Reading through
Trans/formations, Resiliencies and Reconfigurations
of Masculinities: Approaches and Practices

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Editorial[1]

1. Reflections on masculinities in times of crisis

This issue is intended to contribute to the study of masculinities in the context of social, economic, individual and collective change. We talk about men and men's social practices in a contextualized way, proposing a reflection on masculinities from an interdisciplinary and intersectional point of view. In the past forty years men have been ana-

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lyzed within the social sciences as gendered social actors and subjects produced by and reproducing socio-cultural norms (Hearn and Pringle 2006; Ruspini *et al.* 2011). This perspective has allowed the unmasking of social constructions and, through a careful analysis of the intersections of gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc., an understanding of men's practices, subjectivities and power dynamics in a situational and relational manner.

We are interested in highlighting the tensions affecting men's experiences in the context of neoliberal society and its crisis: the uneasy identity and relational negotiations that processes of change imply, the discontinuities and permanences crossing different masculinities and the opportunities for transformation that current challenges can offer (Piscitelli and Simoni 2015). Our point of departure is the historical premise that sees in the socio-cultural dynamics generated by the crisis of the neoliberal model an opportunity for material and discursive redefinitions of men's experiences (Cornwall *et al.* 2016). Changes in economy, life organization, work and social imaginary influence everyone's experience, requiring a reconfiguration of forms of social organization and of gendered identities and practices in a relational way. The neoliberal system and its ideological underpinnings, despite the promises of success coming along with the obligation to comply with a rational, individualist and *workaholic* subjectivity, today are facing the unsustainability of this very model with its contradictions on a structural and symbolic level. The crisis of neoliberal subjectivity based on a self-sufficient and self-mastering subject involves having to face its opposite: blaming the individual for his own failure as narrated in the film "I, Daniel Blake."

The growth in financial globalization, by challenging State institutions, economic production patterns and national boundaries, has also contributed to questioning the foundations and forms of expression that have accompanied normative male subjectivity over the past two centuries. Globalization has shaken genealogies, cultures and traditions, generating both phenomena of homologation and re-emergence of traditional patterns as identity calls.

If we look to the West, the reduction and fragmentation of labor, the increase in unemployment as a structural feature and other crisis-related changes have challenged well-known forms of productive labor and, with it, the gendered division of labor. The

role of *breadwinner,* deeply attached to the construction of male identity, was faced with professional insecurity; this has contributed to a perception of loss, but also to the opening up of a different context that has led young men to seek meaningful practices for their subjectivities beyond productive labor. The questioning of the division of labor on the basis of consolidated gender roles and the greater involvement of men in care-work, by choice and/or by necessity, offers opportunities for redefining models of masculinity; in different geo-political contexts these opportunities articulate differently at a global level, and produce forms and paths of located and intersectional meaning-making. Deep changes also occur as a result of migration flows, which contradictorily contribute to reaffirming identities and questioning roles, hierarchies and main references for masculinity (Della Puppa 2014).

These transformations are accompanied by mixed feelings and reactions. On the one hand, we find an emerging, albeit not visible, male desire to break with dominant patterns and static roots inherited from previous generations; which leads men to experience, for example, new ways of living paternity (Magaraggia 2013), to participate more actively in caregiving roles, to embody and critically question masculinity norms by distancing themselves from sexist discourses and practices (Nardini 2015). Nevertheless, these changes hardly achieve public visibility, collective expression, or socially significant forms of promotion of transformation. On the other hand, revanchist positions are reaffirmed, manifesting men's anger and victimization (Ciccone 2012), intertwining with xenophobic and neo-nationalist reactions and/or with the symbolic dominance of transnational financial business masculinity (Connell and Wood 2005; Connell 2012). At the social level, however, the plague of male violence against women shows no sign of diminishing, but rather assumes new dynamics in relation to these changes (Magaraggia and Cherubini 2013).

The social and symbolic gender order, which used to be taken for granted and which provided men with apparently solid identity references, is currently becoming the main object for discourses and mobilizations, not only with the intention of overcoming it, but also when it is reclaimed in its conservative elements. Those narratives, clearly appearing as hostile to change, cannot however be considered as a linear result of a traditional hierarchical model. In this regard, it is interesting to turn to the feminist debate on

the crisis of patriarchy: we could speculate whether violent or misogynistic male behavior should be seen as a linear result of the past, and thus indicative of an incomplete transformation, or, by contrast, as symptom of a rupture with a "traditional" symbolic order and therefore to be considered "post-patriarchal" behavior (Strazzeri 2015).

