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Taming Muslim Masculinity: Patriarchy and Christianity in German Immigrant Integration

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Abstract

This article analyzes a growing sector of state-funded pedagogies designed to reform Muslim masculinity in Germany. These programs present Muslim men as suffering from a psychopathology rooted in an alleged Islamic "honor culture". They rely on a mix of Christian and non-religious welfare providers to supply Muslim youth with alternative masculine role models. We trace three implications of this arrangement: First, these programs' culturalist approach perpetuates Orientalist hierarchizations of masculinity. Second, the de-Islamized masculinity these programs construct as normatively binding revolves around a heteronormative patriarchy imagined as benevolent, thereby re-inforcing the subjection of women. Third, these educational initiatives yoke the reform of Muslim masculinity to male participants' dramatic conversion to a Christian-German culture that blurs the line between the religious and the nonreligious. We suggest that studies of (hegemonic) masculinity in Europe ought to attend to the salience of the nation-state and to the public relevance of Christianity—two dimensions given short shrift in recent theorizing.

Keywords

hegemonic masculinity, immigration, Europe, ethnography, religion, social work, youth, patriarchy, fatherhood

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Introduction

While gendered Islamophobia in Europe had long focused on Muslim women and femininity, in recent years it has come to center around men and masculinity. New Year's Eve 2015–2016 represented a bellwether of this development, when men variously described as "Arab," "Muslim," or "North African" were accused of having assaulted women in front of Cologne's cathedral in Germany's fourth-largest city. Although police, court, and journalistic inquiries never succeeded in clarifying the facts of this event, the ensuing pan-European public debate was marked by an outburst of racist imagery and influenced public policies across the continent (Edenborg 2018). Some policy shifts were punitive-securitarian, including the tightening of legal provisions on sexual assault and deportation. Such repressive strategies have, however, been accompanied by "softer" ones. Thus, the regional government of Cologne's home state, North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), began to finance educational projects geared toward immigrants and their descendants, linking state funding of social work to a focus on "the prevention of sexualized violence" and "the strengthening of the teaching of values" (Ministerium der Finanzen NRW, 2019, p. 1986). As a result, gender-pedagogical interventions designed specifically for Muslim men began to emerge. They were premised on the idea that if Muslim men's heterosexual masculinity could be reformed, they might yet become respectable men and citizens.

In this article, we rely on extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted separately by both authors to deconstruct this state-funded pedagogization of Muslim masculinity in Germany. Beyond repressive and securitarian concerns, what "positive" ideal of heterosexual and cisgender masculinity do these projects seek to teach? To address this question, we begin by situating our work in a wider interdisciplinary dialogue on global hegemonic masculinity. We then highlight two specificities of the German case, where hegemonic masculinity is constructed against the foil of Nazism, and where gender pedagogies are implemented in a welfare system reliant on both Christian and non-religious institutions. After outlining our research methodology and site selection, we present three upshots of our analysis of gender-pedagogical trainings for Muslim men in Germany. First, the culturalizing diagnosis of Muslim psychopathology at work in these programs perpetuates an Orientalist hierarchization of masculinities. Second, state-endorsed masculinity projects reconfigure rather than question the patriarchal oppression of women. And third, the attempt to remake Muslim masculinity is best understood as a project of sexual and religious conversion, in which an Islamic-Middle Eastern culture is repudiated in favor of an alternative German-Christian culture. We conclude by drawing out some theoretical implications, and by suggesting two lines of inquiry that situate our findings in a wider European context.

Beyond Homo- and Femonationalism in European "Immigrant Integration"

Interdisciplinary work in sociology, history, anthropology, post-colonial theory, as well as queer and gender studies has parsed how constructions of masculinity are situated in

global power relations. To capture the accumulated weight of these inequalities, Lugones (2016) has coined the term "coloniality of gender." By this, she means a Eurocentric gender framework that involves both a patriarchal subjection of women and a global hierarchy of masculinities. Modern notions of bourgeois, heterosexual, white, and Christian sexual morality in Europe developed through the (attempted) management and transformation of subaltern sexualities—primarily colonized populations but also metropolitan lower classes (Stoler 2010). Notions of masculinity are marked by a racialized ambivalence in this context. On the one hand, an Orientalist homoeroticism construes non-white male bodies as sexually desirable (Boone 2014). On the other hand, (neo-)colonial projects demonize non-Western masculinities as backward, giving rise to ostensibly progressive commitments to "liberate" non-Western women (Abu-Lughod 2015). The sociology of gender traces the endurance of this coloniality today—in contexts ranging from East Asia (Kim and Pyke 2015) to the Arab world (Massad 2008), sub-Saharan Africa (van Klinken 2012), and post-socialist Eastern Europe (Hemment 2004). These contributions stress that across the globe men are compelled to configure their masculinity in relation to a Euro-American norm.

This global hierarchy of masculinities is actualized in contemporary European policies of immigrant integration. As governments and media problematize Muslim immigrants' attitudes to gender and sexuality, completion of gender-pedagogical integration classes has become a precondition for obtaining residency; and even once legal status is secured, Muslim gendered practices are subject to continuous monitoring (Schinkel 2017). Existing literature in cultural and queer studies have attended to the construction of the figure of the Muslim male as a masculinist-homophobic folk devil in contemporary Europe (Ewing 2008; Haritaworn 2015; Mack 2017). This scholarship highlights that Muslim men's diverse everyday masculine practices—particularly those associated with repertoires of nurturing and caring (Inhorn and Naguib 2018; Jørgensen 2023)—are rendered illegible by dominant Orientalist conceptualizations. Such gendered ascriptions become an important site for the bordering of European nation-states, where the ascendancy of a superior—white, bourgeois, and Christian—masculinity is maintained through a commitment to progressive causes of gender equality and liberation.

