it is more than just an analytic project. The importance of deconstruction here is that it leads the researcher to a questioning of the authority of hegemonic masculinity. In so doing, it enables exposure of its dislocatory nature (see Laclau 1990, 41–59) that is, its authority as grounded in exclusionary processes (see Lucy 2004, 10–14 for a discussion of the broader meaning).

2 The term dislocation in postmarxist theory refers to the impossibility of identity completing itself. All identity is understood to express antagonism between what it is and what it must exclude (see Laclau 1990). Thus masculinity is an identity that must exclude femininity. The difference between what is masculinity and what is femininity is dislocation.

3 The term hegemonic has traditionally been understood following Donaldson (1993), who following Connell describe it as “exaltation” as stabilising “ ... a structure of dominance and oppression in the gender order as a whole. To be culturally exalted, the pattern of masculinity must have exemplars who are celebrated as heroes.” This definition of hegemonic was initially examined by Wetherell and Edley (1999) at the level of psycho-discursive practice and concluded that such an approach failed to represent an appropriate connection with the men in their study. At a more theoretical level, this article argues that the hegemonic as a concept is best expressed symbolically as a means of producing complicity. The consequence is not immediately and clearly dominance and oppression but a form of equivalence between particularities. It is the conditions and nature of this equivalence that is determined by the hegemonic and therefore is of crucial interest.

4 The dialectic, although originated in ancient Greek philosophy. Plato for example, tells the story of two disputants, the one maintaining a proposition, the other opposing it, while out of the discussion there emerges a more exact and adequate statement of truth. This form is reflected in the Hegelian method.

5 The gender types contained and developed within the Masculinities Schema are drawn from Connell’s work in Gender and Power (1987) and Masculinities (1995).

6 This problematic resonates with Val Plumwood’s (1993, 437) argument that “feminists and others concerned to develop conceptual structures which can be tools of liberation need not abandon the field of logic entirely” but should rework logic through “critical scrutiny of dominant forms combined with awareness and development of alternatives based on engaged reason” Hegemony.

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DECONSTRUCTING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY: CONTRADICTION, HEGEMONY AND DISLOCATION

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