Recognizing the intimate relationship between the model of neoliberal subjectivity and that of the hegemony of masculinity, a joint analysis of the crisis of these two norms becomes crucial for understanding patriarchal reconfigurations with(in) advanced capitalism. In this regard, a self-mastering subject who seeks self-affirmation through competitive performance and conceives of freedom as an emancipatory distance from corporeality and relationships in order to establish his own hierarchical position, can be considered common to both the neoliberal citizen and thehegemonic masculinity model, in their different declinations and plurality of expressions (Hernando 2012). We consider it relevant to emphasize the reconfiguration processes that this context offers, both in transformative and regressive directions. We write this editorial in the climate of women's mobilizations worldwide, the global campaign *ni una menos* against feminicide and the women's strike on paid and unpaid work. We write in the context of revival of a white masculinity that is gaining attention and consensus, which contributes to electoral victories characterized by overtly misogynist and racist *hate speeches*. A repertory of discourses aimed at providing answers to the disorientation created by the crisis in which reference to masculinity serves as a response to the perception of a threat to its symbolic and economic centrality.

The nexus between the tensions internal to neoliberalism and the construction of gendered subjectivity is, however, much more intricate and controversial. As Ida Dominijanni (2017) points out in relation to the global mobilization of women, «neoliberal hegemony owes much of its grip to the way it is rewriting political freedom and self-mastery over one's destiny». This idea of freedom, rooted within a self-mastery subject separated from the relational and contradictory dimension of human experience, in fact permeates many instances of men's antisexist movements, which take their neoliberal context as a reference point for the affirmation of individual freedom understood as full mastery and ownership of selfhood and one's body. In order to look critically at the politics of masculinities, it is thus important to approach the body and cor-

poreality as central elements, not as the result of biological destiny nor as a mere linguistic construct owned by its subject. Interestingly, Stagi reflects on these controversial tensions and aspirations:

> The idea of the body as a territory of control and re-appropriation of spaces for subjectivity, [and at the same time] the social blame of a non-perfect body [...] The gap between the real body and the idealized body leads to a constant sense of inadequacy, to an obsessive search for beauty that, like a drug, is never enough and needs constant massive doses [...] at the same time [...] As uncertainty and risk increase, body control practices increase as well, in other words, in a society where I can no longer control anything, the effects of my behavior that become visible (diet, fitness ...) give me meaning: a comforting surrogate for control and self-determination. [The intervention on bodies is thus the pursuit of corresponding to a social canon but at the same time] the paths of transgender and transsexual people show that it is always possible to depart from the body in order to be what "we want to be and not what society expects us to be" (Stagi 2010, 17, translated by the authors).

The reaffirmation of conservative masculinity models is, in other respects, paradoxically proposed as transgressive, opposed to a supposed politically-correct conformism. Hostility against the "society of good manners", accused of depriving men of their own identity roots, is a characterizing element of the rhetoric of mythopoetic men's movements (Risè 1993). This is also because of a recurring mechanism that labels as "ideological" any criticism of the dominant social structure, viewed as "natural." The reaction against the often moralistic, conformist, and normative nature of the "politically correct" leads to the conflation, in confused and contradictory ways, of this specific "male revolt against change" with the "populist" revolt against the establishment (sometimes led by the representatives of the economic *elites* as in the cases of the USA and Italy).

Masculinity therefore enthusiastically enters dominant narratives above all through the rhetoric about its crisis. The call to virility is referred to as an antidote to disorientation and the "crisis of virility" is used as a diagnosis of general social instability. The

theme of the crisis of virility remerges during times of change: historical research shows how nationalisms in the early 1900s elaborated upon a crisis of masculinity in terms of feminization (Mosse 1997), or describing it as the loss of men's natural instinctuality within the bourgeois civilization processes (Bellassai 2011); a crisis of masculinity returns during the years of the economic boom (Bellassai 2003). Therefore, the use of "crisis" as discursive category is not new and, above all, it is not neutral. It can be argued that reference to virility and its crisis are rhetorical devices supporting each other, at work at least since the end of the nineteenth century, to reinforce the hegemony of the hierarchy between the sexes and social differences between men and women (Lieblang 2015). The discourse on the crisis of masculinity also exists as a mythical reference, and as such it tends to counteract the erosion of meanings it faces. The crisis of masculinity can be invoked and this can generate self-victimizing postures, or convey paranoid representations of societal crisis (Bazzicalupo 2012) in which otherness (in terms of gender, culture, religion, etc.) appears as a threat. The appeal to a lost masculinity, whose boundaries seem well-defined and whose functions seem to ensure the proper running of social order, thus becomes a rhetorical tool for the "chauvinist political revival" (Mellstrom 2016). These discourses meet, and at the same time interpret in an ideological framework, feelings of anxiety and frustration of those social groups to whom neoliberal capitalism has failed to maintain its promises.

The ambivalent and open character of the concept of crisis thus leaves room for a negative representation of itself: what is perceived as the loss of social order does not appear as the context in which men can redefine their identities in positive terms, their relation with work, their places within family relationships, their sexualities; rather it becomes represented linearly as the source for the crisis of every man. These ideological representations propose a linear connection between the "crisis of the patriarchal order" and the crisis of individual men; between the "fall of a social order" and a threat to the identity of every man. Regarding social practices, critical analyses developed by feminist, anti-racist and *queer* movements (in work, in life, feelings, politics in relation to the current economic system) contribute to the decentralization of white heteronormative masculinity while questioning neoliberal biopolitical relations and offering alternative proposals to such dynamics.