In the recent critical literature, the concepts of homo- and femonationalism have emerged as analytical paradigms to make sense of this gendered politics of immigrant integration. Homonationalism, in Jasbir Puar's (2007) seminal argument, pairs a discourse of LGBTQ rights with the re-entrenchment of racial hierarchies, and with a range of Islamophobic neo-colonial political projects that proclaim to "save gays" from violent non-Western heterosexuals. Homonationalism is productive of an extremely delimited set of viable Muslim masculine subject positions, focused on the stereotyped figures of the oppressed Muslim queer and the victimized homosexual refugee. Complementing Puar's observations, Sara Farris (2017) has developed the notion of "femonationalism" as homonationalism's conceptual twin. Farris observes that European nationalisms enact certain feminist rhetorics, and that Islamophobia claims the mantle of women's empowerment. Like the agenda of queer liberation, the urge to

"save Muslim women" from violent heterosexual patriarchs is part of a wide-ranging neo-colonial politics. And, once again, the result is a narrow delimitation of legitimate gendered subject positions, focused on the valorization of Muslim women as passive victims of sexualized violence.

While the lenses of homo- and femonationalism have greatly enriched our understanding of the role of gender politics in upholding structures of dispossession, their emphasis on the regulatory power of *queerness* and *femininity* has spawned a lack of attention to the normalizing visions of *heterosexual, cisgender masculinity* at work in present-day Europe. In femo- and homonationalist political projects, the figure of the heterosexual, cisgender Muslim male appears only as a negative foil, an oppressor figure that must be cast out from the national collective. Scholarly analyses that critique femo- and homonationalist politics tend to *repeat* this erasure by focusing only on regulatory ideals of femininity and queerness. By contrast, they do not tell us what kind of heterosexual, cisgender Muslim male subject these Euro-American nationalist orders might define as *desirable*. This disregard is surprising insofar as the sociology of nationalism has long investigated the importance of heteronormative masculinity (Enloe 2014). Nevertheless, heterosexual masculinity is given short shrift in much of recent engagement with the intersection of gender and nationalism in Western Europe. Most commonly, explicit inquiry into heterosexual masculinity is relegated to the study of far-right, incel, and white supremacist contexts (for an overview, see Graff, Kapur, and Walters 2019). These investigations are vital; yet there is a large terrain of dominant masculinities that such research does not cover. In particular, if it is true—as critical scholars have amply shown—that Muslim heterosexual and cisgender masculinity is demonized as "too virile," then what is a "not-too-virile" alternative that West European nation-states conceive of as legitimate?

In this article, we investigate this officially endorsed, "good" masculinity. To do so, we draw on the notion of "hegemonic masculinity" originally proposed by Raewyn Connell. While it is beyond the scope of this article to retrace the full intellectual history of the concept, we stress three features that are especially productive (in line with Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832–3). First, *hegemonic masculinity* allows us to center our analysis on heterosexual and cisgender masculinity as an ideal with normative weight in its own right—while taking seriously the fact that this masculinity is constructed in relation to femininity, queerness, and marginalized (e.g. homosexual or racialized) masculinities. Thereby, the concept of hegemonic masculinity offers a way to attend to the power imbalances inherent in the coloniality of gender. Second, the focus on *hegemony* foregrounds dynamics of legitimacy. As per Antonio Gramsci, "hegemony" connotes something other than mere dominance through coercion. What makes hegemonic masculinity distinctive is its public normalization and desirability as a cultural ideal. This is precisely what state-funded gender pedagogies represent. And third, the (Gramscian) emphasis on hegemony as the product of a particular historical conjuncture points to the necessity of studying masculinities *empirically*, in the settings of their everyday social enactment—something that we seek to accomplish through our ethnographic method.

Hegemonic Masculinity in Germany: Specters of Nazism in a Christian-Secular Welfare State

The study of hegemonic masculinity in a German context needs to reckon with two features shaping the reconstructed (West) German nation-state after 1945: the specter of an authoritarian Nazi masculinity, and a welfare state that accords a significant role to Christian institutions in the development of a post-Nazi masculinity. We discuss these two elements in turn.

The birth of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) after military defeat in WWII was marked by pervasive moral panics about German masculinity. National reconstruction was taken to necessitate a "remasculinization" (Moeller 1998)—but of the right kind. Studies of post-WWII (West) German society have traced the coalescence of a reformed masculine ideal that rearticulated patriarchy without returning to earlier martial masculinities. Men, in this view, should be "aggressive but not too aggressive" (Poiger 1998, 168). This paralleled the diagnoses of American reeducation authorities, who conceived of Germans as "boys in trouble" in need of fatherly guidance to become better men (Fay 2008, 1–38). That pervasive social change should spawn a quest for a "softer" masculinity stylized as "American" is not peculiar to Germany (Kim and Pyke 2015). What gave (West) German hegemonic masculinity a distinctive twist, however, was its construction against the negative image of a (supposed) Nazi masculinity. As Dagmar Herzog (2005) has shown, after the 1968 student movement West German elites subscribed to a view of Nazism as defined by sexual repression and authoritarian fatherhood. Herzog highlights that, despite the mistaken nature of this interpretation of Nazism, the development of an anti-authoritarian masculinity henceforth assumed specific urgency in the German context.

