Conceptions of Postwar German Masculinity
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Edited by

Roy Jerome

with an Afterword by Michael Kimmel

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For Julian
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New York City, January 2001
Part I

Introductory Considerations
Introduction

Roy Jerome

Like many recent explorations into the nature and content of masculine identity, as well as into specific sociohistorical and cultural conditions informing the construction of contemporary masculinity in American society, this anthology frames its analysis by asking, “What is a German man?” Those familiar with key American Men’s Studies scholars and their attempts to explore the properties of male consciousness understand that this seemingly perennial question is neither innocent nor academically arcane. Rather, it concerns itself with analyzing the shifting ethical, moral, and psychological contents of masculine identity in an effort to expose how patriarchal society employs conceptions of masculinity to exploit men for economic and political gain, and it uncovers the means by which men as a group maintain power over women and other less powerful groups. The question “What is a German man?” or, better still, how does he perform the power relations afforded to him as the privilege of his body—what Foucault has called “the political economy of the body”—thus concerns itself with examining a complicated existence that is at once privileged, exploited, and, most important, invisible.

Directing our attention to the production of masculine identity in postwar German society, we are confronted with a consciousness that may appear self-evident and stable, yet when analyzed through Men’s Studies theories, it immediately reveals itself as being historically in crisis, fragile as well as constructed. Only very recently has the German academy begun to question the lack of attention given to masculinity—the logic governing its invisibility—and its constant crisis. In doing so, a steady challenge to the “unity” of masculine identity has emerged in the German academy as a feminist intervention aimed at further challenging patriarchal structures. The possibility that theories of masculinity, or
Men’s Studies, can serve as a form of feminist intervention becomes most clear in the analyses of literary masculinity, which constitute the final half of this book. But even before the academic theorizing of the middle and late 1990s, German boulevard newspapers and periodicals publishing special editions on “hidden masculine dilemmas” were already laying the groundwork for later scholarship on German men and masculinity. The need to begin with “common knowledges” about masculinity has always been central to Men’s Studies. Here it is continued in the chapters of Klaus-Michael Bogdal and Klaus-Jürgen Bruder, who read popular and mass culture—translating it into what the Self Psychologist Heinz Kohut has termed “experience near metapsychological abstraction”—as “reliable seismographs for registering the processes of cultural change in everyday life,” to borrow an expression from Bogdal.

In their analyses, the writers of this anthology make explicit that masculine identity is neither stable nor intransitory but rather is historically determined, thus subject to the material conditions of class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion. As Men’s Studies scholars as diverse as Michael Kimmel, Harry Brod, and Elisabeth Badinter have stressed—and as Bogdal, Bruder, and Tilmann Moser also show here—an analysis of masculine identity must include an investigation of specific sociohistorical events that have conditioned that identity. By undertaking such examinations, we achieve a greater understanding of how historical events have affected men’s lives. Moreover, we obtain an indispensable critical revision of why individual men, male-dominated organizations, and Männerbünde have reacted differently to destabilizing events. In short, we arrive at paths that lead to a conception of men’s history.

The authors’ stance vis-à-vis Germany’s recent past forms a thread that runs throughout this collection. In order to make clearer the determinants and, consequently, the possible transformations of masculine identity in postwar society, the authors implicitly or explicitly take as their point of departure the psychic and material legacies of the Third Reich. This is not to undermine Moray McGowan’s assertion that analyses of Turkish-German masculinities test the boundaries by which we can maintain that National Socialism has affected all men in Germany, for that is certainly the case. Nevertheless, in reading Moser’s transcribed therapy sessions with a fifty-six-year-old son of an SS officer still fleshing out his relationship with his father, it becomes painfully obvious that one cannot talk of German masculine identity after 1945 without talking about fascism. Describing a trip to the concentration camp Sachsenhausen, where his father was stationed during World War II, Moser’s patient relates:
I wanted to find some sort of trace and this is . . . (begins to cry silently again, sighs.)
Somehow it is really . . .
*Coughs, sounds as if he needs to throw up.*
It is as if he never returned again after ’45, although he was still there till a year and a half ago and I gave speeches on his birthdays. (He senses the extent to which there exists an unknown, lost part of his father.) I was just reading your book, *Der Erlöser* (The savior). And you ask this patient what you would have to say in order for you to be, for a moment, an ideal father for him. I apparently had a momentary debilitation with this sentence (laughs a little) and had to read it about five times. The sentence is perhaps a little complex, but this is no reason why I should be slow in catching on. I thought then of what I would really want from my ideal father.
There is somehow . . .
*He pauses, breathes very deeply, sobs once, then a loud scream appears to want to come out, which he suppresses however.*
Therapist: Allow a sound to come out, too. These are almost sounds of panic, or cries of pain, that I believe I hear. Screams perhaps, or a type of high-pitched crying.
(Patient sobs loudly and convulsively, breathing and crying mix together. Yells, full of desparing rage:)
Patient: That you would talk to me for once!
(He cries again, but no longer silently as in the beginning; he shudders from crying. Though it seems he wants to calm himself as quickly as possible, he cries for a long time.) I don’t want to hear anything about your past! (He wants to say: Don’t be afraid. I won’t dig up your guilt!) But you should talk to me for once: what affects you, what you think about me, what makes you happy. I never heard anything that came from inside of you. *He no longer sounds enraged now, rather resigned and sad.*
I always had to guess what you . . .
*He sighs, it sounds as if he feels sick, one senses suppressed crying in his voice.*

This dense portrayal of the psychic legacies of National Socialism constitutes our first departure into a masculine problematic that is specifically German.