2. Male subjectivities between conflict and subjection

This scenario shows the relevance of a critical understating of men's practices to be enacted transversally within social policies, research and public participation. This understanding should take into account both the economic-political and the symbolic-cultural dynamics involved in social change and gender relations. In these complex and confused processes of change, it is crucial, theoretically and politically, to interrogate male models and behaviors from an intersectional gender perspective, offering public visibility and voice to those trans/formations that differ from the dominant ones. We see the urgency of making room and meaning for different narratives of men's practices that can account for social change while going beyond the metaphor of the crisis.

The difficulty encountered in producing a critical reflection starting from the normative position of white heterosexual cisgender masculinity has limited this political journey for many men. This question also leads to wondering: how can we start from this normative position to relate to feminist and LGBTQI movements and use personal partial men's experiences for a transformative practice and thinking? These questions are at the core of men's antisexist engagement and fall under the political agenda of what Connell (1996) calls the "politics of masculinity." Precisely with regard to the "politics of masculinity", Connell pinpoints the *impasse* that would arise from the difficulty of practicing those "forms of more radical politics that are more familiar to us [and that] are solidarity-based mobilization around a common interest." (Connell 1996, 171, translated by the authors). Connell claims that a male antisexist movement has few possibilities of developing, given that it does not correspond to the expression of the interests of a specific social group, and rather it could rely on empathy towards other social groups' struggles or on ethical commitment.

> The structural problem of men's antisexist politics must be formulated in a clear way, because it is a problem that is constantly being evaded. *The forms of radical politics that we are familiar with are based on a mobilization of solidarity around a common interest.* This applies, for example, to the politics of the working class, to the national liberation movements, the feminism, and the gay-liberation move-

ment. But it cannot in any way be the primary form of male antisexist politics, because *the project of social justice in the relations between the sexes is directed against the interests that men have in common,* not in favor of them. In general, antisexist politics is necessarily a source of division between men and not of solidarity (Connell 1996, 171-172, translated by the authors).

One of the reasons for this *impasse* in the constitution of a politics of masculinity willing to question the gender order comes, in our opinion, from taking as political reference those "forms of radical politics that are most familiar to us," based on "solidarity around a common interest". In the conceptual scheme, which refers to the notions of hegemonic masculinities and subordinate or marginal masculinities as distinct groups, the only possibility of elaborating a critical relation with hegemony can be acted upon by the "specific category of men", whose interests clash with hegemonic practices. Nevertheless, the hegemonic masculinity order implies for all men, including for those in subordinate locations, a regime of subordination and subjectivities in order to make sense of their own experiences; this dynamic acts by also disciplining the experience of men whose social positioning corresponds (actually never completely) to hegemonic masculinity.

Within second wave feminist theories from the 1970s onwards, we find reference to the political urgency of going beyond the mere representation of women as a *disadvantaged social group* claiming political and civil rights. Radical feminist perspectives take up the conflict with masculinity as a reference point in order to question the pervasiveness of the patriarchal symbolic order, not just the distribution of power and privilege between different social groups (DEMAU 1970). Thus, Carla Lonzi, for the group "Rivolta Femminile", states: «Woman is not a social group but the other to man and man is other to woman» (Lonzi 1974). This reading expresses radical criticism towards the hierarchical gender order, not merely claiming women's inclusion in the system of political and civil rights, but also questioning the foundations of this very order. This approach is similar to the one expressed by *queer* perspectives with regard to the inclusion claims put forward by some LGBTQI movements: this radical stand builds on the refusal to consider sexual minorities as disadvantaged groups whose access to the system

of institutions and rights should be requested, and proposes instead a general critique of the compulsory heterosexual order.

The difficulty of interpreting different male postures within current social and gender-related changes is therefore primarily related to the following issue: the position of power assigned discursively and materially to masculinity and, at the same time, its inclusion within a mechanism of power and social relation that disciplines men's experiences. In a classic work on homosexual political thought, Mario Mieli states, with reference to a possible critical relation of heterosexual masculinity against the patriarchal system, that "there is no subjectivity without subjection. Revolutionary or potentially revolutionary subjectivity emerges from oppression" (Mieli 1977, 56). The cognitive privilege in mechanisms of power is based on the experience of subjection; this knowledge becomes the condition for political subjectivity, and in this sense Mieli agrees with *feminist standpoint theory* (Harding 1993). In this regard, Rosi Braidotti (1994) expresses a widespread doubt about male participation in the wider social and theoretical process of criticizing a hierarchical gender system:

> It must be very inconvenient to be a male, middle-class, middle-class intellectual in a historical moment in which so many oppressed minorities and groups make their voices heard; in a time when the hegemony of the subject of knowledge in the West is crumbling. Lacking the historical experience of oppression based on sex, paradoxically, these intellectuals lack a *minus*. Missing their lack, they cannot participate in the great wave of ideas that is shaking Western culture: it must be really painful to have no other option than being the empirical reference of the women's historical oppressor and to be called to respond to his atrocities (Braidotti 1994, 97).