Official attempts to influence gender relations significantly rely on the welfare state, which in the FRG is marked by a characteristic split between non-religious and Christian institutions. In the political economy literature, Germany represents the archetype of the "conservative" welfare state, where social service provision is generous but offers highly stratified entitlements that maintain social status differentials (Esping-Andersen 1990). This literature has identified Lutheran social reform and Catholic social doctrine as key influences that have shaped the German welfare state (Manow 2008). This influence means that tax-funded, public social services are provided through a dualized structure. State-run programs and institutions coexist with formally independent state-approved providers, of which Christian confessional organizations—Catholic *Caritas* and Protestant *Diakonie*—are by far the most significant. With 1.3 million employees and a further 1.2 million volunteers, they are the largest employers after the state (BAGFW 2018, 42–3). In accordance with the "principle of subsidiarity"—a concept taken from Catholic social doctrine—tax money for welfare provision must preferably be funneled through non-state institutions. Thus, despite receiving most of their funding from the public purse, Christian-confessional institutions take precedence over formal state provision and assume public status.

This set-up accords a significant role to institutional Christianity in German welfare provision—including in the fields of gender and immigration. Historical studies on masculinity in Germany highlight that post-war governments responded to anxieties about masculinity by tasking the Churches with "exercising a tighter social control over parts of male youth" (Biess 2019, 110). And over the course of its development, the country's welfare state and its conservative style of social protection shaped feminist argument, leading to an emphasis on women's role as vulnerable mothers and carers (Ferree 2003). These legacies continue to be active today, despite the country's religious pluralization. In her work, Aleksandra Lewicki (2021, 2022) identifies Christian welfare institutions as key sites for the reproduction of racialized inequality. She not only outlines how derogations from equal opportunities legislation allow *Caritas* and *Diakonie* to prefer Christian applicants, meaning that non-Christian employees must convert to Christianity to access permanent employment. Lewicki also analyzes the ways in which Christians are seen to embody a superior spirit of service and care that Muslims in particular are deemed incapable of assuming. At the same time, Alexander-Kenneth Nagel (2021, 2023) highlights that *Caritas* and *Diakonie* have staked a major claim on governing the integration of refugees. As a result, Nagel describes refugee reception centers marked by Christian spatial-architectural forms, by celebrations of Christian holidays, and by significant room for Evangelical missionary work among (Muslim) migrants.

The present-day politics of immigrant integration is marked by the proliferation of homo- and femonationalist anxieties that actualize the quest for a post-Nazi masculinity. Like elsewhere in Europe, in Germany Muslim men are stigmatized as violent heterosexual patriarchs (Ewing 2008). Esra Özyürek, however, has demonstrated the specific form that this stigmatization takes in German public and media discourse, where it is claimed that present-day Muslim men exhibit the same authoritarian masculinities as pre-1945 Nazi Germans. As a result, Muslims are depicted as "Germany's past future" (Özyürek 2019). Unless they undergo the same trajectory of masculine reform that Christian German men have (supposedly) already undergone after 1945, Muslims will drag Germany back into its National-Socialist past. As a result, a wealth of Muslim-oriented educational projects are publicly funded to address a laundry list of masculinist ills, including a stipulated Muslim-only antisemitism (Özyürek 2023). After a note on methodology, we proceed to analyze the substantive content of the desirable masculinity that these interventions are designated to propagate.

Methodology

The mainstay of this article are two projects of ethnographic fieldwork conducted by both authors independently of one another in Germany's Ruhr region between 2015 and 2022. The Ruhr is a polycentric region, whose more than five million inhabitants make it the country's largest urban area. As the former industrial heartland of West Germany, it has long attracted labor migration. During the post-1945 economic boom, the Bonn

government concluded a series of labor migration agreements, with the Ruhr becoming a prime destination for Turkish workers. Yet the decline of the region's industrial base in the late twentieth century brought decades of socioeconomic change. As factories shuttered and unemployment rose, cash-strapped cities scaled back public service provision, and parts of the Ruhr now rank among Germany's poorest counties. While the region prides itself on being a melting pot of cultures, this self-representation runs up against large-scale inequalities in the wake of worker migration and refugee re-settlement; a phenomenon aggravated by white flight from old working-class neighborhoods.

Our research strategy involved two steps. We began by attending more than a dozen training seminars on Islam and integration organized by state- and national-level players for education and gender pedagogy. These trainings brought together social workers from across NRW state and served to diffuse shared educational practices.[1] A pedagogical model that was presented as cutting-edge at these seminars was called *Heroes*, with many projects across NRW either claiming formal allegiance to the *Heroes* blueprint or adopting its methods informally. Since its approach to Muslim masculinity was therefore replicated at many different sites, in a second step of our research strategy we focused on *Heroes* by conducting fieldwork at two local youth clubs in the Ruhr that ran *Heroes*-based activities in practice.

In this second step, we sought to capture the dualized nature of the German welfare state. In NRW, state-funded gender- and diversity-oriented educational projects are split between Christian and non-religious providers. Thus, two thirds of the recipients of one of the relevant public funding programs available for local youth work are Christian institutions, the remainder are religiously unaffiliated (AGOT 2019).[2] In the Ruhr, Protestant institutions are the largest service provider, reflective of a long-standing tradition of Protestant charity in worker parishes. Thus, one of our local *Heroes* chapters—which we refer to as *Orange*—was based at a non-religious institution, while the other one—which we call *Lifepoint*—was affiliated with the Protestant Church and its welfare provider *Diakonie*. To run their programs, both youth clubs predominantly relied on public funding. Both had received prizes for their work by the NRW government and the regional Church authorities; and they were recommended to us by educators as models of pedagogical "best practice". The appeal of focusing on *Orange* and *Lifepoint* was, therefore, that they were significant beyond their own case by virtue of being held up to other youth workers as authoritative examples to follow.

