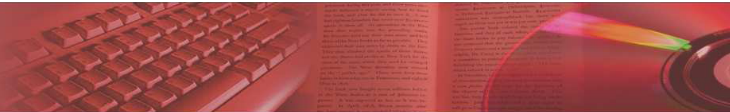
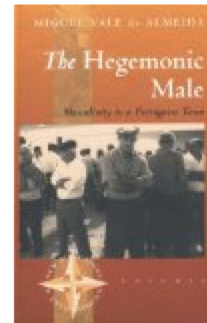


Miguel Vale de Almeida. *The Hegemonic Male: Masculinity in a Portuguese Town.* Providence. R.I. and Oxford, Eng.: Berghahn Books, 1996. 186 pp. $16.50 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57181-891-1; $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57181-888-1.



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Miguel Vale de Almeida's *The Hegemonic Male* examines the cultural construction and performance of hegemonic masculinity–straight, white, and patriarchal–in the context of the Alentejo region of Portugal, a part of Europe notable in anthropological texts as the epitome of "a male chauvinist culture, simultaneously with a strong sexual division" (p. 11). That such an ethnographic project is possible is in no small part due to more than two decades of critical feminist scholarship which is now producing young scholars who conceive of gender as central to their work. The artless tacking on of a "women-chapter" or the subsumption of gender within the family and/or reproduction is no longer standard practice. Vale de Almeida's ethnography is a powerful and insightful exploration of what it means to be a man in a working class community in a field in which there are few such studies (Tom Dunk's *It's a Working Man's Town*, McGill/Queens University Press, 1991, is a notable exception). While it is easy to locate studies of non-industrial or "alternative" masculinities, Vale de Almeida's contribution is all the more significant for exploring the construction of hegemonic masculinity.

Vale de Almeida sets as his goal to "show how hegemonic masculinity is constituted and reproduced through a series of different social relations and symbolic constructs" (p. 166; see also pp. 1, 3). He separates out six specific sets of relations and symbolic contexts from which to examine the social construction of masculinity. These are notions of hierarchy, power, control, and conflict (Chapter Two); relations at work between men (Chapter Three); forms of sociability (Chapter Four); ritual and symbolic performance (pp. 113-24); and notions of personhood and emotion (Chapter Five). Vale de Almeida approaches the construction of masculinities not simply "through relations of power but also through their interrelation with the division of labour, and patterns of emotional attachment" (p. 15). This is a refreshing change from earlier gender studies which too often posit a totalizing and universally repressive male subjectivity against which other gender identities are necessarily positioned. Vale de Almedia does not, however, try to diminish nor ignore the misogynist qualities of hegemonic masculinities. In fact, his treatment of male representations of women and andocentric sexuality is the core strength of this ethnography. This is a nuanced and sensitive ethnography that highlights the cracks in the edifice of hegemonic masculinity into which we may thrust crowbars of change.

Vale de Almeida accomplishes his goals in eight clearly written chapters. Each chapter flows nicely one to another as the author's argument is carefully constructed and advanced. In Chapter One, "A Home for a Stranger," we join with the author as he enters his field site (see especially, pp. 14-18). The chapter is effective in describing both the region and the processes of entering the field site. Chapters Two through Five describe the various levels of social identity–the contexts within which discourses and practices of masculinity are expressed. The final two chapters "provide a systematisation of theoretical influences" and "synthesises and intertwines the stronger arguments of the book" (p. 7).

For anthropological research, making that first meaningful contact with people in one's field site can be a difficult and anxiety ridden process. It is easy to avoid the plunge by exploring all manner of non-animate objects. Vale de Almeida spent much of his first few weeks in the field (when he wasn't trying to force his sense of "struc-

ture" on the place) listening to and speaking with Sr. Altino, an "affable, generous and loving man" (p. 23), and reading the memoirs of a catholic priest who had lived in Pardais during the latter half of the nineteenth century: "I was still refusing to plunge into the world of the quarries, the cafes and lively interaction with and among people. I was letting myself be seduced by history, by the old world of landless workers, large estate owners, sharecroppers, rural foremen and the constant state of unease and revolt involving state, church, and social classes" (p. 24). Sr. Altino's life history bridged for Vale de Almeida the divide between the past that was seducing him and the present that lay around him and led to his first encounter with working age men.

