Plural Masculinities
The Remaking of the Self in Private Life

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PLURAL MASCULINITIES
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Acknowledgements

The making of a book is always the result of a long-time process. Along the road, there are always many people who cross our path and impact our lives. Doing research is never a solitary endeavour. My case is not an exception. There were people without whom it would have been impossible to arrive at the finishing line. First of all, I must thank Neil Jordan, my commissioning editor at Ashgate, for having invited me to submit the initial proposal that gave birth to this book as well as for his consistent interest in this project. My scientific curiosity about men and masculinities started a few years ago, when, after dedicating some years to the investigation of women and their family lives, I started working on a research project that was, instead, concerned with a male perspective of family, fatherhood and identity. Karin Wall, who supported and supervised my work from my undergraduate days to the completion of my PhD, was at the time the coordinator of the project. The work carried out together with my research colleagues, Sofia Marinho, Vanessa Cunha, Susana Atalaia, Sónia Correia and Maria do Mar Pereira, was also important in the empirical collection of the data. From 2004 onwards, a number of key events led to amplify that initial appeal for the subject. Another project, this time with Pedro Vasconcelos, Lia Pappâmikail, Dulce Neves, Vítor Ferreira, Vanda Aparecida and Pedro Alcântara da Silva enabled me to pursue this line of research. I am particularly grateful to Pedro Vasconcelos for all the illuminating theoretical discussions that we have had along the years, which have also allowed me to enlarge my knowledge on the subject of men. Without doubt, he taught me much about the paradoxes of masculinity. Without the financial support of the Portuguese Science Foundation and of the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon, my ‘will to know’ would have remained no more than a mere project. Alongside our daily basis of support, there are sometimes brief encounters that are a true source of encouragement. Jeff Hearn, who came to Lisbon for a seminar, was also a major help in broadening my theoretical horizons. I also owe my sincere thanks to Colin Archer who has proofread the whole manuscript and, more than that, also helped me clarify some blurry points. The enduring work that he has done throughout the making of this book was of major importance. Finally, I must also mention Samantha Holland. Through our exchange of emails during the past few months she shared with me the many hardships of writing. But, most of all, I thank my friends, my family and especially my mother, whose support and forbearance throughout the whole writing process will never be fully repaid.
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Introduction
Plural Masculinities:
Evidence from the Field

Early in the twentieth century the apparently indestructible monument of patriarchal masculinity began to crumble, initiating a process that relentlessly and irresistibly would gather pace over the succeeding decades. That process and its ramifications and repercussions, in practical and theoretical terms, provided the subject matter of this book. It was ‘a man’s world’, they said, but, though it went under, it was replaced by a brave new world of plural masculinities that, in my analysis, oblige us to draw some unpredictable and paradoxical conclusions.

As a first step along the road, we may consider the issue of identity, starting with the fragmented perception of it discussed by Georg Simmel. As he noted (Simmel 1989 [1908]), among many other ideas, identities will be more fragmentary the more the individuals are included in different social circles. To him, it was precisely through the juxtaposition of fragmentary and even contradictory realities that modern individuality became an ‘adventurous’ and freer enterprise, almost impossible to fully apprehend. Under the conditions of modernity, the universality of identities could not be embraced by any general theoretical framework. Individuality should, in turn, be investigated in the multiple forms of social interactions. A century after Simmel’s insights, the proliferation of concepts related to the transformation of contemporary social identities, which have become liquid (Bauman 2004), fragmented (Craib 1998), reflexive (Giddens 1991), contingent (Dubar 2000) or patchwork-based (Beck 2000), is definitely a sign of the times.

Yet, even if there is now more room for manoeuvre, identities still obey the powerful rules of social categorization – a point that we brings us to focus our attention on our object of study. For most people, a man is still a man and what defines him is, above all, the apparently simple fact of not being, or looking like, a woman. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote in 1949:

A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man. (…) In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. (…) He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.
But, nowadays, to present oneself as a man is perhaps no longer enough. The growing recognition of diversity has set more demanding criteria to evaluate a man’s identity. Is he heterosexual or homosexual? Black or white? Professionally successful or unemployed? Husband and father or single? Men are still men, but increasingly they define themselves – and are defined by others – through a myriad of material positions and cultural references. Any researcher interested in men’s lives and discourses rapidly sees just how much diversity lies beyond the inescapable inclusion in the social category of ‘man’. Only with great difficulty can the codes for ‘doing masculinity’ be considered universal or neatly related to specific social positions. My experience in researching men has confronted me, from the start, with more diversity than I could ever have expected before going into the field: at the time I had no other equipment than a handful of theoretical readings and a few empirical hypotheses on how to identify ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (Connell 1995) in Portuguese society. The fact is that I was unable to do that, which led me to enlarge my reflection on plurality and then on the cultural and material entanglements that constitute masculinities. Most men seemed to ‘be’ many things at the same time. Most men also seemed to occupy different positions in different spheres of social life, which led them to enact and exert their ‘male power’ very unevenly, according to the circumstances and demands of the moment. Many of these reflections, difficulties and findings are condensed in this book, following lines of research that have grown exponentially over the past few decades.

In fact, there has been an increasing interest in men and masculinities, driven by massive changes within the gender order, the second-wave feminist critical assessment of the dominating male culture and practice, and the development of critical scholarship on deconstructing the ideological singularity of a universalistic ‘male way of being’. The deconstruction of the patriarchal male figure, rooted in the traditional provider role and the assumption of uncontested authority over women, has established the need for a deeper understanding of contemporary masculinity as plural masculinities.

Yet, although plurality is a central feature of gender relations, no longer conforming to monolithic models, there still exists, as Raewyn Connell has argued since the 1980s (Carrigan, Connell and Lee 1985), a symbolic ideal-type of masculinity that imposes, on all other forms of masculinity (and femininities), meanings about their own position and identity. The concept of hegemony, as applied by Connell to masculinity/ies in an inspiring combination of Gramsci’s (1979[1947]) approach to power with a theory of practice, is a powerful but complex notion meant to capture the underlying dominating structures in gender relations that result in the subordination of women and in unequal relations between different forms of masculinity (e.g. Connell 1995, and also Howson 2005, Demetriou 2001, Donaldson 1993, Hearn 2004). In this view, one dominant form of masculinity gains ascendancy over other – subordinated and marginalized – masculinities, thus creating hierarchical relations among men and groups of men. Although hegemonic masculinity is essentially directed at the domination of women, thereby nourishing a traditionally dichotomized gender system that
cuts across social class, it similarly discriminates against men from lower classes and, even more so, gay and non-white males. From this perspective, masculinities are necessarily plural because, more than symbolic, they are related to different positions within a power structure, that is, a gender order that segregates men in accordance with how far removed they are from the hegemonic norm: white, heterosexual, professionally successful.

Hegemony and Beyond: The Dynamics of Complicity

The idea of plurality that I explore in this book is right at the centre of the heteronormative definition of masculinity. For that reason, I hope to contribute to our understanding of the many-sided building-up of identities among the so-called dominant mainstream group. By focusing on ‘complicit men’ – those who Connell defines as supporting hegemonic masculinity, though remaining ‘without the tensions or risks of being the front-line troops of patriarchy’ (Connell 1995: 79) – I am proposing that it is important to deconstruct the idea of a homogeneous dominant masculinity, normally associated with a man who is heterosexual and a breadwinner. In fact, most men can be viewed as complicit. They are not particularly powerful, nor do they influence the dominant cultural symbols of manhood. Conversely, most men do not explicitly defy the codes of masculinity. Yet, it would be a misnomer to see complicit men as merely passive subjects, sandwiched between those who are the most powerful and those who directly challenge hegemonic masculinity (e.g. gay men or pro-feminist activists). They are simply ‘doing gender’ (West and Zimmerman 1987), and in many ways making masculinity evolve into plurality. For this reason, the range of variations in the practices and the identities of complicit men is, in effect, central to our understanding of what is hegemonic.

As a result, the notion of plurality, which I defend in this book, is not only a theoretical tool to sort out different groups of men and different masculinities. Plurality is, in my view, an intrinsic feature of any masculinity. It is its formative and generative principle. Therefore any masculinity is always internally hybrid and is always formed by tension and conflict. Any masculinity, as any man, any individual, is plural both in relation to the material positions that locate him in the social world and the cultural references that constitute his universe of meaning and significance. For this reason, in the title chosen for this book there is an assumption that is theoretically-oriented more than simply aesthetic or just a reproduction of common assumptions about masculinities.