Participant observation allowed us to take part in the pedagogical exercises designed to produce a legitimate, desirable masculinity. Thus, during our fieldwork, we joined youth clubs' regular activities, sat in on team meetings, and accompanied educators and their clients on excursions. If single-authored "multi-sited ethnography" (ethnographic study at several locations) has become common, coauthored ethnographies bringing together two authors working at different fieldwork sites remain rare. Yet this approach has much to offer, not only because it extends the scope of the research and allows for the triangulation of different research projects. Co-authorship also makes use of our differential positionalities in the field. That one us—Esra Özyürek—was drawn to the

setting of *Orange* while the other—Jacob Lypp—explored the Protestant organization *Lifepoint* is reflective of this. Esra Özyürek is a Turkish- and Muslim-background researcher who found it easy to establish a rapport with Middle East-/Muslim-background youth, who referred to her as "older sister" and introduced her to their families. Conversely, as a native white German with a Protestant background, Jacob Lypp was seamlessly incorporated into the world of the Christian educators at *Lifepoint*, who were eager to use his (presumed) academic expertise to foster their youth club's educational and spiritual mission. This allowed us to bridge the split between Christian and nonreligious organizations characteristic of the dualized German welfare state. Yet despite these differences, we encountered a strikingly similar diagnosis of the problems of Muslim masculinity.

Identifying the Villain: Muslim Fathers and the Psychoculturalist Diagnosis of Deficient Oriental Masculinity

Independently of one another, *Orange* and *Lifepoint* had developed their projects on masculinity using the same verbiage, each establishing weekly group meetups for Muslim boys they called *Heroes*. In doing so, educators relied on a pre-existing blueprint. Pioneered in Berlin's Neukölln district, the *Heroes* project has received nation-wide praise for its problematization of what it refers to as a Muslim "honor culture" (*Ehrenkultur*). Its public profile has been enhanced by Ahmad Mansour, a Palestinian-Israeli psychologist based in Berlin. A former educator with the local *Heroes* chapter, he has become a commentator in German media. In his best-selling books on Islam and integration, he relies on *Heroes* as a model for successful pedagogical engagement of Muslim boys. Mansour offers a sweeping diagnosis of Muslim masculinity:

> In a shame culture where modesty is a positive value, genders are segregated, and sex is taboo, neither men nor women can develop their individuality. This produces suffering, anger, anxiety, a feeling of being torn, depression, and violence. Especially for young men, it creates a considerable and often dangerous potential for violence. (Mansour 2015, 129)

In 2023, *Heroes*' Berlin chapter distanced itself from Mansour and his public pronouncements, stressing that it had cut all ties due to Mansour's "open flirt with racist forces" (Heroes Berlin 2023). Yet this stance did not filter down to the local *Heroes* projects in the Ruhr, run independently from the Berlin chapter. Here, Mansour's diagnoses were still very much operative in pedagogical practice.

In Mansour's diagnosis, the main agent responsible for Muslim boys' psychopathology is the boys' father. Here, Mansour reproduces the abovementioned tropes of the West German quest for a post-Nazi democratic masculinity that is neither too aggressive nor too weak. In the process, Mansour combines two seemingly contradictory positions. On the one hand, Mansour stylizes the Muslim father as too authoritarian, a Nazi despot with a totalitarian quest for control; on the other hand, he is too absent, his

laissez-faire parenting begetting fatherless sons. According to Mansour, these opposing faults nevertheless lead to the same outcome: dysfunctional sons lacking in psychosocial balance and prone to religious violence, sexism, and antisemitism (Mansour 2015, 99–108). Policymaking discourses have picked up on these diagnoses. NRW government studies identify family-based disruption as a decisive factor in the making of future jihadi terrorists (Akkuş et al., 2020), and the federal Family Ministry depicts Muslim fathers as overwhelmed by the "cognitive and social challenges" of raising boys in in Germany (Leyendecker, 2011, 37).

To understand how this diagnosis of absent-authoritarian fatherhood might be operationalized, we attended numerous training seminars put on by the *Heroes* group from *Orange*. They were often invited to run workshops on "honor culture" in schools or at training seminars for other educators organized by NRW's flagship agency for gender pedagogy. The centerpiece of these trainings were short acting skits—either performed live onstage or prerecorded and published on a government-funded gender pedagogy YouTube channel—in which the young men enacted everyday situations where they stood up to their peers' and families' notions of "honor." They were shown defending silent sisters against irate fathers; they claimed their own right to marry German women for love (rather than settling for "honorable" arranged marriages to Turkish Muslim women); and they condemned their families' traditions. The villain of this story was always the father. He was the guardian of what Stefanie, the white German educator co-leading *Orange*, defined as the idea of honor prevalent in Muslim culture. Focused on controlling the sexuality of the family's women, it provided the basis for "honor killings," which Stefanie emphasized were categorically distinct from all other femicides. Using Turkish-language terminology, she reserved special opprobrium for *saygı*, a notion of "respect" that was taken to demand boys' absolute submission to their fathers. This, *Heroes* suggested, made many Muslim homes unsuitable for the development of a democratic masculinity.

