Political Masculinities and Populism

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Politics is most often conceived of as a gender-neutral practice guided by rationality. Yet, as is the case more generally in society, masculinity operates as a hidden (human) norm structuring politics. As the 'unmarked' gender category, its influence has remained hidden from critical enquiry. However, since the early 1990s, a growing body of literature in masculinity studies generally, and masculinities in politics in particular, has debunked the myth of the gender-neutrality of politics and made masculinity visible (see Starck & Sauer, 2014).

As is the case in masculinity studies, right-wing populist discourse currently refutes the rational and gender-neutral image of politics. Yet unlike masculinity studies, masculinity is not open to critical enquiry among right-wing populists. Rather, populist politicians such as Donald Trump or Vladimir Putin promote and valorise the relationship between masculinity and politics (Boatright & Sperling, 2020; Sperling, 2015). Newly emerging versions of right-wing populism have been described as being misogynist and sexist: they oppose feminism and gender-equality measures, same-sex marriage and gender studies; they seek to re-instantiate traditional family and associated gender roles; and they pursue a strong-man style of political leadership (Dietze, 2018, p. 34; Inglehart & Norris, 2016, p. 7; Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Mayer, Ajanovic & Sauer, 2018; Mayer, Sori & Sauer, 2016; Nocorel, 2013, p. 5). At the same time, somewhat paradoxically, the seeming 'gender traditionalism' of populism (Sauer et al., 2016) is undercut by the existence of female leaders of populist parties and populists' appeals to European values of gender-equality and emancipation (Akkerman, 2015; Dietze, 2018; Mayer, Ajanovic & Sauer 2014).

This special issue contributes to the debate on gender and populism by focusing on the relationship between the concepts of political masculinities and populism. It

developed from a conference on *Political Masculinities and Populism*, hosted by the *Political Masculinities Network* in December 2017, and based at the University of Koblenz-Landau. The research network was established in 2012. It aimed to bring scholars together, from different disciplines, who hold a common interest in the political dimensions of masculinities. The *Political Masculinities Network* merged with the Uppsala network on *Men in Politics* in 2018. This research network is committed to critical research on political masculinities and seeks to encourage a broad church of cross-, inter- and multi-disciplinary debate with the aim of comparing, contrasting, and where possible integrating different modes of understanding and related findings from across academic disciplines. The special issue contributes toward this project. We provide a brief overview to this topic in this introductory paper.

The concept of populism

Populism is a contested concept (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 2). It is frequently used in media and political debate but difficult to define as an analytical concept. The term refers to different and conflicting political groups and projects. Whilst in Europe it is most often associated with the (radical) political right, the United States have a tradition of "liberal populism", an expression, which in Europe would be "a blatant contradiction" (Müller, 2016, p. 9). Populism has also been linked with left-wing politics, especially in South American and southern European countries (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015), whereas some populist movements are best described as hybrid in combining elements of left and right (Brubaker, 2017, p. 358f.). Moreover, their social basis may be agrarian or urban; their economic policies protectionist and state-centred or neoliberal and market-centred; they may be secular or religious; and they may celebrate cultural liberalism or attack it. Populist politicians may be challengers or incumbents seeking to mobilize or demobilize. Consequently, scholars

from different backgrounds use the term to describe different phenomena, which in turn have inspired different analytical approaches. For instance, the study of populism in Latin America focuses predominantly on economic and organizational aspects of populism, while European scholars use to stress the political and ideological aspects (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015, p. 17f.)

