DEBATE

Power, Masculinities, Southern Theory: An Interview With Raewyn Connell About Political Sociology

Raewyn Connell,[1] Martin Seeliger,[2] Paula-Irene Villa Braslavsky[3]

Raewyn Connell began work in political sociology in the 1960s and has not entirely stopped since. However, her approach to power now transcends a narrow focus on the state and extends to fields such as culture, education and gender. She is best known in Australia for her research on inequalities in schooling and on class structure, and internationally as a leading figure in studies of men and masculinities. More recently, under the title of *Southern Theory*, her work on the global dynamics of social science has contributed to debates about epistemology and the decolonization of knowledge. In her reflections on the prospects and challenges of political sociology, she emphasizes the workforce, the transformation of universities and the employment conditions of young scholars responsible for creating the future of the field. This interview was held via e-mail with a first round of questions posed in February 2022 and a second round in June 2022.

The Interviewers are Martin Seeliger and Paula-Irene Villa Braslavsky.

Seeliger and Villa Braslavsky: Political sociology can be understood as sociology of *the political*, or as a perspective in its own right. That has itself political implications and is, thus, subject to political negotiation. As you state in an interview with Marcos Nascimento (2017), your personal history of becoming a political activist starts in the 1960s. Looking at the contemporary situation, where do you detect the continuities within the interplay of sociology and social movement politics?

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1   Professor Emerita at University of Sydney, Camperdown NSW 2006, Australia. Raewyn.connell@gmail.com.
2   Research Fellow at Institute Labour and Economy, Wiener Straße 9, 28359 Bremen, seeliger@uni-bremen.de.
3   Chair of Sociology and Gender Studies at Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, Sociology Department, Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, Konradstr. 6, Room 310, 80801 Munich, Germany, Paula.Villa@soziologie.uni-muenchen.de

Connell: When I began working in political sociology, back in the 1960s, the point of reference in almost every debate was the nation-state. Social movements, including the anti-war movement I was involved in, were understood as trying to influence state policy and action. Electoral sociology was a study of how parties or leaders captured the national state, or failed to. Social classes were imagined as ruling through the state, alternatively as resisting or opposing the state... and so on.

In the mid 1970s I wrote a book called *Ruling Class Ruling Culture*, which presupposed all that. Twelve years later I co-wrote a book about gender politics and the state, called *Staking a Claim*, which had much the same idea of the state. However, it shifted outside the boundaries of the old sociology, since it was informed by the Women's Liberation movement in Australia. Particularly our book was informed by Australian feminism's distinctive *femocrat* strategy. This tried to gain power within the patriarchal state to use its power *for* gender equality—seeing state/society relationships through a feminist lens.

Since those decades, the state has not exactly withered away—recent events in Ukraine don't allow us to think that! But new thought and changing social movements on several fronts have made the project of political sociology look rather different.

Perhaps the biggest shift is realizing that the most powerful states, back at the time when sociology as a discipline first crystallized, were not nation-states but empire-states. And realizing that an empire-state had colonies, with colonized peoples in them. And realizing that most contemporary states are descendants of colonial power structures, with still-embedded racial hierarchies, and reconstructed colonial economies, and dependent positions in global power relations. Claims of indigenous sovereignty, strongly heard in Australia now from indigenous movements, disrupt how we conventionally think about the political. If the old model of the discipline sought for *social bases* of political power, we now have to recognize that power (in the form of colonial conquest and rule) has transformed social structures, and has done so on a world scale.

For other reasons too, the nation-state framing doesn't work as well as it once seemed to. Worldwide markets, transnational corporations, global media, new communication technologies, international finance, and so on—however unsatisfactory the 1990s concept of *globalization* has turned out to be, the facts that it referenced were solid enough. We need to think of political processes as running far and fast across old national borders, reconfiguring the geometries of power and struggle in ways we are still coming to terms with.

I would argue that if we are to speak of a ruling class or a power elite now, we have to recognize that a large part of it has been off-shored and automated. To the extent it is still human, the ruling class resides in corporate jets zooming around the world overseeing huge wads of capital and operating mighty intranets, which now have only a limited connection with any particular nation. State power-holders can only be understood in their articulation with that ruling class and the institutions and dynamics it (however imperfectly) controls. In Australia, for instance, we currently have a Labor Party national government, a historically social-democratic party grappling with the mad task of reconciling a battered working-class constituency to a destructive market ideology. The government is only a little beholden to the local business elite, who supported the conservative coalition that lost the 2022 election; but is massively reliant on transnational markets and transnational corporations for the export earnings on which the de-industrialized economy now depends. Hence its embarrassing subsidies for the fossil fuel export industries, despite its rhetoric of climate action.