The result of the absent-authoritarian father's failure to function as an exemplar of male life was taken to be young men whose masculinity was out of balance. While they *appeared* hypermasculine, they were actually suffering from being weak men. As the co-organizer of a series of gender training seminars explained to us, the "big problem" involved in helping Muslim youngsters was their lack of faith in their own masculine agency. Instead of assuming that they were in control of their own destiny, these boys located control "at the fatalistically external level, [by saying] for instance 'God wants it that way,' or 'that's fate.'" To many educators, Muslim youngsters appeared captive to "their" Islamic culture, a theme graphically illustrated in one of *Orange*'s video skits in which we see one of the *heroes* gaze at us through iron bars reminiscent of a cage while delivering an indictment of his family's honor-based traditions. In this view redolent with Orientalist imaginaries about effeminacy and fatalism, pedagogical intervention was to enable Muslim boys acquire a quality referred to as "balanced boyness" (*balanciertes Jungesein*, Winter and Neubauer 1998). Published by the Federal Center for Health Education (BZgA) and endorsed at state-funded gender-pedagogical training seminars, "balanced boyness" is expressive of the post-WWII (West) German

recalibration of hegemonic masculinity. German men had already learnt the ropes of a masculinity that was "aggressive but not too aggressive" (Poiger 1998, 168). *Heroes* therefore re-enacted a global hierarchy of masculinity in which Muslim youngsters had to "catch up" with German men.

An Alternative Masculine Example: Reconstructing Benevolent Patriarchy

For Muslim youngsters to become "balanced boys," educators had to fill the void left behind by Muslim fathers and provide youngsters with alternative masculine models. Throughout our fieldwork, we encountered innumerable social workers who spoke of their desire to be father figures to Muslim boys they took—often without evidence—to require masculine guidance. Gabriel, who was in his late thirties and had been a social worker at *Lifepoint* for a decade, described its masculine clientele by recounting how *Lifepoint*'s history had been punctuated by troubled relations with what he called "Turkish gangsters" and "drug-dealing Arab boys". His "daddy role" (*Papa-Rolle*), he said, consisted of getting these boys off the streets and into *Lifepoint*. Situated in the shadow of a twin-steepled church a stone's throw away from the busy pedestrianized city center, the youth club was animated by a Christian spirit that was pervasive yet oblique. In the words of Gabriel's colleague Samson, this was intentional:

> We want to be a Christian youth center without marketing ourselves like that. Gabriel always cites a Franciscan dictum: "Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary, use words." And that's exactly how we do it at *Lifepoint*. We don't want to preach to people, yet we still want to pass Jesus on to them by giving them a home. We want to civically educate by being a role model for people.

Lifepoint's mission thus hitched together the civic education of the neighborhood's "Turkish" or "Arab" boys and the passing-on of the Gospel. In Gabriel's and Samson's telling, both objectives depended on *Lifepoint* providing a "home" that the boys' biological families were unable to offer, and on social workers becoming the "daddy" figures that the *Heroes* diagnosis perceives Muslim boys to be lacking. It was for this reason that their colleagues Joseph and Rocky had created a local *Heroes* chapter: to help their clients explore "what it means to be a man in this world," as Joseph put it. He added that this required providing Muslim boys with "adventure, competition, and a princess." Thus, the group's vision of an alternative, "balanced" masculinity relied on adventure pedagogy and an agentive heterosexual masculinism already inherent in the program's titular promise to turn participants into *heroes*.

In this vein, on a late October evening a trip to a wildlife conservation area was organized for us to experience a powerful display of masculinity. It was deer mating season, and we would be watching the males roar and ceremoniously challenge each other. As night fell, we stood transfixed by the males fighting on a hillside meadow, the sound of their clashing antlers echoing through the valley. Then we gathered in a circle,

and Rocky interpreted our experiences for us. He recounted how he had recently organized a "father-son weekend"—a survival trip that had taught its participants "how to become a man, in a responsible, trusting manner." In a remote area of the central German mountain ranges, the men had completed physical and spiritual exertions, such as grueling hikes or a march through the darkness of an abandoned railway tunnel. This had allowed them to showcase masculine virtues of strength and self-reliance while also underscoring their limitations. Facing the insufficiency of their own powers, the men had been propelled to turn to God in the evening, when a worship session of Christian song brought tearful emotional release. This "father-son weekend" had been part of the international Christian men's movement *The Fourth Musketeer* (4M). 4M promises to expose its adherents to "a process of life [in which] God molds you into a man," so that men "discover their full potential and heroically take a stand for God, for the family, for the Church, and for justice" (4M Deutschland 2024). These, Rocky said at one of our team meetings, were exactly "the kinds of Christian values that we are embodying when dealing with Muslim youngsters."

Given *Heroes*' problematization of Muslim fathers, much pedagogical effort was expended to provide the boys with a model of fatherly masculinity that was caring and benevolent rather than absent and authoritarian. This hinged on the creation of a harmonious quasi-domestic sociability. Every Monday, Gabriel presided over an activity called "family dinner," where the boys would experience things educators assumed they were denied at home—a wholesome family environment, healthy eating, and the obligation to help with the gendered chores of cooking and cleaning. The dinner always proceeded in a highly ritualized manner. Gabriel would distribute the tasks among the attendees. While some prepared the food, others arranged a long, communal table. Gabriel would then turn off the music and admonish all those present to wash their hands and sit down in silence, before opening the meal with a Christian prayer to the "Heavenly Father." Gabriel then watched over the meal, telling the boys to keep their voices down and respect the moment of supper. Gabriel's performance was in tune with 4M's admonition that good men should become "priests in their families" (Stoorvogel and van den Heuvel 2015, 72).

