

George L. Mosse on Masculinity and Politics

George L. Mosse Program in History, University of Wisconsin-Madison: online course, "European Gender, Sexuality, and the Borders of Tolerance, 1914-1990"

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It is more than 35 years ago that I met George Mosse for the first time. That was in 1983 in Amsterdam at one of the first international gay and lesbian studies conferences, which was also the occasion, as it were, of his coming out as a gay scholar. At that time Mosse, who was a distinguished professor of history at the universities of Wisconsin and Jerusalem, had just started his research into the relations between nationalism, sexuality and masculinity, and we stayed in touch, sharing an interest in the history of male bonding and its homoerotic implications. As a leading historian of fascism, Nazism and antisemitism, Mosse's interest in masculinity was also closely connected to his focus on the history of bourgeois respectability, and how gender and sexuality as well as the stigmatization of outsiders was involved in all of this. His seminal book *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* published in 1985 presented a new perspective on gender politics. In the 1990s two studies about the origins and development of masculinity followed: *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (1991) and *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (1996). The last work is a broad overview of the social and political role of masculinity from the late 18th into the 20th century. Although he also covers developments in Britain, France, Italy and Russia, he paid most attention to Germany, which for him was the main frame of reference. This was not a coincidence, because his personal background was German. Born in the last year of the First World War, he grew up in a wealthy and assimilated Jewish family in Berlin. In the late 19th century his famous grandfather, Rudolf Mosse, had established a major publishing house and advertising agency that that grew into a vast media empire issuing influential newspapers such as the liberal *Berliner Tageblatt*.

Mosse's interest in the history of masculinity was partly inspired by his own life, as he makes clear in his autobiography *Confronting History*, published a year after his death in 1999. Since he was seen as an unruly and incorrigible boy in need of discipline, he was sent to boarding schools in the south of Germany, and later, after the family's exile, in England. His experiences in these schools were formative for his personality. Life in these boarding schools was permeated by norms and ideals of masculinity: character building, self-discipline, willpower and self-control, sportive and military virtues, a sense of duty, honour and patriotism, and sexual purity. All of this, he wrote in his memoir, centred on 'virility, strength, and daring as opposed to the weakness and feebleness of sissified boys.' He internalized such ideals of masculinity, while at the same he felt that he could not live up to them and he therefore suffered from an inferiority complex. He was uneasy about his appearance; and failed in sports. His anxiety increased when he, against the background of widespread antisemitism, became aware of his Jewishness and homosexuality. In the boarding schools he lived within an atmosphere of male camaraderie, which he liked, but he had to be secret about his sexual feelings; coming out was simply not an option at that time.

Mosse knew very well what was to be an outsider. The rise of Nazism had an enormous impact on the course of his life. However, he always liked to tell that his fate as a German Jew, his forced exile from his native country, had also its positive side. His position as a refugee and outsider liberated him from his established family-background and saved him from a conventional and predictable bourgeois life. Being thrown back on himself was an energizing challenge to shape his own life, to become more self-confident and politically active, and, later, to come to terms with his homosexuality. He liked to describe himself as an eternal traveling emigrant and spectator without fixed roots, which in his view was the perfect position for the detached position of the historian. At the end of his life he had become almost an icon of gay studies, although he had no taste for postmodernism or radical queer theory and even less for political correctness. The task of the historian was destroying myths and breaking taboos, not only those of the right but also those of the left. He was ambivalent about middle class respectability: at the one hand criticizing its repressive aspects, but on the other hand acknowledging that its normative manners and morals were essential for the cohesion and functioning of civil society. Against this background Mosse pointed to the recurring tension between on the one hand the martial, aggressive and potentially unruly tough guy masculinity unleashed in nationalism and fascism, and homosocial environments, and on the other a more restrained manliness which was geared to man's role in the family and middle class society. Mosse preferred the stiff upper lip masculinity of the British gentleman over the nationalistic and militaristic model that prevailed in Germany and that again and again undermined pacified civil society and liberal democracy.

Mosse explained nationalism and fascism in general and masculinity in particular in terms of ideology and culture rather than of social structure and the economy. He emphasised that it was an irrational response to anxieties and fears about the uprooting effects of modernization and he drew attention to the emotional force of symbols, images, perceptions, rhetoric, rituals and myths in mass culture - what he called the sacralisation of politics. He wanted to understand why so many people were attracted to nationalism and fascism and why ideals of masculinity found such a broad resonance. For Mosse, Nazism, fascism and racism were not just historical phenomena: he closely witnessed these movements during his youth. Attending some Nazi mass meetings and a rally of the British fascists, he himself sensed the seductive emotional power of these movements, the feeling of being part of a larger whole and contributing to a larger cause.