However, arguing for the internal plurality of ‘complicit men’ implies further reflections on the subject. As many others before, I speak of plural masculinities, but what kind of plurality am I referring to? The plurality that emerges from men’s practices in their daily lives? Or the plurality brought about by transformations in the proper codification of hegemonic masculinity? In fact, both these theoretical and methodological strategies have been used to disentangle the multiplicity of
masculinities (e.g. Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). However, in the first case, we would simply be arguing in favour of diversity, in so far as the breakdown of strongly patriarchal masculinities has promoted the rise of new forms of building oneself up as a man. Yet, the pluralization of masculinities also has transforming effects on the equilibriums of domination: not only of men over women but also of some men over other men. If patriarchal inequality is no longer the single code for constructing masculinities, are other practices and norms evolving into subordinated or even rebellious forms of masculinity? Or is hegemony becoming internally more hybrid? The present book intends to tackle this problem, which has captured the interest of various researchers reflecting on hegemonic masculinity (e.g. Tolson 1979, Snodgrass 1977, Cockburn 1983, Connell 1983, Kimmel 1987, Weeks 1989, Hearn and Morgan 1990, Segal 2007 [1990] and Collier 1995).

Finally, it is also imperative that we bring the dynamics of domination and hegemony down to the level of real men and real masculinities. In the contemporary context of gender change, how are plural masculinities, developing at the ideological level, being linked with the practices and identities of men? Is present-day cultural and discursive plurality matching the practices of men, and vice versa? In the light of these questions, investigating plurality among men requires us to reconcile material positions and culture. In advocating plurality in this broad sense, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, I am also refusing sociological dichotomies such as that which sets a limited vision of plurality, related to a set of materially identifiable positions in the social world, against a never-ending perspective on the discursive generation of identities.

The constitution of the self is a complex notion and process. In late modernity, plurality has become a buzzword in research emerging from theorization on individualization, privatization and de-institutionalization. In a world where the old roles are losing their place and both women and marginalized groups are achieving much more social equality, men are definitely facing new challenges. In this context, many men are perhaps changing, not only because the legitimate models (fictional or real) of what a man should be are shifting – for instance, towards the new caring father and partner – but also because the strategies through which men create a social self have been evolving into a sort of a *bricolage* of identities (e.g. Lash 1999). To say it simply, going back to the Simmelian metaphor, social circles are multiplying, thus allowing men to take on plural cultural symbols and practices in their daily lives.

**Changing Men and Masculinities: A View from the Private Sphere**

As a result, my major challenge, and main aim, is to offer the reader a contemporary portrait of the plural dynamics of ‘complicit masculinities’, which emphasizes the multiple, even contradictory, paths through which men are remaking their identities. By looking at heterosexual men, who are partners, fathers and breadwinners, the book proposes a simple but compelling thesis that rather than representing
a single development (for instance, from the traditional to the modern or from
the male provider to the male carer), men’s practices and identities are taking
on multiple, hybrid, even paradoxical forms, as they seek to find a new place
in private life. This is not a new idea. Several books have been written arguing
that masculinities are plural, in different corners of the world. However, fewer
books have specifically focused on the question of plurality among complicit
men or have placed masculinities in the realm of family life, its history and its
transformation. Similarly, fewer books have explored the links between empirical
plurality found among real men living in real families and the reconstitution of
hegemonic masculinity/ies. These considerations provide a good reason for
contributing another book to a topic as popular as masculinity.

Consequently, alongside the focus on the dynamics of complicity, a second
important argument in this book emphasizes the fact that an important part of the
genealogy of masculinity was, and is still, constructed in private life. Although
the power of men has become public (e.g. Walby 1990, Hearn 1992), family
and private relationships are not exactly ‘soft institutions’ in terms of gender, as
Connell suggests. Quite the opposite – I argue that it is in the historically privatized
contexts of reproduction and sexuality that key processes of domination are still
occurring, both materially and discursively.

We must not forget that the history of Western patriarchy is first and foremost
the history of the modern family, as the privileged locus for the reproduction
of inequalities, and therefore the exercise of male power. The transition from
traditional or pre-modern to modern family forms in industrial and urbanized
societies stemmed from major structural and axiological changes which had
a crucial impact on gendered institutions, norms and practices. The separation
of production and reproduction and the setting up of boundaries between public
and private lives, alongside the importance granted to conjugal families and
the development of the romantic couple and of new bonds of affection towards
children, gave new meanings to gender differentiation. These processes, which