In the *Heroes* model, this benevolent patriarchy involved the elision of women. Educators generally conceived of Muslim women as passive victims requiring protection. The abovementioned video and play-acting skits put on by *Orange* and copiously used at workshops across NRW only featured women as pawns to be distributed among men. Muslim mothers and daughters did not speak as the men haggled over their rights, nor did the German girls the sons wished to marry ever tell their side of the story. *Heroes*' tendency to reduce ultimate sexual decision-making to an all-male affair also colored everyday pedagogical engagements. At *Lifepoint*'s "family dinner," Gabriel often sat next to Zoran, a shy 20-year-old regular who had taken an interest in Christianity and had begun attending the weekly youth-oriented church service *Lifepoint Jesus*. One evening, a few young, white Christian women from the *Lifepoint Jesus* team joined us at the dinner and began talking about the German young adult movie franchise *Wilde Hühner* (Wild Chicks). Gabriel was shocked to learn that a main

character had to contemplate an unwanted pregnancy, realizing that his own daughters had been undesirably exposed to sexual themes when watching the movie. But then he leaned over to Zoran and said to him with a conspiratorial wink, "Oh, I don't care what the girls are watching. At home I need to take care of that—here I don't." Zoran smiled impassibly, yet the moment held out the possibility of masculine complicity in managing female sexuality—a complicity that Gabriel often playfully underlined by mimicking youngsters' "hard" masculine swagger.

Ostensibly contesting the patriarchy of the alleged "honor culture", *Heroes*' pedagogy in fact hinges not on the supersession of patriarchy but on its reorganization. *Heroes* promises its participants that, in contrast to their absent-authoritarian fathers, they will be able to attain a hegemonic masculine ideal. As explorers of the wilderness and desirers of princesses, the boys can become successful heterosexual men. A core feature of "hegemonic masculinity" is its centeredness around the principle of the oppression of women (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Yet in the name of this principle, hegemonic masculinity accommodates a certain amount of diversity. Dimitrakis Demetriou (2001) has suggested that marginalized masculinities are not simply negated or eliminated; rather, masculine hegemony reproduces itself by selectively incorporating marginalized elements. Zoran's and Gabriel's interactions indicate precisely this ability for dominant masculinities to coopt subordinate ones into a hierarchized patriarchal coalition.

Healing the "Father Wound": Becoming a Hero, Converting to Germanness

So far, we have seen that educators' psychoculturalist diagnosis of an illegitimate Islamic masculinity is accompanied by the deployment of a "balanced" hegemonic alternative. Yet how exactly are youngsters imagined as transitioning out of their deficient masculinity? We argue that the experience of *becoming a hero* is akin to the experience of conversion: that is, of leaving an inherited identity behind and embracing a new one. This is where Christian and nonreligious pedagogical interventions converge. Both stylize the necessary self-transformation of Muslim men as a dramatic change involving a metaphorical "killing of the father" so that they might adopt a set of new cultural values, understood as German and Christian. And here lies the rub: if this notion of the *hero* suggests that a masculinity freed from the cultural baggage of a Muslim upbringing is attainable, then the impossibility of leaving Islam behind raises the possibility that the education of Muslim boys might be an unfinishable task.

The influential scholar of religion Talal Asad defines accounts of conversion as "narratives by which people apprehend […] and describe […] a radical change in the significance of their lives. Sometimes these narratives employ the notion of divine intervention; at other times the notion of a secular teleology" (Asad 1996, 266). Two implications of this "radical change" are worth stressing (van der Veer 1996). First, conversion narratives place tremendous emphasis on the *inner* dimension of this change. Conversion signifies a transformation of one's heart, one's innermost being and

a rediscovery of one's "true" self. Second, this inner change must manifest itself to the outside, notably through a decisive turn away from one's own past and a break with one's earlier social relations and practices. It is these social repercussions that inspire competing assessments of conversion and its political situatedness. Converts frequently stress the clarity of purpose that conversion has afforded them (Roberts 2012). Onlookers, by contrast, often criticize conversion as a "colonization of consciousness", where converts internalize a value system imposed on them from the outside—especially where this conversion takes place in the context of domination (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992). *Heroes*' impact revolved around precisely the attainment of such an inner change, the disruptiveness of its outward manifestations, and the differential assessments that these manifestations inspired.

First, becoming a *hero* amounted to undergoing an inner change towards becoming German—not in a legal sense, but in the form of a deeper identification. After we had watched the various video skits condemning the supposed "honor culture," Stefanie interjected in an apparent non-sequitur midway through her presentation with a smile on her face that all the young men working in her *Heroes* program "feel themselves to be German." She hastened to add that it would of course be fine if they identified as Turkish. Yet the connection was made: the boys' rejection of their patriarchal birth culture opened the path to becoming full German citizens. And vice versa: establishing a bond with Germany required the abandonment of the "honor culture." Metin, one of the *heroes* in Stefanie's program, assessed the transformation he had undergone in precisely these terms:

> Thanks to *Heroes*, I found the courage to call myself German. I don't know when and how exactly. Maybe in my eyes, anyone who defends human rights and equality is a German, and that's what I struggle to be, so that's how it happened.

When someone he identified as "a former radical Muslim" came to *Orange* to talk about the dangers of radicalization, Metin was disconcerted that the process of inner change he had undergone since joining *Heroes* appeared to mirror the sense of purpose found by the guest speaker upon joining a Salafi group. 4M anxiously seeks to dispel such resemblances, claiming that "the radical call to follow is not a call for a Jihad-like life. It is [instead] an invitation to be part of a boisterous, intimate love relationship with the [Heavenly] Father" (Stoorvogel and van den Heuvel 2015, 47). Yet these resemblances are not coincidental, for the change that *Heroes* pursued amounted to precisely this kind of transformation.