These objections, rather than confirming the doubts about the feasibility of men's critical positions against the social and symbolic patriarchal order, invite us to rethink the categories at play when speaking about forms of conflict and subjectification in light of the peculiar positioning of men in this order. As Teresa De Lauretis (2002) observes, the theoretical problem presented by Mieli is partly because he did not have the chance to deal with Foucault's work and see that desire is not only repressed, but also socially

constructed, and how this is part of power relations. With a poststructuralist reading of power and subjectivity we can see that an embodied hegemonic subject without any experience of subjection can only be an abstraction: this opens the possibility of critical postures for white heterosexual men, aware of their privileges and at the same time that they themselves are subjected to disciplinary devices. Gender relations and sexed experience are part of power relations and are subject to linguistic constructions and symbolic representations, and masculinities are certainly at the center of those constructions that attribute material and symbolic power to men. A more complex reading of power, with the reflection of authors such as Foucault, Bourdieu, Gramsci and Butler, can help in the analysis of the relationship between the patriarchal system and the concrete experiences of men. It is necessary to explain the relations between differently situated subjects and their normative contexts of reference so as to gain adequate understandings of the links between subjectivity and social norms. This requires approaching power neither as mere explicit domination nor as exclusively institutional, but as a network of relations that produce desires and expectations affecting subjects' embodied experience. This reflection implies a more complex reading of subjectivity and desire as conflictual and colonized terrains, which applies, though in different ways, to "hegemonic" and to oppressed, subjugated, or stigmatized subjects.

3. Men's mobilizations against sexism

If we are willing to explore the possibilities stemming from the critical reconfiguration of this hegemonic male positioning, it therefore becomes interesting to turn to antisexist engagement of men mobilizing against male violence and against the gender order in their contexts. As a heterogeneous form of collective organizing, men's mobilizations have been referred to in general terms as *men's movements* (Messner 1997; Flood 2007), and have until now taken different organizational forms and political positionings including: gay liberation movements; fathers' rights groups; more explicitly antifeminist groups; local associations of men against violence; mythopoetic men's groups; grassroots activism and network-like antisexist or "profeminist" mobilizations (Kimmel and Mosmiller 1992; Pease 1997).

Since the 1970s, antisexism male engagement has been widespread in Anglo-Saxon countries and Northern Europe, and has collaborated with feminist movements, contributing to combat violence against women. The main feature of men's antisexist activism could be identified as the commitment to eradicating violence against women, as Flood has pointed out (2003). At a participatory level, the mobilization of men in conversation with feminisms can manifest itself in the form of individual commitment, small groups aimed at sharing experiences between men, more structured forms of collective participation such as associations or organizations, and also as networks with a more horizontal structure. Political claims and forms of organization within this type of collective engagement change depending on the economic and cultural context, their feminist genealogies of reference, as well as on the local history of political mobilization.

Historically, men's antisexism has led in some contexts to the emergence of established networks and non-governmental organizations that collaborate at various levels in academia, policy making and social intervention, focusing on the areas of gender-based violence prevention, gender education, and the promotion of active involvement of men in care work. Some notable examples of current transnational networks are the *White Ribbon Campaign*; the U.S.-based *National Organization of Men Against Sexism* (NOMAS); the *Red Iberoamericana y Africana de Masculinidades* (RIAM); *MenCare Global Fatherhood Campaign; Sonke Gender Justice* from South Africa; *Promundo Global* and the growing *MenEngage* global alliance, gathering nongovernmental organizations from all over the world with the support of international agencies such UN-Women, and connecting initiatives, campaigns, and grassroots groups involved in engaging boys and men in gender justice. These transnational organizations link local commitment, development and cooperation policies, and social intervention.

Engaging men in gender equality has become part of European politics (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2012; European Women's Lobby, 2011) in accordance with the European Commission's *Strategy for Equality Between Women and Men 2010-2015* (EU 2011); but also and especially among gender-sensitive organizations in institutionalized as well as less-institutionalized settings (Bergmann, Scambor, and Wojnicka 2014). From the perspective of grassroots politics, networking between organizations, local initiatives, profeminist advocates, professionals on the field, and re-

searchers has recently provided the ground for creating the European section of the *MenEngage* alliance, which is growing in affiliations and transnational connections after the board meeting held in Zagreb in 2014.

In those contexts in which feminisms have been partly incorporated within institutionalized politics, men's antiviolence engagement has followed more structured organization, also in order to dialogue with the political and social claims proposed by gender equality policies. In the contexts where feminist political experiences have taken up alternative forms of institutionalization or have opted for non-institutionalization, and where a different social fabric relies heavily on local associating networks as in the case of southern Europe, men's engagements can appear less organized, less homogeneous and less "visible" when compared to Nordic experiences. However, they can offer interesting proposals for theoretical reflection and political collaborations. In relation to the latter, we are interested in the ways in which critical discourses and practices are elaborated against patriarchal dynamics, starting from the position of normative male subjectivity and social privilege.

