

Report from the Symposium 'Central-European Masculinities in a Comparative Perspective'

Shana De Sousa

The international symposium Central-European Masculinities in a Comparative Perspective, held on 19–20 June 2024 at CEFRES in Prague, was a pivotal event in the field of Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities. Organised as part of the Central-European Masculinities research project, this symposium brought together leading academic institutions across Central Europe: 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). The event was supported by the French Ministry of Higher Education and Research through the PARCECO programme. The symposium explored the construction and deconstruction of masculinities in Central Europe within historical and contemporary contexts. The interdisciplinary discussions highlighted the dynamic and contextual nature of masculinity, integrating local perspectives into the global academic discourse. Sessions covered a wide range of themes, from literary modernity to queer masculinities under state socialism, fostering a comprehensive dialogue among scholars. This review provides insights into the presentations and their contribution to the understanding of masculinities in Central Europe.

The first and second panels of the symposium, titled 'Modernity & Masculinity', presented perspectives on the evolution of masculinities in Central and Eastern Europe. Marcin Filipowicz (University of Warsaw – University of Hradec Králové) explored 19th-century Czech masculinities, highlighting the interplay between gender, nationalism, and hegemony. He traced the evolution of Czech masculinity within the Habsburg Empire, noting how nationalist movements shaped masculine ideals, arguing against a simplistic Austrian-German dichotomy, and presenting Czech masculinity as both resistant and participatory in response to Austrian hegemony. Ivana Taranenková (Institute of Slovak Literature, Slovak Academy of Sciences) focused on Slovak literature's portrayal of masculinity from the 19th century to the present. She analysed literary representations of father-son relationships and the portrayal of anti-heroes in post-communist narratives. Michal Pitoňák (Czech National Institute of Mental Health) examined LGBT+ activism in Central and Eastern Europe, contextualising it within the region's socio-political history from the 1930s to contemporary

Pride movements. Pitoňák analysed the impact of morality politics on LGBT+ rights, exploring societal attitudes and policy developments across different countries. His analysis of ontological insecurity underscored the complex intersections of masculinity, politics, and activism in the region.

The second panel offered insights into the evolving representations of masculinity in late 19th- and early 20th-century (Central) Europe. Romain Courapied (ISFEC BRETAGNE / Université Rennes II – Haute-Bretagne) explored late 19th-century decadent literature and delved into themes of instability and societal anxieties, criticising essentialist perspectives on masculinity and advocating for a constructivist approach. Judit Acsády (Institute of Sociology, Hungarian Research Network) and Zolt Mészáros (Petőfi Museum of Literature, Budapest) shifted the focus to Hungary and examined the intersections of masculinity, feminism, and societal modernisation at the turn of the 20th century. They highlighted the role of feminist movements in reshaping gender relations and promoting women's social emancipation, emphasising the active participation of men in advocating for women's rights through their exploration of Ede Harkányi's writings. Aleksandra Dębińska's (University of Silesia in Katowice) presentation on war invalids[war disabled] in the Second Polish Republic provided a critical examination of the marginalised status of veterans who suffered war injuries, focusing on the dehumanising impact of war on masculine identities and critiquing the sentimental narratives that obscured the realities of war-induced disabilities. Her research underscored the need for broader scholarly attention to the experiences of war invalids in Polish literature, challenging prevailing notions of heroic masculinity.

The next two panels, titled 'Under State Socialism', were dedicated to masculinities in socialist contexts, examining masculinity in diverse areas of life, from everyday practices to military service. Peter Hallama (Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne) reassessed masculinity under state socialism and challenged the prevailing scholarly narratives by advocating for a more nuanced understanding. He highlighted the diversity of socialist masculinities beyond state-sanctioned ideals, exploring how these were negotiated and contested in everyday life, based on examples such as debates on fatherhood and homosexual identities under state socialism. Iwona Kurz (University of Warsaw) focused on the visual discourse surrounding military service in Czechoslovakia and Poland, framing the army as a total institution within totalitarian regimes. She examined how images and narratives portrayed military life and revealed its dual role in shaping societal perceptions and individual experiences. Kurz's interdisciplinary approach illuminated the emotional and social dimensions of military service, and she argued that it was pivotal in shaping masculine identities and citizenship ideals.