Vale de Almeida's first encounter with working age men opens Chapter Two, "Blood, Sweat, and Semen." He had gone to a dance at the local Civic Centre, but found only a few people dancing and no one that he knew. So, Vale de Almeida retreated to the adjoining bar–a socially defined male preserve (p. 33, see also pp. 53-54)–and sat down beside an elderly godson of Sr. Altino. The ethnographer listened as his companion talked about the good old days when men and women danced and sang late into the night. But the conversation was interrupted when an "obviously drunk heavily-built young man, fell on the ground beside him" (p. 33). Vale de Almeida helped the young man up, bought him a bottle of water, and persuaded him to drink it. Through this act of kindness, Vale de Almeida was brought into a circle of young working men from the community with whom he spent much of his time from that night forward. Though fortuitous, this encounter is key in setting the stage for the more sustained and theoretically informed discussion of the social construction of gender Vale de Almeida develops in the rest of the book. The two most important themes of which are gendered space, and the definition of women (by men) in terms of male sexuality.

As an anthropologist, it is difficult not to read Vale de Almeida's discussion of the cafe as a male preserve without immediately hearing echoes of earlier ethnographic accounts of the men's houses in, for example, the Amazon Basin or Papua New Guinea (indeed, Vale de Almeida himself makes use of this metaphor: "the Melanesian analogy is more than simply irony" [p. 88]). The cafe is set off from women, it is a space in which "the tired (male) body, disciplined by hierarchy and tasks, gives way to open gestures, banging on tables, excessive volume, reiteration, and narratives of self-praise" (p. 53). The family home, however, is seen as "female territory, in which even the family men stay only for short periods of time other than sleeping hours" (p. 48). Whereas the "home is a space of exchange and mutual visitation between women" (p. 48), for men, the home engenders in them a sense of unease: "to stay home is *faz mal* (is bad for you), *amolece* (makes you soft)" (p. 53). For men, the cafe is the "main stage of masculine sociability" (p. 88) and the idiom of conversation is gender.

Safely ensconced in the "men's house" or cafe, men talk about women through the lens of male sexuality. Though other subjects do intercede into the liquored sociability of the cafe, the primary focus of the men's world are "mostly exaggerated stories about sexual prowess and joking invitations to homosexual intercourse" (p. 53; see also pp. 90-92, 101). We are left with an impression that Vale de Almeida spent a good deal of time in the bars and cafes of his field site. Nonetheless, he is careful to also locate the construction of straight white manhood within the social fields of andocentric employment.

Male discussions of women within the idiom of male sexuality is not an uncommon focal point of male-to-male conversation. I have documented a similar form of sexualized banter amongst all male fishing crews in British Columbia (see Menzies "Obscenities and Fishermen: The (Re)production of Gender in the Process of Production," *Anthropology of Work Review* Vol. 12(2):13-16). A key difference between our observations is that Vale de Almeida is describing a form of andocentric conversation based in sites of leisure. The similar conversational patterns I have written about occurred at the point in which value was being manifest–that is, fish were being hauled onboard the vessel. Here, the obscene and suggestive banter was steeped in a gendered language of male sexual gratification. In contrast, at points of crisis the use of obscenity shifted to a gender neutral form and served to punctuate the severity of the moment, not celebrate the triumph of the catch. Nonetheless, Vale de Almeida's observation that "masculinity is always being constructed and confirmed, whereas femininity is seen as a permanent essence, "naturally" reaffirmed by pregnancies and births" (p. 54) resonates strongly with my own and others' observations of male-centered work and leisure environments. This is a consistent feature of hegemonic masculinity, or, at the very least a consistent theme of cultures with strong European roots such as the settler states of the Americas, Australia, and Europe itself (see also, Daniel Wight, *Workers Not Wasters: Masculine Respectability, Consumption and Unemployment in Central Scotland* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993]; Peter Knustson, "Measuring Ourselves," *MAST: Maritime Anthropological Studies* vol. 4[1]:73-90, 1991).

The Hegemonic Male is an important addition to the literature of gender studies. Vale de Almeida refuses to assume a universal maleness and, in so doing, he effectively describes and analyses how masculinity is rooted in social processes of work and leisure. This is a book well worth reading.

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