Looking at the Italian and Spanish cases of *Maschile Plurale* and *AHIGE (Asociación de Hombres por la Igualdad de Género)* networks, we can see that men's antisexist experiences differ from other forms of collective struggle and social movements, and from the critical instances offered by LGBTQI politics and mobilizations as well. Men's antisexist actors, mostly white, heterosexual, cisgender and with a high cultural capital, face social change by identifying themselves and the privileges coming from their normative social positioning as the main controversial grounds for elaborating critique and transformation, trying to stimulate processes of reconfiguration by focusing on their own experiences as men (Nardini 2016).

Quoting two key phrases from the *Homas Igualitaris - AHIGE* from a group, this transformative attention directed towards men's own experience socialized within patriarchal culture and willing to reformulate it starting from itself, is explained as: *El enemigo común es el machismo* (our common enemy is machismo) and *Cada hombre, una revolución interior pendiente* (to every man is assigned an inner revolution to be performed). Possibilities of deconstruction and reformulation of men's practices may arise in this tension between the desire for personal change, the need to develop effective col-

lective strategies and the ongoing critical perspective on power relations and on individual privileges. In the case of *Maschile Plurale*, the strategy adopted to stimulate such self-reflexive attention is exemplified with the practice of "speaking starting from oneself", borrowed from second-wave Italian feminism and performed among men in small reflection groups. This reflection crosses and fuels, although to a varying degree and with different characteristics, the mobilizations of antisexist men who want to give voice and body to their critical stands in relation to material-symbolic power relations. It should be noted that in recent years these men's antisexist experiences have contributed more and more to the discussion and joint work between straight and gay activists: based not so much on the pursuit of similar and political claims, but rather having as a common task the deconstruction of dominant sexual imaginary, normative bodily representations and hetero-patriarchal dynamics.

4. Academic research, conflict and processes of subjectification

Academic research is strictly connected to the realm of collective mobilizations taking a critical stand against dominant representations. Theoretical research can provide the social field with analytical categories and interpretative tools so as to contribute to acting in a more aware manner within the social context. At the same time, academic research can learn from social action on the risks of producing concepts as a separate, neutral and abstract business, and rather learn to work through questions with innovative ways to relate to consolidated knowledge. The journal AG-AboutGender aims to create a dialogue between these different dimensions, facilitating the conversation between academic research, forms of collective politics and social practices. Especially within gender studies it is fundamental to anchor academic research and theoretical work onto experience, and to uncover the presumed neutrality of knowledge that does not recognize its relations to the subjects who produce it.

Feminist epistemologies have contributed to going beyond a model of knowledge based on a neutral subject separated from the context and from the epistemological process; arguing in favor of rethinking knowledge-making in relation to experience. Harding (1986) proposed working with critical reflexivity and with the awareness of one's

own partiality, and Donna Haraway (1991) coined the term "situated knowledges" as a way to overcome the quest for positivist objectivity.

The criticisms of the social construction of gender roles that came from conflicting social experiences in the feminist and LGBTQI movements have generated research perspectives and analytical categories that are nowadays part of the academic scientific production. Feminist research, queer theory and LGBTQI studies have historically been rooted within political practice. In these cases, theoretical reflection is related, albeit not always happily or coherently, to political subjectivity and activism, producing therefore critical views that not only give voice to their activist position but also aim to deconstruct the dominant order and its naturalization.

Several genealogies of feminism have given birth to the presence of gender studies in universities, where the exchange between feminist activism and research remains very fertile. But even for feminisms, the relationship between social practice and academic research is conflictual. In Italy, despite the limited space offered by academic institutions to feminist thought, many young women have encountered feminism through academic readings, and others have started their political and personal journey starting from the academic sphere that in the Anglophone environment has seen rich production of theory. Many feminists have often denounced the risks implicit in the academic "institutionalization" of feminist research and the subsequent loss of radicalism and "alterity" (Melandri 2001).

In the academic circle, gender studies have revealed a strong vitality by orientating and promoting academic careers. This fertility in the academic community is ambivalent: on the one hand, it affirms the authority of critical thinking, on the other it also runs the risk of distancing itself from the political subjectivity it refers to. The criticism of the risks involved in the institutionalization process also addressed queer theory and stressed the need for ongoing awareness of the relationship between thought, research and activist social practices. Rosi Braidotti reflects on the academic vitality of feminists' thinking and, considering the role of men in this context, she warns us against a sort of masculine invasion of this field of study that could be reduced just to an academic subject:

> Despite my disillusionment, as a European feminist I am against the diminishing of feminism to "feminist theory" and the confinement of both of them within the academic discourse/debate. [...] [the men of the Academy] made short-sighted by what they have learned to recognize as "theory", they clear the way through feminism as if it were a field qualitatively similar to all the other academic disciplines (Braidotti 1994, 97).

The relationship between processes of subjectivity formation and production of critical knowledge is more controversial when dealing with studies of men in antisexist mobilizations. Given the lack of a comparable social movement and of significant forms of critical self-representation and self-reflection, in academia critical approaches on masculinity run the risk of becoming, more easily, an "object" of social research rather than acting as situated knowledge (Haraway 2000) speaking from and to subjectivities.