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1 In fact, since Connell proposed the idea of plural masculinities, a huge number of
articles and books have been published on this subject (e.g. Kimmel, Hearn and Connell
2005, or Flood, Gardiner and Pringle 2007). Perspectives on plural masculinities have also
been developing on account of the growing link between masculinities and globalization
theories, with the focus on non-western masculinities and broadly on post-colonial gender
issues. Several recent publications deal with this contemporary issue (e.g. Morrell 2001,
Hodgson 2001, Lindsay and Miescher 2003, Ouzgane and Morrell 2005). Furthermore, the
notion of plurality has been thoroughly used by non-English speaking researchers. A good
example is found in French sociology, a field in which Bourdieu’s Masculine Domination
is not a single example. The works of Elizabeth Badinter or Françoise Heritier (1988) have
been/made important contributions to conceptualizing plurality. More recently other French
researchers have also approached the topic (see, for example, Castelain Meunier 2004 and
2005, or Welzer-Lang 2000). In Portugal, the first ones to focus on these subjects were
perhaps the anthropologists, who were engaged early on in the study of masculinities (Pina-
are generally referred to as the privatization of family life, helped to institute the role-model of a familialized man (Collier 1995) who should provide for and guide his family. Today, the disempowerment of men in private domains is not a fully consummated process, nor is the fusional family dominant, as anticipated by Burgess, Locke and Thomes back in the 1940s.

In fact, in spite of the persistence of gender inequalities, the erosion of patriarchy constitutes today a major element of our inheritance from the twentieth century, alongside the remaking of family organization in the direction of democracy, individualization and self-expression (e.g. Therborn 2004). That erosion seems to draw men into a number of broad movements of change, thus portraying a plural culture of masculinity, a polyculture of masculinity in the words of the French sociologist Christine Castelain-Meunier (2005). As I will argue in Chapter 5, quite a few men are seeking to be ‘companions’, as they value family inclusion as their main source of identity. Companionship-based masculinities are the corollary of what family historians such as Ariès or Shorter (e.g. Ariès 1965, Shorter 1975) called the making of the modern family, a process in which the ‘domestication’ of men had a key part. Today, for many men, conjugal and parental ties are still essential features of identity, but in a different way. Instead of strongly institutionalized gender roles, it is through relationships (that is, through intimate otherness) that men give meaning to ‘their selves’ (Giddens 1992). Other men, however, are constructing defamilialized masculinities, while substituting the old code of male familial responsibility by other self-fulfilling gendered alternatives. The defamilialization of men is also, however, an echo of traditional masculinities. The model for male hegemony during the first, or organized, modernity (to use Peter Wagner’s expression [Wagner 1994]) was, in fact, codified by complex schemes that emerged from the constant tension between ‘nature’ and ‘society’, freedom and control, heterosexual compulsion and family responsibility, thereby setting the figure of the sexual predator against the family provider, the responsible male adult who domesticated predatory sexual compulsion. Finally, in the move towards social individualization (Elias 1991 [1939-1987], Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), some men cherish personal autonomy and are trying to create a place of their own, which involves finding strategies to rebuild the self in a traditionally feminine sphere.

From a theoretical viewpoint, my key argument is that the composite character of masculinity, as a basic principle of power relations, did not simply result from the erosion of patriarchy. On the contrary, today’s plurality and hybridism is to a greater extent the development of contradictory forces contained in the traditional archetypes of masculinity. Evidently, new trends are also arising. The emphasis on personal autonomy, emerging from historical individualization, is leading men to change the material and mental sets of masculinity and domination. In this scenario, partnership and fatherhood gain a new value and a new instrumentality, as they have become as central to identity as the old patriarchal control was. However, the new male engagement in private life, a traditionally femininized sphere, is pervaded by the tensions between the predator and the provider, the dangerous and
the familial, the citizen and the father, thus generating ambivalence in the schemes of domination.

These trends emerge within the historical changes that have underpinned massive transformations at the core of the gender order. In contemporary societies, the decline of Durkeim’s or Parsons’s earlier ‘modern family’, which were symbolically dominant until the late 1950s, had further implications for femininities, masculinities and – more importantly – the relationship between the two. Men are, to a great extent, invited to embrace ‘new expressive roles’ within the private sphere, beyond the traditional model of the authoritarian provider or the dominant sexual predator. In so doing, many men transform the old features of masculinity, yet masculinity, rather than a complete metamorphosis, often results from the mix of old and new. That is one of this book’s two chief premises. Another is that it is impossible to fully understand masculinity without looking into its connection with change in both the family and women.