How social movements deal with that transnational formation of power is an enormously important new question. The climate movement, I think, is currently the most vigorous in exploring these issues and trying to find the chinks in the armour. The tech anarchists too are active in penetrating the secret databases of the corporate and political world.

Seeliger and Villa Braslavsky: Masculinities and their negotiation are a core element of contemporary politics. We may identify an updated version of an aggressive, some say even *toxic* masculinity, performed by Trump, Putin, Bolsonaro and the like. A bullying masculinity that *grabs*, that insults and mocks all those who appear weak or sensitive, a masculinity centered on the egocentric domination and exploitation of all persons and things regarded as others, i.e. nature, women, non-hegemonic men. But, at the same time, we do see new, plural forms of masculinities, especially within social movements such as ecological or anti-racist ones. How would you, after so many years of research on the complexity of masculinities, see the political dimension of contemporary masculinity or masculinities?

Connell: It is seductive to analyze the masculinities of public figures, especially those who make a big display of themselves on mass media. It can be a trap, especially if we forget the highly crafted image-making that such men rely on. Trump, for instance: although his image is one of extreme spontaneity, *telling it like it is*, he was an experienced media operator as well as a real estate mogul before he ran for president. He was the star of a reality TV show, no less! I rather doubt his actual personal style is very different from Nixon's. The corruption, the aggressiveness, the racism and

misogyny, the egotism and disorganization, the obsessive search for enemies, are all there. But Nixon, being a more experienced politician, kept it behind closed doors, until those doors were forced open by Watergate and the tape-recording fiasco.

I'm always inclined to look behind the super-visible front man, not to a conspiracy, but to the organizations, networks and milieux the front man works from. I think hegemonic, complicit or subordinated masculinities are above all *collective* masculinities. Such terms refer to positions in a structure of gender relations that are occupied by considerable numbers of men (and in different ways may be occupied by women). The different masculinities are in part constructed by the institutions of the world their bearers live in.

There's nothing radically new about this idea. Back in the 1950s there was a fuss in the USA about the conformist *organization man*. This representative man was supposed to have been created by a new era of giant corporations and expansive governments. That was the time we now imagine as the golden age of welfare capitalism!

I do not think the Trump/Putin/Bolsonaro show of aggressive masculinity, which is certainly a notable phenomenon, has become *hegemonic* in a sociological sense. The antagonism these figures have aroused is significant: there is not general social buy-in to their model. You are right about the presence at the same time of models of masculinity which are very different; they include the more feminist-influenced masculinities found (though not universal) in the Green movement. I would also point to the striking popularity of queer and even trans stances among students and other young people in the affluent Anglosphere. I don't know how far this is true in Germany, though I have seen some interesting queer work from there.

In some circumstances, the minor political advantage that can be given by a display of strong leadership, racism, even cruelty against the marginalized, may be enough. I understand that in Trump's election victory in 2016 the general profile of his support followed the established pattern of the Republican vote. There was no mass swing of working-class men towards him, as many have supposed. But there was a small swing, and with an unpopular Democratic Party candidate, that was enough to get a narrow win. Biden's campaign restored the status quo. If this is correct, it may explain why a lot of Republican Party politicians in the US now are taking extremely hostile stances towards women's abortion rights, trans children, gender studies and critical race theory in universities, etc. They probably don't care two cents about these issues, but are trying to get the little edge now, as Trump did back then.

Seeliger and Villa Braslavsky: A question on German politics: With the *Schulden-bremse*, privatization of large parts of the hospital sector, or the austerity measures enforced mostly in Southern European countries during the so-called *Euro Crisis*, former Chancellor Angela Merkel holds responsibility for important neoliberal reforms in Germany and the EU. At the same time, her reluctance to take a clear stance on central issues of common concern, as well as her blunt rhetoric, often contributed to what could be perceived as a de-politicization of would-be political questions ("If the Euro fails, Europe will fail!"). How can this *particular* approach to politics be located by drawing on your theoretical framework? Is the technocratic rule of authoritarian neoliberalism easier to legitimize when relativized through quiet appearance? And, if so, could this eventually challenge patterns of masculinity adopted by populist politicians such as Trump or Bolsonaro?

Connell: I have been intrigued by Merkel's long-term survival as Chancellor, but I have never made a study of her political techniques. The attempt to de-politicize issues that are in fact deeply political is now a familiar one, practiced by right-wing politicians here in Australia too. One of our Prime Ministers famously declared that he wanted to get sport rather than politics back onto the front page of the newspapers.