In seeking to define the concept of populism, the only common basis for doing so is that all populist movements, parties, figures, and regimes claim to speak in the name of 'the people' against various 'elites' (Brubaker, 2017, p. 359; Müller, 2016, p. 20). However, speaking in the name of the people is assumed in modern democracies, and not confined to populists. Further disagreements in definition ensue where some scholars see populism as an ideology of democracy (Canovan, 2002), while others view it as intrinsically anti-democratic, as "a perverse inversion of the ideals and procedures of [electoral-representative] democracy" (Rosanvallon, 2008, p. 265). Yet others see its effect as enabling democratization processes or contributing to the dismantling of democracy, depending on the type of populism and on the political system in which it occurs (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, p. 86). This reveals the ambiguity of the concept of democracy and its defining notion of 'the people' shifting between meanings of them as ordinary (*plebs*), as sovereign (*demos*), and as culturally or ethnically distinct (*nation* or *ethnos*). Therefore, 'the people', though crucial for democracy, is essentially an empty signifier (Laclau, 2007), which comes to represent something different across cultural, historical, political and regional contexts.

Although populism as an analytical concept is contested, we agree with Rogers Brubaker (2017, p. 358) that it is indispensable in understanding the current "populist moment". Moreover, many scholars on populism agree that a key feature of populists is their claim to be the 'true democrats' (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008, p. 4) by not only

claiming to speak in the name of 'the people', but the *whole* people, following "the idea that it's possible for the people to be one and – all of them – to have one true representative" (Müller, 2016, p. 20). Populists combine this with a further claim that the current political establishment fails to represent 'the people', or more specifically, the general will of 'the people' (Otjes & Louwerse, 2015, p. 61). Central to the populist claim is the notion that 'the people' does not equate with the citizenry of a country, but refers to an imagined 'heartland' of a virtuous, pure and uncorrupted population (Taggart, 2000, p. 95). These notions are in line with the definition of populism as a 'thin-centred ideology' (Mudde, 2004, p. 544), which considers society to be separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite' (Mudde 2014; Mudde & Rovira Kalwasser, 2015, p. 18). In understanding populism ('us vs. them') as 'thin-centred', it cannot stand alone, but is always in need of a host ideology, which can be either right- or left-wing.

This minimal definition of populism is consistent with the analytical approaches that are applied in the papers included in this special issue. They study populism, for example, as a political style (see Löffler) or as discourse generating heterogeneous and inconsistent messages (see Wiedlack). They analyse the persona of a populist leader (see Starck) or emphasis on how Weber's notion of charisma contains populist claims to being against elites (see Geva). And finally, they problematize the relationship between right-wing populism and minority groups (see Lobban et al.).

Populism and Gender

There is an extensive literature discussing gender and populism. The following overview is not intended to be exhaustive, but to illustrate the research perspectives of this still growing field of research. Recent research on populism and gender focuses on a wide range of individual, political and social processes including, for example, the

representation of women in populist parties (e.g., Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015), their performance (e.g. Nocorel, 2018) and leadership (e.g. Meret, Siim & Pingaud, 2017); on the gender and the psychological characteristics of populist supporters (e.g., Coffé, 2018) as well as gendered voting behaviour (e.g. Spierings & Zaslove, 2015; 2017); on the (anti-feminist) gender ideologies of right-wing populist actors (e.g. Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Kováts, 2018) and their conservative gender (family) policies (e.g. Akkerman, 2015).

With regard to the prominence afforded women in left- and right-wing populist parties, Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2015) challenge the *Männerparteien* thesis ('men's parties') formulated by Helga Amesberger and Birgit Halbmayr (2002). They argue that while right-wing populist parties in Northern Europe perform on average worse than other political parties, even if they have a female leader, left-wing populist parties in South America seem to be progressive. However, the difference relates to the cultural context, a highly emancipated society in Northern Europe and strongly patriarchal societies in South America (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015, p. 17). Yet the degree to which a party may be considered progressive may not necessarily be determined by women's political prominence (Caraventes, 2019; Norocel, 2018).

