



THE EUROPEAN MAN, A HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY (19TH-21ST CENTURIES)

Virility in Europe

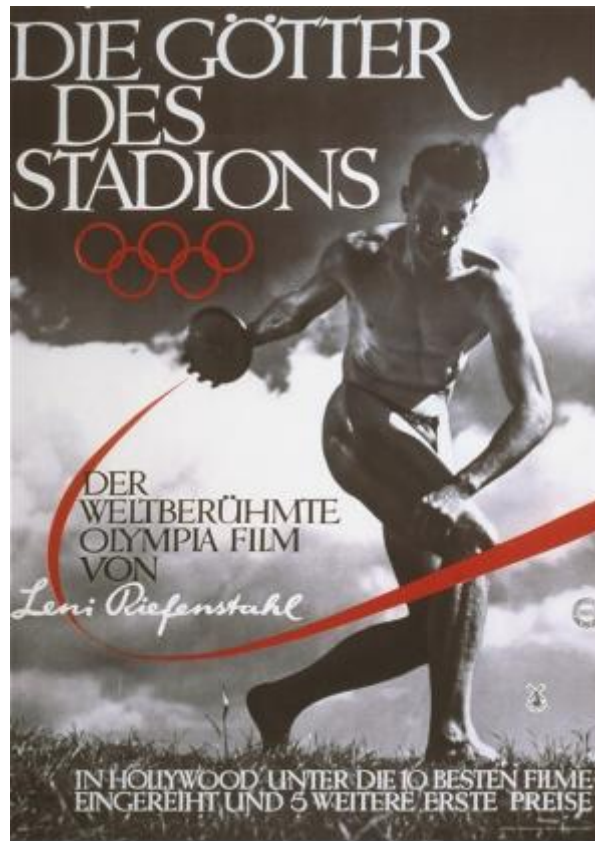
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ABSTRACT

Virility, an exacerbated form of a dominating and violent masculinity, was revived in eighteenth-century Europe in reaction to the transformations of modern societies. While some of the constituent characteristics of the archaic virile ideal have endured over time, models of virility have adapted to a wide range of political, social, and cultural contexts. Virility contributes to the ordering of gender by legitimizing male domination over women, imposing a hegemonic model of masculinity on men, as well as fostering competition and hierarchy among social groups. While being a universal concept, virility is nonetheless specifically related to men and their relation to the body understood as a force.



Carl Steffek, *Execution of Robert Blum on November 9, 1848*, 1848-1849.
Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#).



Poster for the Leni Riefensthal film, *Die Götter des Stadions* (The Gods of the Stadium), 1936. DR.



Jean-Pierre Bonnotte, *The actors Lino Ventura, Jean Gabin, and Alain Delon on the set of Henri Verneuil's The Sicilian Clan*, March 1969, Rome, Italy. Gamma-Rapho. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Based on physical, sexual, moral, and social characteristics, virility is an ancient normative ideal that sustains individual and collective constructions of masculinities. Through its reaffirmation in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe in renewed forms, virility has helped legitimized male domination, all the while shaping hierarchies that are part of other social relations. War, sports, politics, work, and culture are privileged fields for its expression.

The physical markers of virility

Virility is firstly associated with physical characteristics. After the notion of a sexual dimorphism in human bodies took hold in the eighteenth century, gender differentiation was accompanied by a positive emphasis on the characteristics attributed to males.

Neoclassicism, which was theorized by Winckelmann (1717-1768), set the ancient Greek virile model up as the incarnation of the beautiful, and combined it with the nobility of a resolute mind, a capacity for self-control, remarkable courage, and a potential for domination. This aesthetic endured throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and culminated with its outrageous use for the glory of fascist regimes, as demonstrated by the sculptures of Arno Breker or the films of Leni Riefenstahl. Ancient virility remains firmly established at the dawn of the twenty-first century, and can be diverted as a homoerotic icon, such as *Mercury* by the French artists Pierre et Gilles in 2001.

Most men opt for more humble markers of virility. Depending on the time period and social class, ordinary physical attributes such as hairiness (mustache, beard), clothing (pants, three-piece suit), accessories (top hat, derby hat, cap), and consumption habits (tobacco, alcohol) outwardly demonstrate a shared belonging to the so-called stronger sex, as well as the coexistence of competing masculinities. In ambivalent fashion, virility simultaneously unites men while prompting them to distinguish themselves from one another, both individually and socially. Women also appropriate these markers of virility, especially *garçonnes* (flappers) and later butches.

