Political Masculinities, Crisis Tendencies, and Social Transition: Toward an Understanding of Change

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Abstract

This introduction to the special issue on “Political Masculinities and Social Tran-sition” rethinks the notion of “crisis in masculinity” and points to its weaknesses, such as cyclical patterns and chronicity. Rather than viewing key moments in history as points of rupture, we understand social change as encompassing ongoing tran-sitions marked by a “fluid nature” (Montecinos 2017, 2). In line with this, the con-tributions examine how political masculinities are implicated within a wide range of social transitions, such as nation building after war, the founding of a new political party in response to an economic crisis, an “authoritarian relapse” of a democracy, attempts at changing society through terrorism, rapid industrialization as well as peace building in conflict areas. Building on Starck and Sauer’s definition of “political masculinities” we suggest applying the concept to instances in which power is explicitly either being (re)produced or challenged. We distinguish between political masculinities that are more readily identified as such (e.g., professional politicians) and less readily identified political masculinities (e.g., citizens), emphasizing how these interact with each other. We ask whether there is a discernible trajectory in the characteristics of political masculinities brought about by social transition that can be confirmed across cultures. The contributors’ findings indicate that these political masculinities can contribute to different kinds of change that either maintain the status quo, are progressive, retrogressive, or a mixture of these. Revolutionary transitions, it seems, often promote the adherence to traditional forms of political masculinity, whereas more reformatory transition leaves discursive spaces for argument.

Keywords

political masculinity, social transition, change of gender order, social change, new masculinities

This special issue builds upon a conference on “Political Masculinities and Social Transition” that was held at Landau University (Germany) in late 2015, and a broader conference series focused on “Political Masculinities” established in 2012. The project aims to bring researchers together from across the world and a wide range of academic backgrounds. This has fostered interdisciplinary exchange, seen in the development of a Research Network (see http://www.uni-koblenz-landau.de/de/landau/fb6/philologien/anglistik/Page/Research/PolMascCon) in an area of research, whose importance, especially in light of recent political develop-ments in Europe and around the world,1 seems to be ever increasing.

Recognizing the historicity of masculinity may, arguably, be one of the most important insights adopted within the field of men and masculinities. In accepting that masculinities emerge as a product of our time, the concept is able to capture not only their inexorable change but also their recurring disruption through “crises”— both a feature of their gender order (Connell 1987, 1995; Corber 2011) but at key moments in history as well (e.g., Rotundo 1993; Tosh 2005; Segal 2007; Kimmel 2005, 2013; Clare 2001; Gilbert 2005).

Within this context, crises have frequently been analyzed as single points of rupture that produce a restructuring of the social and political arena generally, and the gender order specifically. Resultant changes to any specific arena, such as the gender order, may in turn generate further crises and changes more broadly. Liter-ature points toward the interdependence of our social and political worlds, with particular emphasis afforded the notion of “a crisis in masculinity” (Pleck 1995; Starck 2016) and its critique (Connell 1995; Robinson 2007) within the field of men and masculinities. Historian James Gilbert (2005, 16) points out that his colleagues, due to the growing complexity of “masculinity roles,” attest to “masculinity in crisis” as a chronic problem. “Crisis” here is defined as “a moment when observers begin to notice that assumptions about masculinity and expected male behavior are being undercut by circumstance and social psychological changes” (Gilbert 2005, 16). However, if there is a “cyclical pattern of anxiety and worry, and then the development of new cultural forms to fill the spaces vacated by older behaviors” (Gilbert 2005, 16; our emphasis), this problematizes the term “crisis” as demarcating particular moments in history. We need to ask how often these “moments of crisis” appear in this cyclical pattern and whether it is justified to talk of

"moments" when these can span whole decades? If, as Gilbert points out, crisis is a chronic problem, would it not be more helpful to look at its actual chronicity?