In the studies of men and masculinities, the social constructions of masculinity have been the subject of theoretical research for at least thirty years; emerging from within gender studies, with the intention of interrogating men's practices as gendered and situated. Despite coming along together with men's collective antisexist mobilizations and in conversation with feminist positionings, research on men finds it difficult to maintain a mutual exchange with activist social practice.

The dynamic relation between academic research and feminist political practice in women's, queer and LGBTQI studies has shown its fertility. As far as the studies of men are concerned, because of the scattered and unusual character of men's antisexist engagements, the relationship of mutual contamination between academia and activism is much less developed. The risk here would be to limit critical thinking in favor of an objectifying descriptive gaze in which the subject of thought disappears while leaving room for the object under study. Regarding the engagement of men against sexism, in recent years, a few experiences have emerged, usually with some difficulties in carrying out a constant and fruitful dialogue with academic research. An attempt to encourage a dialogue between social analysis of masculinity and men's antisexist commitment is the project *Men in Movement* started in Barcelona in 2015 from the collaboration between the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) and the association of men for gender

equality *Homes Igualitaris.* In 2016 this project promoted the conference *Men in Movement II* in Rome (Dec 5-6), thanks to the synergy between the men's network *Maschile Plurale,* the journal *AG-AboutGender,* and the Italian Universities of Padua, Genoa and Rome Tor Vergata. This issue of *AG-AboutGender* is one of the outcomes of this journey, which in 2018 will allows the organization of the third congress *Men in Movement III* in Barcelona, where we will try to put to work the synergy between research and antisexist mobilization at a transnational level.

Precisely because of the normative position of the masculine subject within mainstream power/knowledge dynamics, research on masculinities cannot limit itself to descriptive work. Within gender studies, even the mere descriptive research into social experiences, knowledges and women's biographies, previously removed from *his*torical and sociological canons, has represented an epistemological rupture. We therefore argue that, in order to engender an epistemological contribution, it is not enough to create "men's history" and social research on men by simply describing men's doings; rather, it is indeed crucial to start from explicit and self-aware references to the subject position of knowledge production, against discursive dominance of *Abstract Masculinity* (Nardini 2014). As observed by Simonetta Piccone Stella and Chiara Saraceno:

> Taking men as a research subject in the same fashion as women is a challenge that does not allow us to simply replicate the steps already taken towards one of two genders. The historical overlap of the male gender with universal human destiny, either in the internalization of self-image or in the reconstruction of events, in the concrete structuring of the experience or in its scientific arrangement, is a problem that extends and complicates the boundaries of the object. The study of the social construction of "men" requires preliminary work of decodification of linguistic categories and logical costumes, narrowed down choice of objects of the investigation, the detection of psychological mechanisms and practices men reproduce (Piccone Stella and Saraceno 1996, 27, translated by the authors).

The efforts aimed at generating a critical outlook on the social construction of masculinities and at questioning the underpinnings of hegemonic masculinity by heterosexual men owes a lot to LGBT studies and queer theory (Pustianaz 2000), and also to those very practices of non-heteronormative subjects performing masculinities differently from the heterosexual norm.

5. Intersectional approaches to masculinity and poststructuralist contribution to the reflections on subjectivity: the articles in this issue

Feminist thought, with the contributions of authors such as Bourdieu (1998) and Foucault (1994), has allowed us to recognize gender as a product of power relations and as a material-discursive device that operates intersectionally producing bodies and subjectivities. The articles collected in this issue can only partially depict the extent of these relevant issues, as well as showing the relevance of identifying theoretical analytical tools to deal with such situated gender dynamics.

Stefani's anthropological research *Peripheral masculinities in Praia: among privilege, subordination and resistance* adopts an intersectional approach and underlines how men's experiences are produced by the interactions and the mutual reinforcement of experiences of both privilege and oppression. In this case, the definition of hegemonic masculinity is not intended in terms of hierarchy among social groups of men, but as a symbolic field and a pervasive discourse that discipline those masculinities considered "marginalized" or "subordinate". Reading the framework proposed by Connell with poststructuralist thought, together with Foucault's understanding of power, makes it possible to account for the contradictions and ambiguities related to hegemonic masculinity.

Embodied male experience, in relation to the disciplining tool of hegemonic masculinity and conditioned by the material-symbolic contexts of virility norms as well as in reference to other forms of expression of male subjectivity, is in a constant process towards achieving a hegemonic reference, which, by its very nature, is unattainable and alienating. This highly demanding and disciplining practice of ongoing approximation to an unattainable norm has been described as the precariousness or crisis constitutive of the making of individual and collective masculinity (Bellassai 2011).

As a matter of fact, men's experiences are marked by the exercise of power and privilege, and current men's cultural imaginary refers mainly to symbols of power and authority. Power and powerfulness seem to be mandatory attributes to orientate oneself within the construction of male identity, without which normative masculinity seems to

be lost. From fatherhood to violence, what the articles in this issue highlight is the urgent need to identify innovation from persistence, as well as to grasp the resilient character of patriarchal imaginary. Another aspect that emerges from the research and analysis is the individual character of the transformation processes that occurs in men's practices, more than the political, public and collective dimension of change.