The cult of personality around populist leaders contributes to the masculinization of politics. The charismatic leader is frequently seen as a feature of populism (e.g. Taggart, 2000); though gender neutral, the descriptions of charisma often reveal framings that feature predominantly masculine attributes (Meret, 2015, p. 83). This leader is usually portrayed as a masculine and potentially violent "strongman", ruling on the basis of "a cult of a leader" (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 63). Thus, there is an emphasis on action and the courage to take difficult decisions, which

relies on anti- intellectualism and urgency and exemplified by the leader's virility, the use of simple and vulgar language, and, of course, the leader's charisma (ibid: 64-68). As noted above, research has pointed to a gender paradox, namely the existence of populist "men's parties with women leaders" (Meret, Siim & Pingaud, 2017). Female populist leaders such as Eva Peron (Argentina), Pia Kjærsgaard (Denmark), Marine LePen (France), Sarah Palin (United States) or Alice Weidel (Germany) question the taken-for-granted masculine qualities of populist leaders and populism as well as, indeed, masculinities themselves.

Gender research on (Northern and Central) Europe often focuses on the populist radical right parties (Akkerman 2015; de Lange & Mügge 2015; Mayer, Ajanovic & Sauer, 2018; Spierings et al., 2015) that emerged as a political force since the 1980s (Mudde 2004). Populist radical right parties are characterized by their opposition to immigration as their most salient and most successfully exploited issue. Consequently, they do not only construct an ideological difference between 'the people' and 'the elite', but also between 'the people' as insiders and 'others' (outsiders) who pose a threat to 'the people'. Since 2001, Islam has been singled out as the main threat.

Examining the vote for populist radical right parties, a gender gap has been observed where more men than women are supportive of them (Harteveld et al. 2015). However, the most important reason reported in individuals supporting populist radical right parties remains the same for men and women – namely their opposition to immigration (Spierings et al., 2015). The gender gap in voting for right-wing populists is often overemphasised (Spierings & Zaslove 2015) and reproduces the notion of tolerant women vs. intolerant men. Yet we witnessed a large proportion of women voting for the 45th President of the United States. Moreover, there have been other minority group movements who espouse support for right-wing populists such as "Gays

for Trump" and "Alternative Homosexuals" who are part of the German right populist AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*).

Populist radical right parties often hold contradictory gender ideological views (Akkerman & Hagelund, 2007; Dietze, 2018). They typically emphasize the traditional family and gender roles as core institutions of society and oppose same-sex marriage as well as abortion. But in debates concerning immigration, in contrast, populist radical right parties have adopted more liberal views of gender relations by emphasizing gender equality, women's rights and freedom of choice (Akkerman, 2015, p. 40; Akkerman & Hagelund, 2007). This apparent contradiction, between the 'liberal' defence of gender equality in debates on immigration on the one hand, and the 'conservative' defence of the traditional family and gender roles on the other, has been explained by discursive shifts in populist rhetoric when constructing "others" – "those up there" (the elite) or "not us" (Muslim immigrants) (Mayer, Ajanovic & Sauer 2014). Many right-wing populists support movements against gender equality, which have been understood as a conservative backlash against levels of equality achieved between women and men and/or LGBTQ rights (Kováts, 2018, p. 529). Most right-wing populist parties do not only support traditional gender norms, but hold essentialist notions of gender as determined by sex. They conceive of feminism as a threat to the 'natural' division of the sexes, and hence, oppose policies that promote gender equality. This is seen, for example, in their frequent demand to have gender studies removed from university curricula (Küpper, 2018; Mayer, Ajanovic & Sauer, 2018). However, 'gender' also stands in as a placeholder or empty signifier. As discussed at the *European Conference of Gender and Politics* in 2019,[i] in Poland and other post-communist European countries, gender equality is sometimes framed as 'communist' and therefore 'anti-democratic'. This perspective fuels the populist claim that gender equality measures are

an elitist ideology working against ‘the people’. In right-wing populist discourse ‘the people’ is constructed in terms of biological essentialism (Mayer, Sori & Sauer, 2016), based on the idea of the traditional conjugal family as the natural cornerstone to society, as well as the pre-eminence of men and masculinities in politics (Kreisky, 2014).

Political Masculinities

In contrast to the construction of men and masculinity in populist political discourse, we suggest elaborating a concept of ‘political masculinities’ that can inform critical gender research. In order to facilitate cross-, inter- and multi-disciplinary dialogue, Kathleen Starck and Birgit Sauer propose a broad definition of political masculinity, which “encompasses 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 movements claiming or gaining political rights” (Stark & Sauer 2014, p. 6).