Mosse's own political affiliation was a progressive brand of liberalism. He had grown up in the bourgeois liberal environment of the German *Bildungsbürgertum* that was involved in culture and the arts rather than in politics. His father was an optimist in the spirit of liberalism and Enlightenment and underestimated the threat of the Nazis. Like most assimilated Jewish families, the Mosses considered themselves Germans without giving it a further thought. The weakness of liberalism, according to Mosse, was its reliance on enlightened reasonableness and individual freedom while underrating the irrational forces of modern mass society: the power of emotions and people's need for belonging and for cultural identity. The more abstract enlightened and humanist principles of liberalism proved to be no effective barrier against populism and totalitarianism.

After his exile Mosse found a new homeland, the United States. What he liked about American society was its egalitarian ethos, the absence of the virulent nationalism prevalent in Europe and its openness to foreigners, that he was not treated as a stranger. Mosse's own affinity with liberalism and American society may explain a blind spot in his analysis of the history of masculinity. He does not consider that not only nationalism and fascism, but also liberalism together with capitalism forged particular masculine values, that overlap with nationalistic ideals. The liberalism that was articulated three hundred years ago by political philosophers such Thomas Hobbes and John Locke set the tone for a hegemonic masculinity that is based on an egocentric, self-sufficient and competitive self-possessive individualism. It celebrates self-reliance, self-control, calculated rationality, productivity, appropriation and the boundless pursuit of profits, without caring much about social responsibilities and compassion for those that cannot or do not want to fulfil the requirements of this rather heartless individualism. This classist doctrine of possessive individualism not only postulates ownership and the consequential socioeconomic inequalities as the path to full personhood and citizenship. It also defines the public domain of politics and the market economy as exclusively masculine, whereas women are considered to be biologically destined for childbearing and childraising and thus fulfil a subordinate and unpaid role in the private sphere of the family. It is taken for granted that women, and also other males without property or the capacity to acquire it, cannot really be independent rights-bearing subjects and that married women and their children are not more than the property of their self-owning spouses and fathers. This self-possessive masculinity is still prominent in the neoliberal order of global hypercapitalism. Its prevalent logic of entrepreneurial rationalism and efficiency holds that selfish greed is good and that pitiless competition brings out the best in people. Social, more feminine values, such as caring and compassion, have systematically been downgraded.

At the end of Mosse's life in the neoliberal 1990s, trust in the future of liberal democracy and global capitalism was at its peak. As far as I remember, he tended towards a cautious optimism: he hoped that the Western world would not repeat the fateful nationalism, totalitarianism and militarism he had experienced - although he pointed out that the appeal of nationalism had not disappeared. He did not and could not foresee its recent revival and the rise of right-wing, authoritarian and sometimes even proto-fascist macho populism. One wonders what Mosse would have thought of the present political situation in the USA and Europe. In the rhetoric and policies of leaders, such as Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Jair Bolsonaro, Viktor Orbán, Matteo Salvini, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Rodrigo Duterte, we see the resurgence of aggressive, misogynist and heterosexist tough guy masculinity, that is all the more toxic if it is fused with xenophobia and racist notions of white supremacy. When Trump, supported by many working and middle class, was elected as president in 2016, *The Wall Street Journal* spoke of the 'year of the angry white male'. To a large extent this masculine populism is fuelled by the resentment of frustrated men who feel left behind and under siege, not only because global capitalism and immigration take away their industrial jobs. They also seem to be surpassed by women whose participation in higher education and workforce and their patriarchal power has been severely undermined by more egalitarian family structures, the emancipation of women, gays and transgender people, new social policies of minority rights, antidiscrimination laws and affirmative action – MeToo can be seen as the latest wave in this development.

Resentful men seem to have adopted their own tough guy identity-politics as a backlash against the emancipatory identity-politics of sexual and cultural minorities. Masculine populism tends to reject the 'corrupt' liberal order that is not only considered as elitist and leftist, but also as effeminate. It is striking that such masculine identity-politics now also finds supporters among young educated men and students. One of the most influential intellectuals on social media nowadays is the psychologist Jordan Peterson, who opposes political correctness, transgender rights and what he views as the feminizing of child raising and education that would hamper boys to find and develop their true masculinity. Peterson, who simply defines masculinity as order whereas he equates chaos with the feminine, argues that young men should be liberated from the female regime from which they are suffering. A step further is taken by so-called 'involuntary celibates', frustrated heterosexual young males who have difficulties finding a female partner, and who apparently cannot adapt their sexual behaviour to increased sexual empowerment of women. They band together under the banner of male supremacy and claim the right to subordinate women and even treat them as sexual objects.

What all of this also shows is that modern masculinity is not so robust and vigorous as it often presents itself, but that it is in a constant state of insecurity and uncertainty and that therefore it is in constant need of reaffirmation. Many men apparently still feel a deep fear of being associated with effeminacy, of not being not considered as a real man. Any perceived threat to masculine values and positions, seems to trigger counter-mobilizations. As Mosse has pointed out, this is not new; similar developments happened in the late nineteenth century and in the 1920s and 1930s as a reaction against the emancipation of women and the increasing presence of sexual minorities. The present tide of populism and illiberal democracy enhances the relevance of Mosse's historical analysis of the political and nationalist dimension of masculinity.