Second, this transformation proved a double-edged sword that came with considerable costs attached. To be sure, Metin stressed that he had found a new, better, and German sense of self. Yet he and others who had undergone the *Heroes* program also described to us their estrangement from childhood friends, who found them unrecognizably altered by their transformation into a *hero*. The video materials produced by Metin's *Heroes* chapter ceaselessly proclaimed that *heroes* had to repudiate their family's traditions, even if it meant breaking with their parents. Conversion, if it was

genuine, had to bring about a radical break with one's past and one's former social circle. Such rebellion was laudable from the Christian perspective of *Lifepoint*, too. The 4 M movement reiterates unremittingly that Jesus had a clear message about how to become a good man:

> Leave your father and mother.... Leave your father and mother.... Leave your father and mother.... Jesus was often forced to say no to his family, to be able to say yes to his Heavenly Father.... In that intimate encounter with Jesus, at the bosom of the Father, is where... the father wound can heal. (Stoorvogel and van den Heuvel 2015, 41–56)

In the Christian institutions of the FRG's welfare state, the quest for conversion to a new masculine ideal was often indistinguishable from conversion to Christianity. While the social workers at *Lifepoint* did not want to preach, they still imagined their work in a missionary idiom. When an evening altercation involving some of the young men had turned violent, the social workers saw this as indicative of their failure to communicate the transformative power of Christianity appropriately. As a senior team member mused pensively the next morning, "we want the Gospel to have an effect through our work. And that is not happening through them coming to the church service. But that's why the Gospel simply hasn't 100% reached them. Maybe only 20 or 30%." The same frustration was expressed by one of *Lifepoint*'s educators who recounted his yearslong experience offering pastoral care in the local juvenile prison. Given the legal privileging of Christian organizations in the German welfare state, Muslim clergymen had not been allowed to enter the prison, and the mostly Muslim inmates had flocked to his Protestant offerings. Yet although they had shown great interest and "many had been close [to converting], they pulled back at the last minute." According to him, they had become fearful of how their Muslim fathers would react: "Because there's only one thing you can say to your father that is worse than 'I am a Christian,' and that is 'I am gay.'" Becoming a good man implied becoming Christian; yet an imagined all-powerful Muslim father stood in the way.

Educators' situation was paradoxical: on the one hand, they blamed a father-driven "honor culture" for depriving the boys of religious and sexual self-realization; yet on the other hand their pedagogical interventions in fact produced those very cultural specters and strictures. Gabriel explained that when the boys misbehaved, he called upon the authority of a higher-ranking, culturally appropriate male figure. Relying on threats such as "I'm going to get your father involved" or "If you don't respect the rules, I'm going to tell the imam" was regrettable, he said, "but unfortunately in the Arab world you need to put up rules that are ultimately shit." Here, *Heroes*' psychoculturalist diagnoses provide indispensable tools for the disciplining of recalcitrant cultural subjects, leading to an inexorable dynamic of racialization. If *Heroes* promised that by becoming a particular kind of man the boys might also develop a German sense of self, then the project's very modus operandi also foreclosed this possibility. The boys' transformation into good men thus appears as a miraculous conversion that only the few can attain. For most, *Heroes* programs resemble the Christian gay conversion courses

analyzed by Tanya Erzen in her pathbreaking book. Just as the desired reformed heterosexuality remains elusive for most men undergoing this therapy, young *heroes* are stuck in "a conversion process that has no endpoint" (Erzen 2006, 3). Religious and sexual transformation perennially recede into the future, justifying further pedagogical measures in the present.

Theoretical Implications

The state-funded educational projects under study in this article claim to include heterosexual, cisgender Muslim men in the national collective on the condition that they transform their masculinity. Working forward from a psychoculturalist diagnosis, they attribute Muslim boys ascribed deficiencies to the "honor culture" of their fathers. Educators are called upon to act as stabilizing role models and tasked with turning Muslim boys into balanced men and benevolent patriarchs. Yet youngsters' embeddedness in the alleged "honor culture" is so strong, the psychoculturalist logic goes, that their becoming citizens can only take the shape of a dramatic conversion in which an Islamic-Middle Eastern culture is repudiated in favor of an alternative German-Christian culture. Such cauterization of the father wound comes at great cost. To attain the ideal of German hegemonic masculinity, Muslim-background youngsters must internalize Orientalist stereotypes and break with their families.

There are three upshots for the study of hegemonic masculinity we wish to stress as emerging from our case study. The first implication pertains to the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and the state. Even though in Gramsci's formulation of "hegemony" the nation-state had never been far off, analyses of "hegemonic masculinity" have often placed a premium on non-state masculinities in sport, media, and business, sidelining the nation-state form and its effects. Yet the masculinist pedagogy under study here is very much a state project. Not only are Muslim men placed in a distinctly national-historiographical narrative of post-WWII German masculine reform. *Heroes* programs are also commissioned and funded by German authorities, with the explicit aim of fostering immigrant integration. To do justice to this national emplotment, studies of hegemonic masculinity can benefit from re-engaging with the political sociology of the nation-state (Enloe 2014). In calling for such a re-engagement, we build on several recent contributions. They have focused either on how European state policies demonize Muslim masculinities as deviant and regressive (Ewing 2008; Mack 2017), or on the masculine repertoires that Muslim men may deploy to counteract such racist depictions (Inhorn and Naguib 2018; Jørgensen 2023). What our contribution shows is that the German state not only stigmatizes Muslim men as deviant but also claims to offer a more progressive, better masculinity through pedagogical labor.