This broad definition of political masculinity has served as a foundation for a growing body of work, fostering dialogue between a wide range of disciplines, on topics as diverse as political masculinities’ involvement with, and associated tensions in, prevention of violence against women initiatives in the United Kingdom (Burrell, 2020); political masculinities in parliamentary debates during Austria’s period of postwar nation-building (Löffler, 2019); the Indian state’s intervention, along with the role played by both state and non-state political masculinities, in practices of sex selection (Rahm, 2019); and the political masculinities of pro-feminist men involved in an Israeli high school gender equality intervention programme (Schwartz, 2020). These, and other studies, have contributed toward developing the concept of political masculinity/ies. A few key observations are useful in this respect.

Starck and Luyt (2019) recognise that the original definition particularly speaks to masculinities that are more overtly, or easily recognised, as political (e.g., professional politician). Yet they stress the importance of including individuals, groups, practices or representations of those whose impact on or within the political sphere is less easily identified (e.g., citizens, media tycoons, global businessmen/women). This allows us to scrutinize the dynamics of interactions between a wide range of 'political players' and masculinities, an indispensable focus for analysing change in gender relations.

Political masculinities are crucial in the reproduction of power relations. However, the concepts of gender and masculinities include dimensions of power. Masculinity is therefore always political. While gender and masculinities are inextricably political concepts in the production and reproduction of power, it is argued that the concept of political masculinities holds particular use in "instances in which power is explicitly either being (re)produced or challenged" (Starck & Luyt, 2019, p. 435). We see the reproduction of power through political masculinities clearly in the contributions toward this special issue. For example, Dorit Geva describes how Marine Le Pen draws on charisma, as a characteristic of political masculinity that is not in conflict with notions of political femininity in France, in order to further her political influence; Marion Löffler demonstrates that masculinities exist as a symbolic resource that is flexibly drawn upon by political actors in Austria to further their political advantage; whilst Kathleen Starck similarly identifies Nigel Farage's (United Kingdom) active construction of his persona to incorporate different representations of masculinity in order to appeal to a wide national audience.

There appears to be consensus in acknowledging political masculinities as thoroughly involved in the reproduction of power. Yet the suggestion that we can

identify instances in which power is explicitly operating has been the subject of some debate (cf. Hearn, 2020; Burrell, 2020). Luyt and Starck (2020) reaffirm their belief in the usefulness of considering the extent to which power is operating explicitly through masculinities and argue that it is only "[i]n identifying such instances, or through actively making the operation of power explicit, (that) possibilities for challenge and change are realised" (ibid.). We argue that current phenomena of populism illuminate such explicit instances of the production and reproduction of gendered power. The contributions to this special issue discuss some examples. Katharina Wiedlack, for instance, shows how Putin's representation and performance of virile and powerful masculinity became the object of homophobic ridicule in the 'liberal' media discourse in the USA, which in turn reaffirms the superiority of heterosexual masculinities. The round table discussion of Rose Lobban and her colleagues considers, among other things, the obvious power strategies of Donald Trump's misogynist and homophobic rhetoric, and point to his unexpected support by women and LGTBQ+ groups.

Finally, this special issue on political masculinities and populism aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on conceptualizing political masculinities. Luyt and Starck (2020) advocate a context-sensitive approach to conceptual definitions which avoids privileging dominant modes of understanding and experience (e.g. Western core theories). Instead of setting rival definitions (and their underlying world views) against each other, they call for an 'inquisitorial' or questioning approach, in which "the value of a concept and its definition is determined by the extent to which it can meaningfully elucidate our understanding of local contexts" (ibid.). The papers included in this special issue explore how varying incarnations of political masculinities across different contexts operate to either reproduce or challenge existing power relations and gender inequality. They generate new insights into the meaning of political masculinities when

considering (right-wing) populism and contribute to the debate on the gender dimensions of populism.