Two Case Studies in Contemporary Portugal

Over the past few decades, gender relations in Portugal have changed dramatically, in tandem with the transition of the country from the condition of a poor and largely illiterate society to that of a modern, more developed, urban society (e.g. Wall 2001, Viegas and Costa 2000, Aboim and Marinho 2006). In 1960, a third of the population worked in agriculture, the fertility rate was 3.2, 90.7 per cent of marriages were in (the Catholic) church, and women were legally charged with management of the household and owed obedience to their husbands. Only 18 per cent were employed. Family organization was generally based on strong gender differentiation, an institutional orientation and a pattern of integration that associated the husband with autonomy and the public space. However, family life has changed enormously: in 2001 only 5 per cent of the population was employed in the primary sector, the number of children per woman was 1.5, 40 per cent of marriages were non-religious, 25 per cent of children were born outside marriage, the divorce rate rose to 1.8, 65 per cent of women between the ages of 15 and 64 were in full-time jobs, and both husband and wife were legally responsible for household life.

The 1974 revolution and the subsequent introduction of democracy ended almost fifty years of right-wing dictatorship (1926-1974), bringing in clear-cut changes in values and legislation, strong recognition of women’s work, the affirmation of secular tendencies, and a new logic for the state’s responsibility towards families. These are now some of the specific features of the national context in Portugal. They have contributed to developments in family patterns that reflect certain dissimilarities of outcome in relation to other southern European countries, e.g. the prevalence of dual-earner couples who work full-time, fairly high divorce rates, emphasis on the provision of child-care facilities, and links between family policy and policy for gender equality. At present, research has
already pointed out important changes in the position of men in family life and has brought in new facts to help us understand persisting inequalities in gender relations (e.g. Aboim 2009, Wall 2008, Wall, Aboim and Marinho 2007). In the face of the rapid pace of change in gender relations, Portugal offers, quite clearly, a challenging profile that I explore in the last three chapters of the book.

The empirical data used, particularly in Chapters 4 and 5, is drawn from two qualitative investigations, both of which aim at understanding the different scenarios of men’s practices, discourses and identities. My main concern was to know to what extent and in what way men and masculinities are changing. And, against this background, how gender domination is being reconstituted in a society that witnessed such a strong backlash against the enduring patriarchal model of the dictatorship period (1926-1974). Analysis of the interviews with Portuguese men carried out since 2005 has allowed identification of a number of important changes in a context where late processes of modernization have brought in a sweeping transformation in gender relations.

Data from the first body of research mentioned above, which I analyse in Chapter 5, was collected in metropolitan Lisbon. In the period 2005/6, around 60 in-depth interviews were carried out with fathers, all of them heterosexual men, living in various household arrangements (conjugal, blended and lone father families). The main purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between the making of masculinities and the dynamics of family life among men with different family trajectories (e.g. Wall, Aboim and Marinho 2007). The comparative strategy of this research permitted a deeper understanding of the varied links between men, masculinity and family life, at the same time revealing the significance of this relationship.2

The second study, which was carried out some time after the first, adopted an intergenerational methodological design. Its results are partially described in Chapter 6. In total, 30 men were interviewed according to a narrative method aimed at exploring social change in men’s discourses on sexuality, intimate relationships and their most significant life events. Ten three-generational male family lineages were covered by the research – grandfathers, fathers and grandsons, who live, at present, in urban Lisbon and rural, semi-industrialized Mondim de Basto (northern Portugal) and belong to families from different class backgrounds.3 Although these are genealogical generations (Manheim 1956), each generation of interviewees also experienced their adolescence and youth in

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2 This research was funded by the Portuguese Science Foundation, a public entity, and, at the time, was coordinated by Karin Wall, in the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon.

3 The research on male family lineages was also funded by the Portuguese Science Foundation. Interviews with family lineages were carried out using a snowball sampling method, in two regional settings, from September 2007 to May 2008. Families were selected according to the educational attainment of the younger generation: basic, secondary or higher education.
different historical times (Viegas and Costa 2000). The grandfathers lived under the right-wing authoritarian and colonialist regime of the Estado Novo (1926-1974). They were privileged witnesses of the country’s gradual transition from a profoundly rural society, generally illiterate and poor, to an increasingly urban society. In the late 1950s and the 1960s, Portugal started industrializing and developing a modern service sector, though, at the same time, it was enduring the limitations of a long-lasting dictatorship involved in a colonial war on three fronts. In the 1960s, women were compelled to enter the labour market en masse due to the lack of men in the workforce: the men had either emigrated to richer European countries or were fighting in the colonial war in Africa. The fathers’ generation represents the country of the revolutionary changes of 1974 and after: the overthrow of the authoritarian regime in a left-wing military coup, which brought about the destruction of the economic elites and nationalization of the main productive activities; the establishment of the rule of law in a democratic system with universal and equal civil rights; and the development of a European Union oriented policy from the outset. The grandsons, in their turn, represent those born and raised in the Portugal of the European Union, who benefited from the massive developments achieved over the last few decades in an increasingly modern and urban society. They are much more highly qualified, work in a modern and globalized market economy, and already live under the banner of gender-egalitarian ideologies. Regional diversity was also a criterion in the choice of family lineages, since Portugal has developed at a highly asymmetric pace, with the predictable rise in sharp territorial differences.

