

Central-European Masculinities in a Comparative Perspective – Symposium Report



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The international symposium *Central-European Masculinities in a Comparative Perspective* was held at CEFRES in Prague on 19–20 June 2024. Although interdisciplinary in nature, the event fell fundamentally within the field of critical studies on men and masculinities. At the same time, it was the first event within the broader Central-European Masculinities research project with the aim of understanding the phenomenon of ‘masculinity’ and its dynamics. The symposium was attended by researchers from the following academic institutions: the Institute of Literary Studies at the University of Silesia in Katowice, the Department of Czech and Comparative Literature at Charles University, the Institute of Czech Literature at the Czech Academy of Sciences, the Institute of Polish Culture at the University of Warsaw, the Institute of Slovak Literature at the Slovak Academy of Sciences, the Center for Social Sciences – Sociology Institute in Budapest, and the French Research Center in Humanities and Social Sciences (CEFRES – CNRS-MEAE). In addition, the event was supported by the French Ministry of Higher Education and Research through the PARCECO programme. During the two days of the symposium, a number of issues were addressed, including the (de)construction of masculinity and cultural history of masculinity in Central European countries in a historical as well as contemporary context, based on leading CSMM research. The researchers repeatedly highlighted the dynamic and ambiguous nature of Central European masculinity, referring to tradition, culture, history, films, and literature. The symposium was divided into eight sessions covering a wide range of topics. This report will provide an insight into the issues that the researchers addressed in an attempt to integrate and create an outline of masculinity in Central Europe, and the tools to be used to study it in a variety of contexts.

The first panel, *Modernity & Masculinity*, focused on presenting the evolution of masculinity in Central and Eastern Europe. It was opened by Marcin Filipowicz (University of Warsaw – University of Hradec Králové), who, exploring nineteenth-century Czech masculinity, drew attention to its relationship with gender, hegemony, and nationalism. He analyzed the changes in Czech masculinity in the Habsburg Empire, showing the process of the formation of masculine ideals through nationalist movements. Ivana Taranenková (Institute of Slovak Literature, Slovak Academy of Sciences) focused on the construction of masculinity in Slovak literature, from the 19th century to present day. She presented characteristic portrayals of masculinity in



post-communist narratives in the context of son-father relationships. Michal Pitoňák (Czech National Institute of Mental Health) examined LGBT+ activism in Eastern and Central Europe. He showed activists' strategic responses to populist narratives and actions aimed at marginalizing gender and sexual minorities.

The next panel, with the same title, provided a glimpse into the evolution of masculinity in late 19th- and early 20th-century Central Europe. The main topic of the first panellist, Romain Courapied (ISFEC BRETAGNE / Université Rennes II — Haute-Bretagne), was the notion of decadence in late 19th-century European literature and the specific discourse on masculinity it generates. Judit Acsády (Institute of Sociology, Hungarian Research Network) and Zsolt Mészáros (Petőfi Museum of Literature, Budapest), focusing on Hungary, examined the relationality of masculinity, feminism, and social modernization at the turn of the 20th century. They highlighted the relevance of feminist actions in modifying gender relations and the active participation of men in the struggle for women's rights, examining the writings of Ede Harkányi. Aleksandra Dębińska (University of Silesia in Katowice) addressed the problem of wartime invalidity in the Second Republic, analyzing Polish narratives about protagonists depicted as injured or disabled war veterans, highlighting the problem of their marginalization and challenges this posed to their masculinity. Her research also showed the dehumanizing effects of war on male identity.

The third and fourth panels, *Under State Socialism*, focused on forms of masculinity in the context of socialism, presenting a wide range of topics, from everyday practices to military service. The presentation by Peter Hallama (Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne) addressed the challenges faced by scholars of Central and Eastern European history and culture in defining masculinity. He outlined potential pathways for the social and cultural history of masculinity under socialism in the region. To this end, he addressed topics such as homosexual fatherhood and domestic violence. Iwona Kurz (University of Warsaw) analyzed the visual discourse surrounding compulsory military service in Poland and Czechoslovakia, revealing the totalitarian nature of the army under a totalitarian regime. The researcher's interdisciplinary view of military service showed the significant impact on the formation of male identity at the time.