Second, the ostensibly progressive gender pedagogy of the German *Heroes* project locally instantiates what Lugones (2016) has referred to as the "coloniality of gender," which she sees as comprised of *both* heterosexist patriarchy *and* a racialized hierarchy of masculinities. With respect to the former, *Heroes* combines its stated aim of liberating Muslim women with the entrenchment of a "correct" form of patriarchy

imagined as benevolent. With respect to the latter, *Heroes* compels Muslim youngsters to overcome an Islamic masculinity pathologized as deviant by embracing a hegemonic white German Christian ideal. White/Christian German men, in this view, have learned the ropes of a Western democratized masculine ideal after 1945; as graduates of a masculine reeducation, they can now become teachers to others. Thereby, *Heroes*' hegemonic masculinity reproduces patriarchal domination over women and a global ranking of masculinities alike (see also Kim and Pyke 2015). Our research highlights the mechanism through which these two features of the "coloniality of gender" are constitutively interlinked: By outsourcing the burden of demonized patriarchy onto a racialized group, wider patriarchal structures in German society are rendered invisible.

Third, our analysis highlights the importance of Christian institutions and repertoires in the construction of gender in contemporary Germany. This builds on recent research insisting on the significance of Christianity in the country's dualized welfare state (Lewicki 2021, 2022; Manow 2008; Nagel 2021, 2023). As the largest providers of youth work in the Ruhr, Protestant churches and their affiliates take substantial influence on the shape of hegemonic masculinity. By figuring the transformation of the Muslim man as a dramatic conversion, *Heroes* resembles masculinist Protestant revival movements elsewhere (Erzen 2006; Kim and Pyke 2015; van Klinken 2012). Our research shows that Germany is not exempt from the global reach of these religious practices. In Germany, too, Protestantism furnishes a crucial imaginative and practical resource to conceptualize the conversion from an ostracized to a legitimate masculinity; a radical change of masculine identity that holds redemptive promise.

Conclusion

In this article, we have analyzed state-funded pedagogizations of Muslim masculinity in Germany. We began by observing that much valuable scholarship—often indebted to the paradigms of homo- and femonationalism—has problematized how European projects of immigrant integration run on the exclusion of a demonized "Muslim masculinity". We noted, however, that there has been much less critical engagement with the "positive" ideal of an alternative heterosexual and cisgender masculinity operative in state-backed integrationist policies. We argued that *Heroes* instantiates precisely such an ideal. *Heroes* promises that, if their masculinity is reformed in line with a hegemonic German norm, Muslim men can become included in the national collective as respectable men and citizens. Through an ethnography of the pedagogical practices enacted at *Heroes*'-led training seminars and at two local *Heroes* chapters in the Ruhr, we analyzed three distinct features of this ideal's practical operation. First, the culturalizing diagnosis of a Muslim psychopathology at work in *Heroes* perpetuates a global Orientalist hierarchization of masculinities. Second, these programs reconfigure rather than question the oppression of women, enacting an ideal of benevolent patriarchy. And third, the attempt to remake Muslim masculinity is best understood as a project of sexual and religious conversion, in which a (stereotyped) Islamic-Middle Eastern culture is repudiated in favor of an (idealized) Christian-German alternative.

Taken together, these observations underscore that these projects systematically contradict their self-professed aims. They neither succeed in destabilizing patriarchy, nor do they offer Muslim men a viable path to citizenship and belonging.

Throughout, we have highlighted that *Heroes*' hegemonic masculinity is situated in a distinct German institutional context and historical trajectory. This applies to the parallel established between contemporary Muslim masculinity and pre-1945 National-Socialist masculinity, and to Muslims' resultant positioning as present-day iterations of Germany's fascist past. It also applies to the dualized institutional set-up of the German welfare state, which grants Christian organizations significant prerogatives in the delivery of public services—and therefore also definitional authority over the norms of hegemonic masculinity. At the same time, Germany is embedded in a wider European sphere with its shared heritage of an Orientalist coloniality of gender that feeds into contemporary stigmatizations of Muslim masculinity. Instead of generalizing from the German case study, our research suggests two avenues for further inquiry that—we hope—may be usefully pursued beyond the FRG's borders.

The first set of questions pertains to the linkage established in the German context between Muslim and Nazi masculinities. To what extent is a similar parallelization operative in hegemonic masculinities elsewhere? *Heroes*—with its rootedness in a German post-Nazi hegemonic masculinity—has been identified by French authorities as a potential model for engaging Muslim men; and *Heroes* chapters have already been established in Austria (Steiwer, 2019). More broadly, arguments linking Islam to fascism proliferate internationally. To give but one example, despite criticisms by historians, Anglophone debates have recently described the Nazi "Final Solution" as driven by Palestinian Muslims (Rubin and Schwanitz 2014). Attempts to unravel the gendered implications of such depictions may benefit from engaging with our analysis of *Heroes*. The second question we wish to highlight pertains to religion: What role does Christianity play in the making of European hegemonic masculinities beyond the German case, especially in relation to Muslim immigrants and their descendants? Other European welfare states have institutionally Christian features comparable to the German one (van Kersbergen and Manow 2009). And Protestant revivalism is a global movement, of which 4M is itself an originally Dutch instantiation. Our analysis of *Heroes* suggests the productiveness of investigating the intersection of Christianity and masculinity. We believe that pursuing these questions holds the promise of complementing our understanding of hegemonic masculinity in Europe.

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Notes

1. Most of these practitioners worked in the field of "non-formal education" (*nonformale Bildung*). The size of this sector of non-school educational institutions is one of the distinctive hallmarks of the German pedagogical landscape. In recent years, the Federal Government has further expanded the funding programs serving non-formal education to enhance processes of immigrant integration, social cohesion, and civic education (see BMFSFJ 2020).
2. No non-Christian—such as Jewish or Muslim—organizations receive funding. Despite NRW's numerous Muslim inhabitants, Muslim youth groups have generally not obtained the necessary legal recognition as public providers of welfare care (*Träger der freien Wohlfahrtpflege*) or of youth work (*Träger der freien Jugendhilfe*).

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