Yet we do not wish to merely replace the term "crisis." Rather, instead of viewing key moments in history as points of rupture that generate crises, this special issue understands social change as encompassing ongoing transitions. This articulates well with Connell's (1987, 1995) use of "crisis tendencies" (Habermas 1975) to suggest that the gender order is crisis-prone rather than alternating between periods of crisis versus stability. This is seen as a result of inherent contradictions and tensions in gender practice. These ensure that hegemonic mas-culinities are always undergoing challenge and change (Connell 1993; Donaldson 1993) in order to offer a more successful strategy of legitimizing some men's dominance over women and marginalized or subordinated men (Connell 1995), such as working-class or homosexual men. Challenge is directed at different features of the gender order at any particular historical moment. Its ultimate impact is also uneven. For example, feminist challenges in Western societies have directed much attention to labor inequalities, and its politics has unevenly impacted upon the young intelligentsia (Connell 1987).

Support for the concept of crisis tendencies in understanding gender relations may, for example, be found in discussion surrounding gender violence. Connell (1995) notes that challenge to dominant gender practice often encounters violence. Men's dominance over women is maintained as a result. The crisis in masculinity thesis implies that there are periods where systems of domination are absolute. Challenge to dominant gender practice is supposedly absent during these periods. Yet, if this thesis were correct, one would not expect to observe instances of gender violence. This is clearly not the case. The ubiquity of gender violence is indicative of crisis tendencies in the gender order. This should not be taken to suggest, however, that some periods in history are not more crisis-prone than others. This point is well illustrated by the current #MeToo movement. It has been called a "global revolution," in which "almost every country in the world has had its own #MeToo moment" (Burke 2018, n.p.). The movement initiated an international challenging of traditional gender regimes—focusing on sexual abuse, harassment, and violence directed at women—in an ever-growing number of industries and institutions such as the film and wider broadcasting and entertainment industries, the banking sector, government institutions (Williams 2018; Almukhtar, Gold, and Buchanan, 2018; Backes, Beier, and Mu¨ller 2018; Baxter 2018), the technology sector (Newcomb 2017), the Swedish Academy and the Swedish Monarchy

(Wiman 2018; BBC News 2018), the aid sector (Beaumont and Ratcliffe 2018), and most recently the New York State Department of Law (Reuters 2018).

We therefore focus on the systemic and processual nature of change—at once at multiple points, intertwined and evolving—as a response to broader circum-stances (e.g., economic, political, psychological, and social) and their relation-ship. While perceived isolated instances of change through crisis offer interesting, and indeed often important "predicaments" for us to consider, such a focus risks reductionism. Thus, change is not seen to emerge from such instances but may alternatively best be viewed as embedded in complex and unfolding social worlds in which crisis in endemic.

The term "transition" likewise carries with it connotations of change occurring from one moment of history to another. We distance ourselves from such an inter-pretation also. As suggested by Montecinos (2017, 2), transition politics is marked by a "fluid nature." The social is thoroughly transitory, seen at a microlevel in the ebb-and-flow of negotiated meanings in everyday situated social interaction but also evidenced at other levels of analysis (e.g., economic, political, and psychological). And yet, as above, this should not be taken to suggest that some periods in history are not marked by greater levels of transition than others.

A growing body of literature has documented the impact of transitional processes on gender issues. The effects on gender relations of the transition, for example, from communism to postcommunism or from war to peace have been studied,2 and there seems to be an expanding field of studies on women in transitional societies.3 Transition is notably not always in women's favor. A feature of crisis tendencies in the gender order, as described above, is that change most frequently results in a continued successful strategy of legitimating some men's dominance over women and marginalized or subordinate men. For example, some scholars have questioned whether the social changes that have occurred in posttransition democracies are favorable to women leaders in simply reinforcing existing female stereotypes:

[p]olitical transitions change these [previous gender] dynamics, in some cases making women more attractive candidates for political leadership . . . established political elites may be weak or have been discredited . . . . Stereotypes that women are more ethical, honest, trustworthy and caring become political assets. (Yates and Hughes 2017, 102)

Another group of researchers focus on masculinities in transitional societies, which are marked by postcommunism, postcolonialism, postapartheid, and devel-opment,4 and on the performance of masculinity in changing precarious positions as well as the real and imagined loss of privileges.