It is, arguably, a very important mechanism of hegemony in a privatised, corporate economy to make important decisions about the allocation of resources and the distribution of income appear as impersonal, technical questions answered only by *the market*. There is something profoundly circular in free-market ideology. The right answer is only found by market mechanisms; at the same time, whatever market mechanisms decide, is the right answer. This is *in practice* compatible with heavy-handed political action to defend the interests of the financial oligarchs, for instance the European institutions' thunderous response to the Greek economic crisis of 2009-2015.

Whether there is an ideal political personality to preside over a corporate economy and a patriarchal state is an interesting question. I can certainly think of other examples of a quiet, ordinary-person style being successful in this role. Biden perhaps is the current example. Another case is John Howard, a true-believer neoliberal who survived as Prime Minister of Australia for ten years at the beginning of the century. (He was considerably aided by dog-whistle racism, right-wing media oligopoly, and an opposition that had lost its way, as many labour and socialist parties have done recently.) The current Australian Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese, who won the national election in May 2022 after nine years of persistent racism and increasingly open corruption by the conservative parties, seems to be another example.

It may be that, with the high visibility of the Trump/Bolsonaro/Putin political style, we are now seeing a split in patterns of masculinity in the world's ruling classes. This would not be the first time such a split emerged. There is some fascinating historical research about how, two generations ago, technocratic and financial managerialism displaced more paternalist, hands-on forms of ownership and management. One might even see the current polarization between Republican and Democratic parties in US politics, and the divisions in the Republican party shown in the struggle over election of the House of Representatives Speaker, as driven by such a split.

Seeliger and Villa Braslavsky: Your writings on globalization highlight the role of multinational corporations in exercising political power in order to exploit labor and the environment. A central role within this nexus of political dominance is undertaken, as you have pointed out, by male power elites, namely, first, the managers of transnational corporations, second, the oligarchs, possessors of extreme wealth, third, the dictators who control authoritarian regimes, and finally the state elites of the global metropole. However, your approach does not engage with the power of images transported and negotiated via popular culture. How can the cultural imaginary, the sphere of popular culture, especially its visuality, be systematically included into your theoretical model?

Connell: I wrote the paper you mention, *100 Million Kalashnikovs*, for *Debate Feminista* in Mexico. It was intended to bring the discussion of masculinity and power on a world scale back to the terrain of institutionalized power. The men in the groups I discuss are able to influence our lives because they control major concentrations of capital, large and powerful organizations, concentrations of weapons, and the communications systems that go along with them. They operate in heavily masculinized and often very closed milieux, not easily studied from outside. We get, at best, fragments of information, trickling out from behind a massive screen of manipulated media.

Let me give one example. We're all very familiar with Vladimir Putin, at least with his imagery. How many have heard of Valery Gerasimov? A handsome lad, though rarely photographed except in a very formal setting. He's the Chief of Staff of the Russian Federation armed forces, and has a reputation as the leading military intellectual in Russia. His career began in the Soviet Union's Red Army, where he commanded mobile units, and he's risen to the top in the nuclear-armed successor state. Probably he was the main strategist behind the current attack on Ukraine; there have been rumours he was to be sacked when the attack did not go well. It's not clear who is the effective battlefield commander, though likely someone with a similar background and the same deeply-rooted organizational culture.

You are quite right, I have not made a particular study of imagery in popular culture. There are other people doing that, much better equipped for the job than I am, and their work is very interesting and useful. For instance, I've read excellent analyses of Putin's media enactments of masculinity. (I promise not to mention Putin again!) I've been interested in cultural constructions of femininity as well as masculinity, in religion, literature, fashion, and other forms.

I have tried to include such work in a theorization of gender in two rather different ways. Back in the 1980s, in chapter 11 of *Gender and Power*, I tried to do it through a theory of ideology, bringing the spirit of Mannheim and Lukács to haunt feminist analysis. I emphasised the practical character of communication and symbolism, analyzed some typical distortions in the cultural handling of gender, speculated about the large-scale cultural dynamics involved, and perhaps most important, discussed ideologists of gender. By this I meant the intellectual workers who generate images, interpretations and utopias around gender relations, who construct and contest hegemony. I even created a little table of the main groups of intellectuals who do this work in relation to gender.

Unfortunately for this splendid analysis, no-one took any notice. So I tried again. When revising the theory fifteen years later for *Gender: In World Perspective*, I treated culture, symbolism and communication as one of the four principal dimensions of gender as a social structure. That moved cultural issues into a more central place in the argument, and allowed a more post-structuralist approach to them—all to the good. Yet, perhaps a certain critical edge was lost by shelving the concept of ideology and the idea of misrepresentation of the world in the interest of dominant groups. I think there is a great deal of misrepresentation and distortion in the sphere of mass media and commercial popular culture, and it generally does benefit the rich and powerful.

