Democratization, Re-Masculinization, or what? Masculinity in the 20th century and beyond.

Martina Kessel, Fakultät für Geschichtswissenschaft, Philosophie und Theologie, Abt. Geschichtswiss., Universität Bielefeld

Democracy in modern societies rarely meant gender democracy. Furthermore, democratization in terms of greater formal equality could spur the desire to re-masculinize politics and society, not only today but throughout modern history. The conference invites scholars from different areas of the world to discuss whether and how demands for democratization since the late 19th century engendered efforts to affirm (specific notions of) masculinity as a category of dominance.

Democratization, Re-Masculinization, or what? Masculinity in the 20th century and beyond.

The establishment of modern societies since the 18th century was based upon and intensified gendered and racialized hierarchies. The modern Western self was imagined as male, White, Christian, and heteronormative, and such assumptions impacted the structures of the modern world, in differing types of democracy as well as in authoritarian regimes, imperial systems and neo-colonial global structures after formal decolonization. At the same time, gender research on all world regions has shown that there was never one notion of masculinity (or femininity) but conflicting and competing (dominant) versions, intersecting with racializing projections, religion, class, caste, ethnicity, generation, or other categories used to define identity and belonging in specific contexts.

The long-cherished assumption that the time since the late 19th century, or at least the second half of the 20th century, saw a linear development toward greater gender equality has equally been challenged. Colonialism not only produced gendered notions of identity both in colonised and colonising societies, but a possibly democratic self-representation of imperialists at home could go hand in hand with intensified racializing and

gendering practices in both the so-called metropole and the imperial context. In a formally decolonised world, gendered and racialized projections continued to define relations between the global North and global South, but also shaped the formerly colonising societies themselves. Democracies since the 18th and 19th centuries implemented heteronormativity in what Margot Canaday called "the straight state". Discussing the aporetic understanding of democracy in Germany in the 20th century, Kirsten Heinsohn suggests a corresponding periodization: While the period from the 1900s to the early 1920s was characterised by moves toward democratization, already the mid-1920s Weimar Republic experienced an intense re-masculinization of politics that lasted in West Germany into the 1980s, spanning not only National Socialism but also the 1970s, a decade that has long been hailed as a turning point towards democratization. While ideologies in the 20th century competed in gendered terms, attacks on democracies and demands for a new world order since the 1990s work(ed) with masculinist projections to give status to their own ideas and discredit others. At the same time, wars, persecution, migration, or flights in the 20th and 21st centuries led to displacements in terms of status and accustomed position, sometimes, but not always, being answered by re-masculinizing practices.

Building on such insights, the conference wants to explore processes of masculinization, de-masculinization, and re-masculinization across the globe from the late 19th century into the present. It raises the following questions but invites corresponding ideas:

Where, why, and how were demands for or processes of democratization connected to forms of re-masculinization? Can we detect differing chronologies in different societies and cultures, considering possibly clashing notions of masculinity and their meaning for state, economy, education, religion, or other dimensions of society? When and why was democracy perceived as a "threat" to masculinity, and in turn, in which

circumstances could groups or societies reduce or minimize masculinity's impact as a structure of hierarchy or in- and exclusion? How did historical actors challenge the heteronormative priorities of modern societies, which influence did non-binary positions have in defining what democracy meant? Given that colonialism impacted but did not determine gender notions and gendered structures in colonised societies, which constructions of masculinity played a role in processes of decolonisation and in the subsequent history of all involved societies? How did historical actors in post-conflict societies or in situations of persecution, migration and flight implement, enforce, or change understandings of masculinity? What did and does a transnational identity mean in terms of masculinity? We might also compare how constructions of masculinity impacted the development of communist or socialist politics, often claiming to achieve gender equality, and whether and how these understandings of identity changed in shifts to post-communist or post-socialist societies.

Conceptually, we will discuss how we can systematically queer our understandings of gender and masculinity. By the late 19th century, the normative binary system defined as Western and modern was historically well in place but also always challenged. Analytically, binary notions alone rarely suffice to explain the complex historical processes of producing, criticizing, or re-inventing hierarchies or relationships between conflicting notions of masculinity and gendered forms of being in general.

The conference aims to bring together scholars from different parts of the world working on any world region and period from the late 19th to the present. It invites primarily contributions from historians but also other fields in the humanities.

The conference will take place from 22 to 24 September 2022 at the German Historical Institute London. Conference language is English. Pending the pandemic situation and visa issues, the conference might be held in a hybrid form.

Proposals of 350 words (max.) should be sent to martina.kessel@uni-bielefeld.de before 17 December 2021.

Contact (announcement)

martina.kessel@uni-bielefeld.de