War and peace, virile values

Violence and war have historically been privileged spaces for the exercise of virility. The *grogard* of Napoleon's Old Guard served as an archetype for the early nineteenth century masculine ideal, before conscription led to the universalist promotion of the citizen-soldier. The diffusion of the martial values of courage and heroism obscured that of another virile imperative decisive in the exercise of war: the capacity to inflict violence. The military conquest of colonies produced virility, by simultaneously exacerbating virile combat and controlling male alterities. The military-virile model transformed as a result of mass warfare. Battlefields, weaponry, and forms of fighting evolved during the First World War in particular, reducing the soldier to cannon fodder whose docility was more necessary than his flamboyance. During the twentieth century, military virility nevertheless remained a politically mobilizing element (Squadrists in Italy, Freikorps in Germany) for promoting the new man. After 1945, the feminization of armies and the technicization of combat hardly made a dent in the virile representation of war.

Virility was also instilled in pacified forms. The conjunction of bodily and moral excellence is one of its leitmotifs. The "muscular Christianity" emblematic of the Victorian era in England, in addition to Muskeljudentum, prefigured the youth movements of the twentieth century such as scouting, which was founded in 1908 by Baden-Powell (1857-1941) on the military model, and promoted traditional values based on the separation of the sexes. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the fear of seeing these values lost in the course of social transformations prompted the recurring staging of a supposed crisis in masculinity. Chivalrous virility was staged in late nineteenth century duels, although it was sports that gradually became the "conservatories of virile virtues" (G. Vigarello), simultaneously offering bodily training, the inculcation of discipline, and a performance of

accomplished masculinity. Some sports, boxing in particular, mobilized the same individual strength and virtues as the sword fighting of old, while collective sports (rugby, cricket, football) promoted a spirit of fair play and camaraderie that assumed meaning in homosociality, and contributed to the emergence of the gentleman. The world of sports was initially organized without women, and for Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937) the true Olympic hero was none other than a male. The twentieth century was nevertheless marked by the dazzling advancement of female athletes whose courage, tenacity, and performance questioned the gendered conception of virility.

Incarnations of and challenges to virility

Politics also bear the stamp of virility. In the early nineteenth century, the affirmation of a revolutionary identity in France was accompanied by the exclusion of women from public life, as well as the establishment of census suffrage, which until 1848 denied poor men the manly exercise of politics. Similarly, in England the Reform Act of 1832 posited that women and members of the working-class were immature, and restricted the right to vote according to criteria of masculine respectability: property, marriage, paternity. The association of virility with politics remained firmly anchored in the twentieth century, leading to a glorification of “great” men, and to the persistent exclusion of women from the vote (until 1990 for the Swiss canton of Appenzell Innerehode) and from public office. The relatively recent accession of women to positions as heads of state or government nevertheless shows—like Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013), the so-called Iron Lady—that masculinity does not condition the virile exercise of power or violence. The same is true outside of an institutional framework: the working-class combativeness of demonstrations or riots is often reduced to the masculine element despite the participation of women. However, virile characteristics can also become the stigma of a supposed savaging of men. For instance, the spasmodic vision of working-class revolts or national liberation movements reduces political expression to an exacerbated and outrageous anger unfit for good men.

Virility serves as a tool of differentiation between social classes, especially in the working world. While the working-class struggle gave nobility to the proletariat from the mid-nineteenth century onward, it was during the interwar period that the male worker—standing for the coming of industrial productivism and modernity—valiantly affirmed himself in opposition to bourgeois values. Proletarian iconography used muscular bodies, Stakhanovism, heavy labor, and activist combativeness to establish an allegory of physical and moral strength. As a result of the expansion of the service sector and the lack of differentiation in the capacity for hard work, the bodies of workers began to fade from view in the 1970s, with the white collar henceforth embodying the new virile qualities.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the beatniks, yé-yé, hippies, and later punks made fun of mandatory virility. But it was the challenging of the patriarchy by feminist movements and the concrete liberation of women that brought about a break with traditional virility. However, in retrospect this break appears to be more of a recomposition. In the twenty-first century, pop culture—whether it be films or television series, advertisements, video games, or songs—shape masculinities by fantasizing about emancipated hypermasculine figures (mafia members, delinquents, etc.), or on the contrary figures representing authority (the police), with both being consistent with the traditional criteria of virility. Despite ebbing and changing, virility is still used as an argument to legitimize male domination.

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