We understand this special issue as building upon these notions of crisis and transition in literature relating to gender and masculinities. Contributions to this special issue examine the transitions in masculinities brought about by currently evolving local, national, and global social structures and systems. These transitions are related to broader economic, political, and social changes, including war, mil-itary coups, terrorism and religious fundamentalism, peace building, radical indus-trialization and resulting demographic transformations, efforts to transfer violent masculinities into nonviolent masculinities, and the formation of new political oppo-sitions in response to economic crises.

These are valuable contributions in themselves. Yet they go beyond existing literature to focus specifically upon the concept of "political masculinities" that we define as:

Encompass(ing) any kind of masculinity that is constructed around, ascribed to and/or claimed by "political players." These shall be individuals or groups of persons who are part of or associated with the "political domain," i.e. professional politicians, party members, members of the military as well as citizens and members of political move-ments claiming or gaining political rights. (Starck and Sauer 2014, 6)

This definition aligns with historian John Tosh's (2004, 48) description of mas-culinities "with a sharper political edge." We are interested in political masculinities that are more readily identified as such (e.g., professional politicians), those with an upper case "P," as well as less readily identified political masculinities (e.g., citi-zens), those with a lower case "p."6 The former operates in what Fletcher (2018, 3) has recently described as the notion of Politik as derived from Max Weber's defi-nition of politics, where it is confined to "representative institutions or within the apparatus of the state." The latter refers to activities or attitudes by nonstate actors who interact with the state, for example, during elections. However, we also empha-size less overt or "hidden" political masculinities such as political structures and their relation to masculinity. This is in line with Fletcher's claim that "a state-based approach to politics is not sufficient for

an effective analysis of political authority and gender" (Fletcher 2018, 3–4). Instead, he points to "unspoken assumptions and expectations of different social groups about how government should work" (Fletcher 2018, 4). Moreover, these different types of political masculinities inter-act with each other as well as with wider social ideas about masculinity. Thus, Tosh (2004) argues, for example, that at key moments in history, such as the rise and fall of nations, the "dominant masculinity is likely to become a metaphor for the political community as a whole and to be expressed in highly idealised forms" (p. 49). In the same vain, Griffin's (2012) study of the performance of parliamen-tary masculinities in Victorian Britain proves how thoroughly intertwined the performance of political masculinity and more widely held notions of dominant masculinity can be. "[P]arliamentary performance offered a way for men whose own masculine status was uncertain to claim the authority of normative (or hege-monic) masculinity" (p. 184).

We are conscious of the critique that an adequate appreciation of gender might suggest that all masculinities are political in so far as they are imbricated within relations of power. But our definition contains an important subtlety. While we fully agree that gender and masculinities are inextricably political concepts in the (re)pro-duction of power, the concept of political masculinities can usefully be applied in instances in which power is explicitly either being (re)produced or challenged. This special issue examines how political masculinities are implicated within a wide range of social transitions such as nation building after the Second World War, the founding of a new political party in response to an economic crisis, an "authoritarian relapse" of a democracy, attempts at changing society through terrorism, rapid industrialization, and peace building in conflict areas. The main question we want to address is whether there is an identifiable trajectory in their characteristics that can be confirmed across cultures, a question which can only be answered in a dialogue of findings from a number of (national) cultures and academic disciplines.

Thus, the issue starts with political scientist Marion Loeffler's essay on Political masculinities in postwar Austria's nation-building efforts and attempts to redefine the country's newly established antifascist neutrality as masculine. Looking at par-liamentary debates, Loeffler identifies the difficulties of this process brought about by foreclosed notions of masculinity such as that of a traditional "German mili-tarized" and a feminized "victim" masculinity. The "neutral masculinity," which was constructed as an alternative, however, did not constitute a "postheroic" mas-culinity, but, instead reinstalled traditional notions of masculinity.

The second essay by sociologist Paloma Caravantes-Gonzales deals with both Political masculinities, as performed by party politicians and "hidden masculinities" of political (party) structures. She analyses the leadership discourse of the Spanish newcomer party Podemos and identifies a discrepancy between the party's stated mission of wanting to "feminize" politics and the actual masculine practices of their party culture.