The next panel offered perspectives on masculinity amidst political repression and societal constraints. Jan Matonoha (Institute of Czech Literature, Czech Academy of Sciences) critically examined Czech independent fiction of the 1970s and 1980s,

focusing on how dissident writers adopted heroic, macho identities in response to state oppression. He revealed the deeper vulnerabilities beneath their bravado, integrating insights from masculinity studies to complicate traditional heroic narratives and critique sexist tropes in works by Milan Kundera and Jan Křesadlo (*Gravelarks*). Julija Ovsec (Institute of Czech Literature, Czech Academy of Sciences) explored lavender marriages in Slovenian literature through Mira Mihelič's novel *April*, portraying these unions as concealing homosexuality behind heteronormative ideals. Contextualising Slovenia's early acceptance of same-sex unions against pre-WWII criminalisation, Ovsec critiqued societal norms and gender expectations through Mihelič's avant-garde style.

In the fifth and sixth panels on queer masculinities, Antoine Idier (Sciences Po Saint Germain en Laye) offered a nuanced historical analysis of homosexuality and masculinities, critiquing the modern categorisations of lesbian women and homosexual men that emerged in the late 19th century. Zdeněk Sloboda (Palacký University Olomouc) examined the complex dynamics of masculinity in sports and the experiences of LGBTQ+ athletes. He contextualised sports as a domain reinforcing heteronormative, masculinist ideologies, particularly in male-dominated team sports like football and basketball. Anna Dżabagina (French Research Center for Humanities and Social Sciences, CEFRES – Charles University) then explored the historical evolution of the historical evolution of expressions of masculinity among lesbians in the region. She traced the emergence of modern lesbian identities, highlighting early instances of gender-bending and cross-dressing as strategies for covertly living in intimate (same-sex?) relationships among pioneering figures like Maria Dulębianka and Maria Rodziejczówna. Darko Ilin (University of Nova Gorica) delved into Pavle Zidar's literary portrayal of queer masculinities in state-socialist Slovenia. He analysed Zidar's literary corpus, noting how masculinity was constructed and contested under state-socialist regimes through the example of works like *The Novel about Hannibal*.

The last panel, 'Contemporary Stakes', offered perspectives on masculinity in philosophical and cultural contexts, examining intersections between the private and public spheres and the roles of archetypes in Czech cultural identity. Libuše Heczková and Kateřina Svatoňová (Charles University) explored masculinity through the lens of Jan Patočka's philosophical insights and Wim Wenders' film *Perfect Days*. They began by analysing Levinas' concept of *la caresse* (Fr. 'the caress'), examining its implications for gender roles and relationships in historical and contemporary contexts. Heczková and Svatoňová contrasted perspectives on public and private realms, highlighting Patočka's critique of societal power dynamics and victimhood. Their analysis of Wenders' film underscored its critique of traditional gender norms, reflecting contemporary discourses on masculinity and identity. Stefan Segi (Institute of Czech Literature, Czech Academy of Sciences) focused on Czech cultural archetypes – war-

riors, sages, and hipsters – to explore the evolution of masculinity amidst societal and ideological shifts. He traced these archetypes' roots to mediaeval constructs of national identity and analysed their portrayal in contemporary contexts such as popular culture and literature.

After the panels, Filip Mazurkiewicz and Wojciech Śmieja (University of Silesia in Katowice) presented their comprehensive research on forms of masculinity in Polish literature and culture from 2015 to 2019. They used a historical approach to unravel the evolution and construction of masculinity in Poland and situated hegemonic masculinity within the unique socio-political context of 19th-century Poland, accentuating the distinctive national expression (of masculinity?) in literature shaped by noble democracy and a political landscape open to free citizens. They argued that the representation of dislocated masculinity often manifested itself through heroic archetypes symbolising loss and resistance, and they critiqued the traditional binary oppositions between masculinity and femininity as insufficient to capture nuanced realities and explore instances where men are portrayed as effeminate. Central to their research was the deconstruction and reconstruction of masculinity across different historical epochs, highlighting shifts in masculine prototypes. Literary analysis of Janusz Rudnicki's short story 'Śmierć czeskiego psa' (The Death of the Czech Dog) and its depiction of hypermasculine heroes underscored these themes. Their interdisciplinary approach revealed how the dominant fictional narratives of masculinity have influenced perceptions and ideals of power and identity in Polish society.

The international symposium on masculinities in Central Europe concluded with a synthesis of insights and proposed future research directions. Researchers highlighted the need for specific methodologies and theoretical frameworks that integrate local academic traditions predating global influences. Discussions questioned the existence of a distinct Central European approach to masculinity studies, stressing the importance of regional collaboration and sharing resources. Proposals included compiling bibliographies, exploring the genealogy of feminist thought in Central and Eastern Europe and examining masculinist movements and Jewish masculinities. Possibilities for future research include thematic clusters for focus group discussions on topics like fictional portrayals of masculinity and historical contexts.