

Masculinism in Europe

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ABSTRACT

Masculinism is one of the contemporary manifestations of antifeminism in Western countries. It defends the notion that women now dominate men, who are called on to revolt, organize resistance, restore lost virile identity, and demand rights, notably as divorced husbands and fathers. While activists of what has become a genuine socio-political movement believe they invented the word, this is not at all the case. The term, which became common beginning in the 2000s, appeared a century earlier, when it was used by the feminists Hubertine Auclert (1848-1914) in French and Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) in English to refer to defenders of male domination. For a long time the word was rare and unstable in its meaning, in French, English, and German.



Fathers 4 Justice demonstration before the Parliament at Westminster, May 2004.

Like feminism, the term masculinism inherited a pathologizing primary meaning, as nineteenth century medicine used it to diagnose the presence of male secondary sex characteristics in women. Use of the word nevertheless resumed in the 1980s, referring to the defence of the male condition. It suggests the existence of a male political voice, which would be the equivalent of feminism for women. This lexical choice was clever, as calling oneself a masculinist masks one's antifeminism, and tries to give a positive identity to a movement of reaction against women's rights. Masculinists actually seek to imitate feminism. For instance, they have called for an international

men's day that would be their "March 8." Of course, public opinion is not necessarily convinced, and some of them prefer to call themselves "hominists" and even "humanists."

Masculinism emerged in the 1980s in reaction to the second-wave feminism of the 1970s, in the global context of the "conservative revolution," of which it is one expression. Amid female contraception, the right to an abortion, authorization/facilitation of divorce, greater recognition and penalization of masculine violence, legitimization of economic independence, sexual revolution, and recognition of LGBT rights, feminism had gone "too far," inverting power relations and leaving men in total disarray and panic. It was a "crisis of masculine identity," a formula appropriated by masculinists. The "suffering of men" (loss of confidence, depression, suicide) was emphasized by the psychologists Guy Corneau (1951-2017) and Yvon Dallaire (born in 1947) from Quebec, among others. Masculinist engagement became surrounded by a "psychoanalytical" and "personal development" discourse. The all-powerful mother and the absent father were now the source of an illness eating away at so-called post-feminist societies. What was important was to take back control, especially in the family domain, by defending the right to oppose an abortion and the insolubility of the parental couple (even for men guilty of violence towards the mother of their children), in addition to the unconditional rights of fathers and denunciation of the *omerta* surrounding women's violence committed against men. Masculinist activists targeted divorced fathers and offered them a community life, with moral and legal support. While this movement was more vigorous in North America, a number of activist groups took inspiration from it in Europe. SOS Papa was founded in France in 1990, *Männerrechtsbewegung* (Men's rights movement) was formed in the late 1990s in Germany, and *Fathers 4 Justice*, which was born in 2001 in the United Kingdom, spread to Italy, the Netherlands... They engaged in lobbying and the raising of awareness in order to, according to them, restore men's rights. Believing themselves to be victims of sexist discrimination, they notably sought to impose joint custody, in the name of their conception of the "child's best interest," which does not correspond to that of family law judges.

Moderate or radical, peaceful or violent, masculinists are not a homogeneous group. The primary motivation can be a search of belonging to a community of men. Some will thus learn together how to become seductive, to be "alpha males" thanks to a transmission of virility from man to man. Two American authors serve as references: the poet and activist Robert Bly (born in 1926), author of *Iron John* (1990), and the Harvard political science professor Harvey C. Mansfield (born in 1932), author of *Manliness* (2006). They advocate a return to virility, with its rites and traditions.

Religious motivation is more traditional, in keeping with a long-standing opposition to women's emancipation. Under the label of "new feminism," the encyclical *Evangelium vitae* by Pope John Paul II (1995) accentuated the traditional model. But with Benedict XVI, a more combative anti-feminist attitude was legitimized as the response to same-sex marriage. In 2009, the Pope wrote that feminism was the "self-destruction of man, and hence a destruction of the work of God himself."

New single-sex male religious groups—with retreats and charismatic communities—were formed. *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul* by John Eldredge (American author born in 1960) was one of the books recommended, in an attempt to rediscover a sense of "struggle," "adventure," and "love of beauty." The influence of North American evangelists in Europe was another medium of diffusion. However, the desire to "re-differentiate" the sexes by emphasizing traditional virility was not exclusively religious, as it was shared by non-religious and agnostic masculinist sensibilities.

Early twenty-first century masculinism is also a response to third-wave feminism. "Gender theory" and gay, lesbian, and transgender movements have become targets, and are the subject of "anti-gender crusades."

Masculinist discourses show a strong intersectionality of hatred, with misogyny and virility going along with LGBT-phobia, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia.

On the initiative of male and female politicians from the right and the far-right, masculinism has also been included on the political agenda. The central issue is to revisit recent legislative victories, which are often fragile and still controversial, for example with the Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán, who in the autumn of 2018 banned gender studies in his country.

The European Parliament is accused of being an instrument for imposing egalitarian policy on the people. Masculinist lobbying is thus exerted on the state and supra-state level, often by masking its anti-egalitarian aims, since it claims to restore the equality of which men have been deprived. State feminism and its “femocrats” are presented as the very proof of female domination of Western societies, and the same is true for the judiciary, which is accused of being feminized and partial.

The range of actions taken is fairly large. In order to compensate for the low number of activists, spectacular action was adopted as a transnational strategy by masculinists, who wore Superman costumes or “perched” on top of cranes (as in Nantes in 2013). During the information age, social media, websites and blogs are used on a massive scale. Cyberbullying of feminists has become a major form of anti-feminism. A “manosphere” that transcends the borders of Western Europe has emerged. Putin’s power is cited as an example of this, for instance his firm stance towards the punk rock group Pussy Riot, whose feminist members were sentenced in 2012 to two years of hard labour for a performance in an Orthodox church.

Another novelty is masculinism serving as the inspiration for mass murderers. In Quebec, Marc Lépine murdered 14 female students in 1989, driven by hatred of feminists. In Norway, Anders Breivik, who murdered 77 people in 2011, was steeped in masculinist and white supremacist argument. Murder is advocated by the community of Incels (Involuntary Celibates) as a way of terrorizing women, whom they criticize for refusing to have sexual relations with them. On the Internet, the demonization of feminists (“feminazis”) reinforces the notion that feminists, who are accused of misandry, are also violent.

Masculinism is no doubt the tip of the iceberg, a conspicuous symptom, such as the dramatic virility of heads of state such as Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin. This trend bears witness to an extreme form of reaction to the evolutions underway with respect to gender equality, which are seen as an attack on the heart of masculinity, the very essence of male domination.

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