Although the empirical data used in this book focuses on the Portuguese case, I would argue strongly that the research carried out in Portugal may account for more than just a specific southern European reality. Clearly, the exact degree of inter-applicability of the conclusions with other national scenarios would have to be the subject of further study. But, in all cases, the main conclusions of both the studies described above can help us advance our understanding of the plural ways in which men live their lives and (re)construct their identities.

Chapter Outline

From the point of view of internal organization, the book is divided into six main chapters. The first three are theoretical. The last three are empirical.

The first chapter intends to connect the scholarship on men and masculinities with feminist theorizations of gender. The concern with men as gendered subjects and the theorization about masculinities can only be fully understood when placed in the broader history of feminism and its relationship with essentialism, reification and categorization in gender analysis. My main purpose is to go beyond the

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4 In the 1940s and 1950s, more than half the labour force worked in agriculture and 97 per cent of individuals were illiterate or had a maximum of four years’ primary education.
simple statement that masculinities are empirically plural, thus engaging in a more thorough discussion of the theoretical move from gender dualism to pluralism, as a generative principle of society and individuality.

In Chapter 2, I address some of the virtues and difficulties emerging from the theorization of hegemonic masculinity and male plurality. To a great extent, these are reflections that resulted from my analysis of ‘complicit masculinities’, which appear in the last chapters of the book. First of all, I argue for the need to develop the dialogue between structuralist and discursive approaches to power. Reasoning about issues of multiplicity and difference implies setting a wider range of male configurations of practice, rather than limiting them, a priori, to a fixed structure of opposing, even if varied, positions, however tentative and tricky this may be. The *bricolage* of masculinities is seen as resulting from processes of material and cultural appropriation that underlie the hybrid character of any masculinity. This assumption ties in with the overall argument of the book and proposes that male power is dependent not only on its ability to dominate the dominated, but also stems from ongoing inner struggles between different forms of domination.

In this line of reasoning, Chapter 3 addresses the making of masculinities in the private sphere, proposing that only through a genealogy of the public/private distinction will we be able to understand many of the tensions and hybridisms that constitute masculinities and are closely related to the historical construction of the modern family.

The first empirical chapter (Chapter 4) intends to provide the reader with a broad cross-national view of the attitudes and practices regarding the division of labour among contemporary couples. I explore the ways in which men and women relate to cultural aspects of gender in different Western societies, via a comparison of the US and the European countries included in the module of the 2002 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) on *Family and Changing Gender Roles*. In the light of the transformations occurring in the gender division of labour at many levels it is important to discover the extent to which individuals, men and women living in different national contexts, value the ideal of a ‘dual earner/dual carer couple’ to the detriment of the male breadwinner model.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus specifically on Portugal. The aim of Chapter 5 is to show how contemporary heterosexual masculinities are built, in private life, upon an array of symbolic models and are enacted through men’s ongoing appropriation of different features. Patchwork and ‘bricolage’ characterize masculinities to the extent that these are processes inherent to the constitution of the self (Lash 1999). As argued above, men’s different routes to change involve tensions between different, historically anchored, archetypes of masculinity: the ‘sexual predator’, the ‘family provider’, the ‘respectable public man’. Finally, Chapter 6 focuses on the importance of (hetero)sexuality to the enactment of masculinity, offering the reader a view of the generational changes that, among Portuguese men, have occurred in the discourses about sex and sexuality.
Each chapter ends with a brief summary and discussion of the main arguments and results. The conclusion of the book intends to move the debate on the pluralization of men and masculinities a step forward, thus presenting some thought-provoking reflections on the meanings of the plural changes that are currently taking place in men’s lives.
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