Among the articles in this issue, we can recognize how men's experiences are marked by the constant efforts towards achieving normative virility in Oddone's contribution *All men do it. The role of violence in the social construction of masculinity: the abusers' point of view.* Within the self-reflexive narratives of men who have exercised violence, their change is recalled as willingness and desire to engage in nonviolent behaviors through taking norms and values linked to non-violent male virility as positive reference points. The contradictory nature of normative masculinity reveals itself in the tension between the exercise of hegemonic norms and self-discipline. However, as Oddone points out, and similar to the explanation in D'Elia's contribution *Still fathers? Social changes and "crisis of masculinity" in the city of Bukavu (DRC)*, male violence has to be read primarily in connection with the forms of social construction of masculinities; also, by taking into account how this violence is affected by the crisis of hegemonic masculinity's institutions and genealogies. At the same time, the violence alert is part of public rhetoric about the crisis of masculinity and acts as a normative reference within society. D'Elia also underlines the urge to observe contextually both the signs of crisis and the resilience of masculinity: fatherhood is one of the fields where this tension is evident at the most, in which self-perceived inadequacy and attempts at transformation coexist despite not becoming visible at a collective level.

The article by Lombardi, *Fathers and Fathering. Men inside the Delivery Room,* for example, points out that even nowadays there is little attention to men's affective experiences related to giving birth, but also to the lack of sharing practices among men themselves. It is interesting to see how initiatives and activities addressed to fathers usually focus on men's experiences with no competitive pressure in relation to motherhood.

Similarly, Cannito's text *Parental leave, hybrid masculinities and new fatherhood in Italy: a complicated ménage à trois* explains how the current phenomena involving

'new fathers' and the new men's engagement in care work can represent a reference for the overall redefinition of the masculine canon. However, it points out that this issue can also come along with the revival of patriarchal models characterized by men as a support and guide for the family.

Another text that shows the controversial nature of the relationship between hegemonic models and the plurality of practices is *Men without orientation, Male gender and "Mediterranean" sexual behaviors* by Burgio, in which the boundaries between normative heterosexuality and occasional homosexual sexual interaction become more complicated and blurred. Burgio shows how polarization no longer concerns heterosexuality and homosexuality, masculine or feminine, but rather when it comes to classifying actors and practices as "active" and "passive;" thus, men's homoerotic practices that do not bring into question their heteronormative orientation are possible. These processes suggest reading through the mutual interferences among the sex-gender system, sexual practices and representations of sexed-gendered bodies, and call for going beyond gender binaries and their assumed complementarity. While questioning normative categories and distinctions between sex, gender and sexual orientation, it would be interesting to ask to what extent phallic imaginary as symbolic of domination also permeates non-normative sexes, genders and sexual orientations.

This allows us to see how discriminatory discourses against stigmatized and marginalized subjects relationally affect the embodied experience of white heterosexual masculinities. Exemplarily, homophobic stigma as well as misogynistic practices are to be read as constitutive to the construction and disciplining of heterosexual masculinity under heteropatriarchal relations (Kimmel 2012). As an example, homophobic jokes and insults have not only a stigmatizing effect on those subjects whose sexual and affective orientation does not correspond to the heterosexual norm, but they also act as a warning, as a tool for shaping behaviors, postures, and the bodily experiences of all men. While setting boundaries and exclusions, this stigmatization also has huge normativizing impact on the conditioning of practices, bodies and desires of the subjects who correspond to a "hegemonic" position within the gender order.

The need to reshape the categories for reading through male experience in its plurality, in its changes over time and in its social dimension is explicitly mentioned in Gian-

nini and Minervini's text *A Relational Approach for the Understanding of Hegemonic Masculinities.* In fact, this article proposes a dialogue between the notion of hegemonic masculinity and those social theories highlighting the relational character of subjectivity. Important in this regard is the work of Leek and Gerke, *Invisible and unexamined: The State of Whiteness in Men's Studies Journals,* which shows the interplay between normative positionings: while masculinity has been overshadowed for a long time and taken as the norm, 'whiteness' as a privileged category often remains problematically unquestioned as well. The authors remind us about the intersectional construction of privileges (masculinity and whiteness as co-constructive norms). The plural construction of masculinities is to be acknowledged with the intersectional awareness of the mutual interference of identity differentials (sexual orientation, sex, "race", but also age, class, nationality, educational level...) located within time and space. An interesting observation in this text points at the potential risk of highlighting plurality when it only serves to multiply categories following a logic of addition, rather than contributing to understating the complexity of situated experiences.