Political sociologist Betul Balkan Eksi's contribution studies three types of police masculinities evident in the public policing of Turkey between 1980 and 2013. In the analysis of her interviews, she is particularly interested in "how masculinities and statehood as revealed in police practice and discourse reproduce one another." Due to political changes such as reforms and public protests, and their suppression, changing ideas of public policing and associated masculinities can be discerned. As representatives of the state, these are clearly Political masculinities. However, at the same time, they are intertwined with the hidden masculinities of state power structures. Eksi terms these "old macho masculinity," "new masculinity," and "militarized masculinity" and identifies a return to traditional masculine values in Turkish public policing.

Literary and cultural studies scholar Rainer Emig analyses how closely aspects of terrorist masculinities and the media are linked. He focusses on political masculi-nities that interact with the state but are not representatives of it. He pinpoints that terrorism and masculinity share a performative root, since terrorism relies for its effects on its mediatization whereas masculinity is likewise in need of constant performance. It is also this link, which according to Emig, can be exploited to combat terrorism by "feeding into the mediated stream of its representations images and ideas of inferiority, ridicule and failure."

Laura Rahm, also a political sociologist, examines how India's rapid socioeco-nomic transition results in a growing "demographic masculinization" and how the state has been trying to control and stop practices of sex selection, not very success-fully, since the 1990s. Rahm interviewed national policy makers, state and district implementers, and representatives from nongovernmental and international organi-zations. On the one hand, she concentrates on Political masculinities who are rep-resentatives of the state. Yet, on the other hand, she also analyses the hidden masculinities of structures of communication. Her findings suggest strongly mascu-linized structures around the issue of sex selection control,

which foster a discourse that patronizes women and is doomed to fail in its efforts to stop sex selection.

Finally, the "Head of Gender and Peacebuilding" of the London-based peace-building NGO International Alert, Henri Myrttinen looks at "new" political and Political masculinities that have emerged due to four different types of transition: the arrival of violent fratriarchal masculinities such as ISIS and their appeal to young people (inhabiting a curious space between political and Political masculinities), the "softer" militarized masculinities of the "blue helmets" in areas of conflict (Political masculinities), the less violent masculinities promoted by global antidomestic vio-lence campaigns (political masculinities), and the masculinities of international political actors championing positive change with and for men and boys (political masculinities). Although Myrttinen sees some potential for change in gendered power relations in these new formations of masculinities, he at the same time attests to the staying power of patriarchal configurations.

The findings on political masculinities across a variety of transitional social and political contexts as presented in this special issue lead to two important observa-tions. Firstly, as to be expected, in all cases, dominant notions of masculinity in societies are intimately interconnected with prevailing political masculinities. Sec-ondly, and more substantively, the political masculinities implicated in social transi-tions can contribute to different kinds of change that maintain the status quo, are progressive, retrogressive, or a mixture of these. Loeffler's example is particularly interesting in identifying a new type of masculinity, "neutral masculinity," which nevertheless serves to maintain the current gender order. Caravantes-Gonzales iden-tifies the limits of developing new gender regimes within a political party when its leadership discourse shares traditional discourses of Political masculinities. Eksi's analysis of Turkish police masculinities demonstrates that (progressive) change toward gender equality is not irreversible but, as a result of changing political structures, can change retrogressively. This example also nicely highlights the fluid-ity of change, as opposed to single "points of rupture." Rahm's research presents a seemingly progressive change—state sex selection control—yet proves that this is actually hindered by retrogressive Political masculinities, which help to maintain the existing gender order through a highly masculinized discourse. Myrtinnen illustrates retrogressive change with the fratriarchal masculinities associated with ISIS; varied forms of political masculine practice in peace keeping, where masculinity is closely intertwined with the national culture of the soldiers; and the progressive change toward which

campaigners against domestic violence and international political actors championing positive change, with and for men and boys, are working.