Contributions

Marion Löffler conceptualizes political masculinities with reference to Raewyn Connell's notion of 'hegemonic masculinity' and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of 'symbolic violence'. She explores how in the 2017 general election right-wing and centrist Austrian populist leaders have shifted the nature of their gender performance in light of a changed political landscape. In their striving for electoral success they have, on the one hand, adopted strongly populist, even marketing, gender strategies in their campaigns. Yet they have also employed a "division of labour" by allocating different political masculinities to different actors of the same party, thus maximising their chances to get elected.

Dorit Geva examines, through extensive field research, the notion of charisma for the *Front National*'s leader Marine Le Pen from 2013-2017. She argues that gender relations are an integral structure of populism and for this purpose introduces Mimi Schipper's concept of 'hegemonic gender', arguing that gender hegemony is the basis of modern charisma. Geva demonstrates how Le Pen's political success rests on her employment of both 'hegemonic masculinity' as well as 'hegemonic femininity'.

In a line of argument, not unlike Löffler's, Kathleen Starck analyses former UKIP and now Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage's flexible gender performance as a populist leader by conducting a close reading of his two autobiographies. She argues that Farage effectively constructs his persona of the *city gent* by blending his Everyman performance with a 'city masculinity' to construct a charismatic strongman persona and a 'gentleman masculinity' in order to appeal to English nationalist voters, enabling Farage to cater to different audiences.

Katharina Wiedlack reviews the contradictory US mass media discourse around Russian President Putin's political masculinity. She exposes how the ridicule of, and fearmongering around the strongman performance of Putin in the Russian media, are used by American media to propagate US-superiority and activate fears of the Russian nation. Yet Wiedlack argues that they simultaneously stabilize patriarchal heteronormative able-bodiedness and thereby the notion that president Putin is a strong and able leader. Thus, she demonstrates how even diametrically opposed discourses of political masculinity can produce the same result – that is to say, reinscribing the notion of a charismatic strongman.

Finally, Rosemary Lobban, Russell Luyt, Sam Martin Ashley Brooks, Daragh McDermott and Magdalena Zawisza-Riley, drawing on a recent panel discussion, examine the seeming conflict surrounding support for right-wing populists by marginalised or disadvantaged groups such as LGBTQ+ and women. Focusing on different social psychological perspectives, they argue that disadvantaged or minority supporters of right-wing populism often react to a threat to the self and can find 'safe' identities in right-wing populism – for example, economically, personally, physically, psychologically or socially motivated. Moreover, their support for right-wing populism can be motivated by a rejection of victimhood. Both safe identities as well as rejecting victimhood symbolically offer access to power.

The research conducted in these contributions refers to a range of democracies with different experiences with, and tradition of, right-wing populism. Austria (Löffler) and France (Geva), for instance, have a long history of radical right-populist parties (The *Austrian Freedom Party* and the French *National Front*), while populism is a rather novel phenomenon in the United Kingdom (Starck), Australia (Martin) and Ireland (McDermott). The United States (Wiedlack, Brooks, Luyt, Zawisza-Riley),

alternatively, have a longstanding tradition of (liberal) populism and at the same time experience a novel phenomenon of right-wing populism. Each of these populisms (in plural) deploy and challenge the conventional gender order. Following this line of argument, all contributions to this special issue do not only attest to the diverse configurations of populist political masculinities, but also to political actors' versatile strategic employment of different repertoires of political masculinities for different purposes. Moreover, they illuminate the mutual relations between those populist 'political players' who occupy the centre of the political sphere, and those who are relatively peripheral. Finally, the findings of these articles suggest that populist political masculinities do not simply equate with 'hegemonic masculinity', rather they might challenge hegemony or indicate crisis tendencies of the gender order. Identifying what exactly the nature of the relationship between hegemonic and political masculinities is, however, remains the task of future research.

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[i] Featured Roundtable "Promoting Gender & Sexuality Studies in Times of Hostility", held on 4 July 2019 at the European Conference of Gender and Politics at the University of Amsterdam.