Rizzo's contribution *Other Extremists: Men, Muslims, Repressed Homosexuals, The Media Representation of Terrorists*" describes in her analysis how the reading of hegemonic masculinity as "an achievement of power" is increasingly loaded with contradictions that require critical awareness. Rizzo's intersectional approach help us see that the stigmatization of subordinate masculinities and the social critique of oppressive gender models have generated in Europe spurious alliances between xenophobic cultures, neoliberal politics and LGBT and feminist components against the otherness young Muslims perceived as enemies.

In their article *Men's Attitudes to Aging: Threatened, Performed, and Negotiated Masculinity* Glendenning Quéniart and Charpentier explain that it is in the elderly years that men might face tensions in relation to the main cultural references in the construction of their identity. The experience of aging carries with it practices of self-care and caregiving of close ones by men, for example; a redefinition of the bodily experience; and a different relation to productive labor as a key identifier for masculinity. Even if these changes could potentially challenge the boundaries of hegemonic masculinity norms, gender hierarchies are often re-stated and re-declined in controversial forms.

Once again, the centrality of differing personal experience comes to the fore.

Similarly, in Gin's text "*Male breast cancer and representations of gender"*, it is argued that not only age, but also illness, may erode or dislocate gender identity. Hegemonic masculinity makes men invisible to themselves and invisible as gendered subjects; this also influences the fact that men's illness, such as breast cancer, rarely are represented in the dominant gender patterns. By drawing a parallel with aging experiences, also personal narratives on illness can give voice to plural account of masculinities. This proves that there is still much to be done in developing concepts that can interpret men's experience by honing the original intuition related to the model of hegemonic masculinity, understood as reading of plurality, of historicity and of variability within the social contexts of masculinity.

The public discourse on stigmatized masculinities, such as against homosexuals, or on marginalized ones, such as against immigrants, as well as their self-representations are elements of a device that aims to group masculinities hierarchically. However, they are also part of the construction of a more complex system of disciplining: thus, it becomes necessary to develop a reflection on men's practices and masculinities to account for interrelated plural contexts, overcoming a reading on hegemonic masculinity as a specific group. The stigmatization of the forms of desire and affectivity that do not conform to the heterosexual norm does not act only on the victims but it also acts as a device that controls social relations, every man's experience and perception of the body: thanks to this observation, a spur to develop a common research field can be provided. At the same time, through the analysis of forms of social construction on masculinity, it emerges how some phenomena - homophobic anxiety, the representation of feminine as subordinate and some male changes as feminization - can also be seen as instruments that hinder masculine transformation.

The contribution *Among men investigate the homosociality to orient themselves in the transformation of the male* by Ferrero Camoletto and Bertone clearly points out how homosocial relations among men play a decisive role, both within unquestioned constructions of masculinity and within its critical and change-oriented practices. More generally, as noted by Pieroni (2002), both social practice and critical research must be able both to recognize the relations of power and privilege that characterize men's prac-

tices and masculinities and to reveal the alienating and disciplining impact they have on men's embodied experience and relationships.

The research on practices depicts a more general, interesting aspect: namely, a reading of power tools and processes of incorporation that might overcome the simplistic dichotomy between the dominated and the subjugated, between the stigmatized and those who adapt to the norms. As noted by Haraway (1995), the gaze and the desires of the dominated are not innocent, and phallic symbolism crosses the imaginary of non-conformist individuals as well (Rinaldi 2015). Power always involves the production of a kind of knowledge that also involves oppressed categories, and the complicity of subordinated subjects is an expression of this power. Far from the intention of proposing a non-conflicting and non-responsible vision for those who hold a position of power or privilege, these observations can suggest a less simplified reflection on the mechanisms of domination and subjection. Butler (1997) notes that

> the insistence on affirming that a person is passionately attached to his or her subordination has been cynically invoked by those seeking to reduce the subordinates' demands. Contrary to this view, I believe that the attachment to subjection is produced through the actions of power and that the performance of power is partially exemplified exactly by that psychic effect, one of the most insidious among its productions (Butler 1997, 15).

In the field of men's antisexist engagement, for example, the critical effort aimed at a change within power relations and men's experiences evidences, as we have seen, the need to rethink the concept of hegemonic masculinity in cultural models. However, it also conveys the attempt to contribute to a difficult and non-linear transformation rooted within personal experiences, by trying to create forms and spaces of male antisexist mobilizations that should be both coherent and apt to dialogue with feminist and LGBTQI politics.

Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the expressions regarding male experiences within transformation processes using precise theoretical tools and perspectives that allows us to grasp their ambivalences and potential. This analysis must be able to distin-

guish innovation from persistence, which are often confused. In order to read and to interpret these changes, it focuses on the need for a new theoretical framework that would reflect on masculinities, the need for a closer comparison with feminist, LGBTI and *queer* studies overstepping academic-disciplinary boundaries and political differences, as well as, eventually, the need for the centrality of associations, which should emerge from their niche. Nowadays, it seems legitimate to address the issue of a male crisis, seen as the inability of the patriarchal symbolic system to give meaning to men's lives and to the material-discursive productions built around the hegemony of masculinity, to provide tools to interpret men's experience within a context that is marked by the emergence of different female subjectivities and by the end of the compulsory heterosexuality model.

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