Seeliger and Villa Braslavsky: In your genealogy of Sociology as *Northern Theory*, you spell out an agenda for social science on a world scale. In this context, I have especially enjoyed reading your critique of the wanna-be-cosmopolitan theory of Ulrich Beck. Today, over fifteen years after the publication of *Southern Theory*, do you see us anywhere near to achieving a truly cosmopolitan sociology which takes into account the multiplicity of local perspectives and particularities?

Connell: No, I don't think we are anywhere near a genuinely world-centred, rather than North-Atlantic-centred, sociology. In the league tables, the *American Sociological Review* and the *American Journal of Sociology* are still at the top. International students still hope to go to Harvard, Berkeley or Yale rather than Hyderabad or KwaZulu Natal.

Even in the pages of *International Sociology*, the theorists cited are likely to come from the global North, though the data may come from the South.

In some ways, indeed, the situation has got worse. With corporate-style management now pervasive in university systems, metrics have become more important than they were. Our managers press us to publish in A-star journals, which are mainly from the global North. Universities are now usually defined in policy terms as competitive firms. So their rankings have become more significant, on measures that favour the rich countries of the global North. Research grant dollars have now become an important performance indicator, and there is far more research funding in rich countries than in poor countries. Funding for research in the global South from development agencies, whether NGOs or government-based, normally comes with the expectation of following established research paradigms. There are self-reinforcing mechanisms in global academic hierarchies, and I think the neoliberal ideology and its techniques of implementation now are deeply entrenched in the global university sector.

But there is also considerable criticism of those mechanisms and their implications for our intellectual life. In that respect we have definitely advanced. There is not just one school of post-colonial and decolonial critique, but several. There have been student movements such as *Rhodes Must Fall* in South Africa and *Why is My Curriculum White?* in Britain. Many academic fields have now begun to debate the idea of *decolonising* their discipline. In the last ten years I have been invited to address conferences, or give public talks on Southern perspectives, in eleven different disciplines of the social sciences and humanities.

At the 2021 annual meeting of the *American Sociological Association*, particular attention was paid to the work of W.E.B. Du Bois. Most attention of course went to his research and activism around racial inequality within the United States. But Du Bois was also a notable internationalist, an anti-colonial campaigner, and specifically a supporter of African independence and renaissance. This side of his work is also now recognized and discussed.

So there is, I think, significant change under way in the disciplinary culture of sociology. Perhaps not in all its sub-fields—I have yet to see a discussion of how to decolonize rational-choice theory! But issues about coloniality are getting into the curriculum, into undergraduate textbooks, in sociology as in other fields.

Seeliger and Villa Braslavsky: What do you perceive to be the challenges for political sociology over the next decades?

Connell: Being asked to name challenges for the future is a terrible temptation! The impulse is to outline the research one would like to do oneself, given some very generous grants, plus a dedicated research institute staffed by hardworking angels. But then, *ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich…*

I'll resist that temptation by thinking sociologically about the question. If political sociology is to exist in the future, like any other field of knowledge it must have a workforce.

When I began to work as a social scientist in the late 1960s and early 70s, there was no problem about the demand. Students were clamouring for critical social science, and sociology classes were packed. In Australia, an institutional base for sociology in the form of university departments had just been established. Many young people from varied backgrounds were employed to teach sociology, and most got their training *on the job*. My Australian degrees were in history and psychology, then in political science. I made the classic colonial move and went for a postdoctoral year at a famous US sociology department, and published a paper in a leading US journal. That helped me get quick promotion back in Australia. In the following decades, the university departments in Australia grew and consolidated, and sociologists began to fan out into other areas of public-sector employment.

But now, under neo-conservative regimes, the public sector has ceased to be buoyant. With the rise of authoritarian nationalism, more governments have become suspicious of universities and positively hostile to critical social science. University administrations, which formerly left the academics to make their own decisions about teaching and research, have mutated into corporate-style managements. The managers have become very much more intrusive and controlling, and generally do not like humanities and social sciences.

Most important, the university workforce is being eroded by the growth of precarious employment, by the destruction of secure career paths, by overwork and exploitation, and by outsourcing. Many talented students now are refusing a career in the university world. I believe the social need for higher education and research is still great. But a disconnect has opened between that need, and the institutional means of meeting it. I've been active in my union against these trends, and eventually I wrote a book about universities, their pasts and their futures. It is called, with a mixture of irony and hope, *The Good University*.