Further, Moser’s and Bruder’s analyses of the psychic legacies of National Socialism in postwar German society bring to light the historical conditions informing masculine identity and accordingly situate the in-
vestigator within this recent history. Perhaps even more telling than the interpretations of literary images of masculinity in themselves are the forces informing the literary analyses. This becomes apparent only in reading the theoretical chapters of this book against the literary interpretations of masculine identity. Because the interpretation of literary images of masculinity are mediated by the postwar development of theory itself, we must also situate the investigator, and the investigator’s methodologies, historically. By doing so, we begin to more closely define and chart postwar German masculine identity itself. Consequently, while Inge Stephan’s analysis of the Cassandra motif in the works of Hans-Erich Nossack reveals a particular conservative reaction on the part of German men to the restructuring of gender relations in early postwar society, reading Moser against Stephan produces some surprising results.¹ Moser’s theories would suggest that Nossack’s depoliticizing, dehumanizing, and deintellectualizing of the literary character Cassandra (not to mention his strong identification with her) become simultaneously descriptive of the failure of the postwar German male intellectual himself—a failure in his masculinity kept silent by his masculinity. Suggesting that “Cassandra is the prototype of the intellectual,” and that both Cassandra and Odysseus “mark the endpoints of a spectrum” of power, Stephan’s chapter explores the questions of why postwar male intellectuals—of which the two most striking examples are Peter Handke and Botho Strauß—turn conservative and renounce earlier, more emancipatory political philosophies, why they ignore radical theories of political processes in favor of the aestheticizing of the political, and why their works become critiques of language and not of power structures themselves. As Stephan’s reading of Nossack’s Cassandra suggests, and as Moser and Carl Pietzcker demand we consider, conservative conversions provide psychic compensation for narcissistic crises occasioned by the intellectual’s inability to affect political processes. Finally, reading Moser’s chapter against Stephan’s, and against Barbara Kosta’s analysis of the Väterliteratur, we see that this malaise, this conservative conversion of male intellectuals of the early postwar period and the ’68 movement, is not really present in German women. German postwar feminist writing has yet, however, to seriously embrace the notion that the contents of male intellectuality—of which conversion to conservatism is probably the most easily recognized—may be conditioned by crises in masculinity.

By reading the theoretical examinations against the literary analyses, we also gain insight into the literary representation of the feminine in, among others, the works of the male writers Nossack, Borchert, Böll,
Andersch, and Meckel. It seems to me that the reason lies—and Stephan, Hans-Gerd Winter, and Russell West suggest this—in the relationship between the representation of the “feminine” and in the nature of trauma itself: identification with the phantasized maternal/feminine offers men a form of psychic compensation that guards against the painful fragmentation of the self in the moment of traumatization, and also later during potential moments of reliving traumatic experience. Union, merging, dreams of feminine love—these coping mechanisms enable the male, through dissociation, to create psychic cohesion in the moment of traumatic exposure. Bruder and West hold that, for men, the “meaning” of traumatization (“meaning” being, I contend, the transformation of somatic experience, that is, behaviors, flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, and so on, into linguistic and symbolic structures, into declarative or narrative memory) may only be reconstituted as a form of femininity precisely because it does not fit within culturally accepted models of masculinity: the hero, the nationalist-warrior, the neo-Nazi, the son of an SS man or any other military man for that matter, the sons of an entire generation of German men. Trauma remains split off from the self in the form of femininity.

Following Nossack’s experience of the bombing of Hamburg, Borchart’s portrayal of war, and Böll’s description of returning home, the sexualization of female relations also provides psychic cohesion during subsequent occurrences of fragmentation. Paradoxically, however, the experience of trauma destroys the potential for building a mature erotic relationship. Trauma extinguishes any real opportunity for mature erotic contact and replaces it with an axis of power relations—characterized by a rigid, extreme polarity—around which interactions turn. Sexualization becomes a means of keeping the self alive while also providing an agency for controlling the Other—an Other who might remind the subject of his traumatization, his lack of manliness. This might explain why Nossack both sexualizes and deeroticizes the character of Cassandra. Certainly, Borchert’s and Böll’s powerful maternal imageries raise serious questions about the relationship between the portrayal of the feminine and the nature of trauma. Although sexualization is possible in Borchert’s texts, mature erotic contact is not, because merging with the Other, surrendering the self and allowing the boundaries of the self to become permeable without losing the self, is remindful of the original traumatic exposure itself. This is the paradox of the traumatized man who uses his masculinity to mask fragmentation—the maintenance of manhood at the expense of women. The psychic cohesion maintained through the feminine during type II traumatization—the humiliation,