The fourth panel began with a presentation by Jan Matonoha (Institute of Czech Literature, Czech Academy of Sciences). The starting point for Matonoha's talk was Czech independent fiction of the 1970s and 1980s, with a focus on narratives created by heroic dissident writers, revealing the weaknesses hidden beneath their bravado. The last panellist of the day, Julija Ovsec (Institute of Czech Literature, Czech Academy of Sciences), discussed the concept of 'lavender' marriages, referring to a novel by Slovenian researcher Mira Mihelič, *April*. Drawing attention to Mihelič's nuanced portrayals of masculinity, she showed how social pressures and identity shape the experiences and actions of the novel's characters.

The second day of the symposium opened with two panels on Queer Masculinities. Antoine Idier (Sciences Po Saint Germain en Laye) was the first to give his presentation. He showed a historical analysis of masculinity and homosexuality, while criticizing the contemporary categorization of homosexuals initiated at the end of the 19th century. Zdeněk Sloboda (Palacký University Olomouc) referred to sport as a key element in the formation of male identity. He also looked at data collected from

focus groups (within the Czech Republic) on coming out and homophobia in team sports, as well as media discussions on the categorization of men and women in relation to trans* and intersex* people. Next, Anna Dżabagina (French Research Center for Humanities and Social Sciences, CEFRES — Charles University) examined the historical evolution of masculine expression among lesbians. Dżabagina reconstructed the process of emergence of modern lesbian identities using the examples of Maria Dułębiana and Maria Rodziewiczówna. Darko Ilin (University of Nova Gorica) analyzed the way queer masculinity is presented in Pavle Zidar's literary creations (predominantly *Roman o Hanibalu*). He also drew attention to the role of state and societal control in shaping these identities.

The final panel of the two-day meeting, Contemporary Stakes, focused on masculinity in a cultural and philosophical context. Here, the researchers noted the roles of archetypes in cultural identity, as well as the intersections between the private and the public. Libuše Heczková and Kateřina Svatoňová (Charles University) showed the category of masculinity through the lens of Jan Patočka's philosophical theses and Wim Wenders's film *Perfect Days*. An important category introduced by the researchers was Levinas's concept of 'la caresse', through which they explored the implications for gender roles. Moreover, they made a comparison between the perspectives of the private and public sphere, highlighting Patočka's critique of social power dynamics and subjectivism. Their analysis of Wenders's film underscored its critique of traditional gender norms, reflecting contemporary discourses on masculinity and identity. The panel concluded with a presentation by Stefan Segi (Institute of Czech Literature, Czech Academy of Sciences), in which he reconstructed such Czech cultural archetypes as warriors, hipsters, and wise men to explore the evolution of masculinity in the context of ideological and social transformation, with reference to contemporary popular culture and literature.

The two days of presentations and discussions were rounded off by Wojciech Śmieja and Filip Mazurkiewicz (University of Silesia in Katowice), who presented a comprehensive and extensive study on forms of masculinity in Polish literature and culture. Their research adopts a historical perspective to examine the development and shaping of masculinity in Poland, placing hegemonic masculinity in the specific socio-political context of the nineteenth century, and highlighting the unique national literary expression influenced by the democracy of the nobility and political environment that welcomed free citizens. They suggest that the portrayal of masculinity often emerged through heroic figures representing loss and resistance, and criticize traditional binary distinctions between masculinity and femininity as inadequate to capture the complexity of reality or deal with instances where men are portrayed as effeminate. The main focus of their research is the deconstruction and reconstruction of masculinity in different historical periods, highlighting changes in male archetypes. They also presented the main issues and objectives of the project, discussed the terminology they have encountered in global masculinity research, and provided a summary of the findings that emerged during their work. They reflected on the possibilities of continuing this type of research and the potential application of the project's findings to the study of masculinities in Central Europe.

The symposium on masculinities in Central Europe was concluded with a summary and discussion of potential research directions for the wider project. The re-





searchers also pointed out the impossibility of using some of the methodologies and theoretical frameworks proposed by Western researchers, sensing the need for a new conceptual apparatus and framework that takes into account local traditions and histories. The symposium participants also tentatively planned further activities related to the project. These include the creation of a bibliography, an analysis of masculinist movements, and Jewish masculinity. Proposed research directions include the creation of thematic discussion groups oriented towards such categories as the historical contexts and dominant fictions of masculinity.