So to answer the question at last, I would say the same for political sociology as for any other discipline. Pay attention to your workforce, to the situation of young

people coming into the field, and join the struggles to give them a decent working future. And trust them to work out the future directions for themselves. The discipline they make will be different from what it has been in the past, for sure. I can't wait to see it!

Seeliger and Villa Braslavsky: We know that academia is marked by deep inequalities based on the intersection of socio-economic background, race and gender. What do you regard as the most profound change in this regard over the last decades?

Connell: First, a change that has continued: the long process of opening universities to women. When two of my great-aunts were students at the University of Melbourne in the 1880s and 1890s, they were among the first women in Australia to get a higher education. When my mother and father both went to the same university, that was becoming more common for middle-class women, but universities were still mainly for men. So it was typical enough for that generation that my mother did not graduate (her family could not afford to keep her at university), while my father did graduate, and he then went on to higher degrees. When my sisters and I matriculated, parity of numbers was approaching. When our daughters fronted up on campus, there was an actual majority of women in their undergraduate cohorts.

But not among the academics. Men are still a large majority among the most senior academic levels in Australia. Understandably, there has not been the radical change in curricula that feminists once expected. Change in the gendered culture of universities has been important, but does not move fast.

Second change, the commercialization of higher education—spurred on by neoliberal ideology and state policy—has had important social effects. World-wide there has been a great expansion in the number of universities and colleges during the last thirty or forty years. There are now about 200 million students enrolled in higher education, so the sector as a whole has enormously greater numbers of middle-class and working-class students than ever before.

But this global expansion has been mainly through the creation of fee-charging private universities and colleges, which now account for a large majority of enrolments in some countries including Brasil and Chile, about half the enrolments in India, and so on. These private institutions, designed to make profits and mainly offering vocational courses, have an insecure workforce and very much smaller resources per student than the public universities, or the elite private universities, of the global North.

The result is that great class inequalities are now visible *within* higher education, especially when we look at the sector on a world scale. Hence the ridiculous and offensive *league tables*, which purport to be comparisons of the quality of institutions, but more profoundly are indicators of the amount of money they have. I once spent a year teaching at Harvard University, and learnt a little about the way it works. With its 53 billion dollars of endowment and its deep ruling-class roots, this is simply not the same kind of institution as—to pick two examples at random—Southeast University in Dhaka division or Universidade Salvador in Bahia state. To overcome divisions such as that is a huge undertaking. It requires global redistribution of resources as well as a deep rethinking of universities as institutions.

Seeliger and Villa Braslavsky: Could you connect these issues with your research on the *Good University*? What are the radical changes you suggest?

Connell: I confess that the 'radical change' phrase in the subtitle was the publisher's idea, not mine. But it catches the spirit of the book well enough. I attempt several ways of encouraging people towards deep change.

First is to re-think the history of universities. There exists a complacent story told in official histories, policy studies, UNESCO reports and so forth. This is a tale of grand progress, funded by enlightened governments, directed by wise academic leaders, bringing the sunshine of higher education to more and more happy people… you can fill in the rest yourself. But there is another story to be told. Universities have always been privilege machines too: selective in their admission in terms of race, class, and gender, usually aligned with the powers of religion and state, helping to form professional elites and ruling classes. They have often used top-down pedagogy and sustained a rigid, narrow curriculum.

So there is also critique, resistance, and a search for alternatives. In *The Good University* I tell some of this Other History too. There is a rich though lesser-known story of radical and experimental colleges, anti-colonial universities, democratic projects in knowledge creation, participatory pedagogies, and resistance to managerialism. I was involved in the experimental Free University in Sydney in the 1960s. In today's grimmer environment, I'm charmed by the idea of the *Slow Professor* as a point of resistance to management demands for speed-up and over-work in the academic world.

Drawing on all this, I propose some general criteria. A good university will be democratic (the idea of industrial democracy has gone out of fashion but seems very relevant to universities); engaged (with its society and environment as a whole, not just

with employers); truthful (as against the pressure to lie and manipulate which we see in universities' marketing and PR); creative (since its business really is the advancement of knowledge and students' varied capacities); and sustainable (in terms of a continuing workforce, as well as a survivable environment).

I also propose criteria for a university *system*, since individual universities do not stand alone. A good university system will be co-operative (competition between universities is destructive not creative), public not private, socially inclusive, and connected to the wider world. Finally, I take those ideas and indulge in a little science fiction, imagining what some universities might look like, 10, 50, and 200 years into the future.

I don't have a Trotsky-style transitional programme for universities in general. I think that change will be generated locally and will rightly take many different directions. But the more we can bring to bear our knowledge and understanding—from political sociology among other resources—the better chance we have of a creative and sustainable university sector for the future.