Social transitions, therefore, do not always appear to fundamentally challenge existing gender orders. Rather, more often than not, they tend to give rise to patri-archal political masculinities, which through processes of hybridization as described by Demetriou (2001), accommodate challenges to the status quo. That is to say, these political masculinities "unite practices from diverse masculinities in order to ensure the reproduction of patriarchy" (Demetriou 2001, 337). This is in keeping with findings from other fields of academia conducting work on transition, such as those introduced by Frydman, Murphey, and Rapaczyn´ski (1998) for postcommu-nism. For them transition is a:

movement or passage from one state or set of circumstances to another. But history is more than a bad habit and a clean, revolutionary break with the past is almost never possible. What most onlookers and participants alike in the revolutions of 1989 and 1991 failed to recognize was that the new postcommunist societies must, at least for a time, retain a good deal of the old. (p. x)

However, they also suggest that the residue of the obsolete should not be seen as a result of obtuseness and ignorance alone because it is frequently difficult to decide what should be saved and what to sacrifice (Frydman, Murphey, and Rapaczyn´ski 1998, x). Ndangam confirms this tendency for postapartheid South Africa. Not only does she point to the (re)constitution of marginalized masculinities. She also empha-sizes the following: "Aspects of Black African masculinities have emerged as a site where the anxieties, insecurities and uncertainties about the post-apartheid socio-political transformation in South Africa are projected, negotiated and defended" (Ndangam 2008, 209). As a consequence, it seems that revolutionary transitions often promote the adherence to traditional forms of political masculinity. This is evidenced by Emig and Myrtinnen's contributions for terrorist masculinities and Eksi's for police masculinities (i.e., if, in light of recent developments, one considers 2013 as the beginning of a revolution of the structures of the Turkish state). More reformatory transition, such as peaceful nation-building efforts as in Loeffler's contribution; the establishing of a new political party, as in Caravantes-Gon-zales' analysis; Myrtinnen's examples of ambivalent peace-keeping Political masculinities; or an attempt to implement "pre-natal gender-equality," as in Rahm's study, leaves discursive spaces for argument. Such argument is crucial in underpinning potential change where

"(d)isagreement is praised as the root of thought" (Billig 1996, 1). The shifting patterns of patriarchy identified in the contributions to this special issue may on the one hand result from conscious efforts to maintain patriarchal power structures even under conditions of social transition. But on the other hand, they may also emerge from uncertainty and anxieties about the unknown, which leads to a holding on to known and valued patriarchal configurations. As Montecinos (2017) has put it for posttransitional democracies, they come about in traumatized societies, haunted by the memories of loss as much as by the loss of memory. For many citizens the transition from authoritarian rule toward democracy paralleled personal recovery from living under a repressive regime. Microlevel resilience ebbs in tandem with the flow of societal endurance and its failures. (p. 16)

If this insight is applied to other types of transition, such as the rapid industrial development described in Rahm's article, the emergence of a new political party as in Caravantes-Gonzales' paper, or parliamentary nation-building processes as stud-ied by Loeffler, the clinging on to tried and trusted forms of political and Political masculinities is not inevitable and can be challenged. This is, in our view, our collective challenge—the task of academics and practitioners. It is not a burden we share alone but one that calls for our actively exploiting change for progressive gender-egalitarian purposes.

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Notes

Contemporary illustrations being, for example, the performances of masculinity during the recent state visit of Emanuel Macron to Washington; the role of male leaders, such as Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson, in the Brexit campaigns; the public performances and politics of political leaders such as Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Victor Orba´n in Hungary, Jarosław Kaczyn´ski in Poland, Sebastian Kurz in Austria, and Vladimir Putin in Russia.

For example, Nikolic-Ristanivic (2002), Daskalova et al. (2012), and Zawisza, Luyt, and Zawadzka (2015).

For example, Kaufman and Williams (2017), Molyneux (1996), Gal and Kligman (2000), and Montecinos (2017).

For example, Kukhterin (2000), Kiblitskaya (2000), Meshcherkina (2000), Mazierska (2010), Brison and Robbins (1995), Morrell (2001), Reid and Walker (2005), and Cleaver

(2002) with a focus on developing countries.

For example, Heywood and Johansson (2017), Luyt (2012).

In order to indicate what kind of political masculinities the contributors to this special issue focus on, we use upper and lower case spellings in the summaries of the articles below.

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