Men, resistance and political radicalization

New possibilities for political articulation and new forms of cultural expression have emerged in contemporary societies and some of these are taken up when men construct political identities. Men throughout the world develop radical political identities as a reaction to social changes, migration and globalization – some based on optimism towards these changes, others grounded in critique or pessimism (Kimmel 2005). On the one hand globalization leads to the creation of economies and cultural forms that challenge national boundaries. On the other it leads to transnational and local forms of resistance, often in the collective shape of social and political movements, countercultures or formal organizations (Beck 2002).

Gender and masculinity often play a crucial role in the creation of political identities, as well as in the performative forms of expression practised by radical organizations. In other words masculinity can be a central part of resistance, but the forms of and the processes underlying these gendered political resistance identities are multiple and complex. One of our primary motives for this special issue is our belief that an increased focus on gender and masculinity can contribute to substantial new insights into resistance and political radicalization. It is difficult to understand resistance and political radicalization, of the present as well as the past, without a gender and masculinity perspective on political identities and practice. We do not expect to provide all the answers in this special issue – but we hope, through the contributions published in this volume, to play a modest part in pointing out research areas where gender, masculinity and political radicalization are closely linked.
Here are some examples of where the relation between gender and political radicalization is visible today:

Firstly, at a macro-level it is quite clear that gender is an important factor in global development and social changes: that much can be observed in the events around 9/11 and the following campaign about (the war against) terror which escalated confrontations around the world after 2001. These confrontations were often framed within the intersection between religion, class and ethnicity, but they were closely related to gender and masculinity as well.

This could be seen when discourses about warriors and heroes were used as a part of cultural re-masculinization of post 9/11 US politics. For instance heroic masculinity was put first on the agenda when the American president at that time George W. Bush branded himself as a real man who could – and would – defend the nation against its enemies and pointed to New York’s male fire-fighter and salvage corps as masculine heroes (Ducat 2004). According to Jill Steans this excess of focus on masculine heroes was based on rendering invisible the many women who participated in the rescue and rebuilding work. Instead women were exaggeratedly portrayed as victims – not only in American women, but also Afghanistan women. From a gender perspective there was also an underlying masculinity motif when Bush in the fight against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda acted as a masculine cowboy hero protecting the family against the ‘bandits’ as a true pater familias (Steans 2006). Bush had already, before 9/11, described Saddam Hussein as an ‘outlaw’, and he spoke about Osama Bin Laden in masculine rhetoric such as ‘We want him dead or alive’ and ‘We’re gonna smoke him out’. In general a dichotomy between good vs. evil; heroic vs. cowardly; civilization vs. uncivilization; occident vs. orient was used with strongly masculine connotations.

In contemporary wars we see hyper-masculine young men fighting against each other in the hot spots of the world – but we have also seen a growing attention to shattered young men, returning from their missions. Through mass media we have witnessed fragments of the explicit forms of expression and the violence which is related to acts of war, whether dressed in traditional Taliban clothing, US military uniforms, or the guerrilla clothing of African soldiers involved in civil wars on their own continent (Parpart 2010).

However, the interplay between gender, masculinity and political radicalization does not take place only on the global macro-level. It is also present on a meso level where organizations and social movements frame collective practice and identity. This can take place in local contexts as well as in transnational organizations, where masculinity can be
central to the understanding of social movements who employ militant forms of action – whether these are left-wing anarchist black bloc strategies or extreme right manifestations (Christensen 2006, Fangen 1999, Lyng 2007).

Last but not least the interplay between gender, masculinity and political radicalization is relevant on the micro level where political learning and political identities are an essential part of individuals’ life course and the face-to-face interactions of everyday life.

Fruitful contributions in this research field often link different levels of analysis in order to relate for instance global inequalities on a macro-level to gendered constructions of collective and individual identities in a local context.

The contributions in this volume work on and combine different levels. Jane Parpart’s focus on masculinity is primarily located on the macro level. However, most of the contributions analyse the interaction between meso- and micro-level, in the sense that they analyse the relation between identities and political practice within collective organizations, e.g. social movements or political parties on the one hand, and the construction of masculinities and gendered identities on the other.

Across the contributions we see three different, although not mutually exclusive, theoretical approaches to the analysis of men, resistance and political radicalization.

One approach is inspired by R.W. Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinities, which is built on the theoretical argument of a (powerful) hierarchy between different forms of masculinity. With a starting point in a feminist understanding of gender and power, Connell maintains both a focus on gendered inequalities and power asymmetries between women and men, and hierarchies and differences of power between different groups or categories of men. Hegemonic masculinity never stands in a one-to-one relation to the practice of real men, rather it consists of a dominating authoritative cultural understanding of how appropriate and legitimate men should be; an understanding which polices masculinity and regulates men’s practice (Connell 1995, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

Another approach is inspired by the concept of intersectionality, which has had a growing significance in gender research. Here the argument is that masculinity and gender can only be understood by addressing their interplay with other social categories such as class, ethnicity, race and sexuality (Crenshaw 1991, de los Reyes and Mulinari 2005, Lykke 2003, Staunæs 2004). We agree with Mellstrøm’s argument, put forward in an earlier editorial of NORMA, that taking intersectionality seriously would be productive for
masculinity research, as this would allow a grasp of the complexities involved when in life men are both dominated and dominating at the same time (Mellström 2009). Central to the usage of the concept of intersectionality in research on men and masculinity is: Staunæs’ argument for intersectionality research, which includes the majority, the unmarked and the powerful (Staunæs 2003); Hancock’s somewhat overlapping argument that intersectionality should not be considered a theory about specific groups (i.e. black women) but can thought of as a general research paradigm for understanding complex social differentiation (Hancock 2007); as well as Wingfield’s suggestion that intersectionality may have a great deal to offer for understanding minority men (Wingfield 2008). Furthermore, an argument put forward by some intersectionality researchers has been that gender, as well as the intersections gender is part of, can only be analysed in relation to specific historical and socio-cultural and local contexts (Christensen and Siim 2006, Yuval-Davies 2006, Ferree 2009). As a consequence, the historical and contextual perspectives are important.

A third approach is Hans Bonde’s contribution about men as the extreme gender—men at the top and bottom of society (Bonde 2008). This theoretical contribution does not take a perspective of dominance or gendered power relations as its main point of departure, and might for that reason be called post-feminist.

In the first article, ’Masculinity, gender and the new wars’, Jane Parpart takes her point of departure in the global post-war violence and the development linked to ‘the war on terror’. One of her main arguments is that today many of these wars are based on a link between poverty, young men and masculinity because many young men, being global outsiders, are a permanent source for recruitment to military and paramilitary groups since these present the only way for them to provide themselves with material means for living and at the same time constitute a seductive ground for realizing masculinity.

In the article ’Det ekstreme køn. Radikalisering af unge mandlige fodboldtilskuere under den tyske besættelse af Danmark’ (’The gender of extremes: Radicalization of young male football supporters during the German occupation of Denmark’) Hans Bonde focuses on the radicalization of young Danish men on the stadium stands in a protest against the German occupational power on Danish Constitution Day, 5 June 1941. Bonde takes the thesis about men as the extreme gender as his point of departure and argues that sport is an ideal field for studying men’s tendency to go to extremes. These are tendencies that, in the world of football, can lead to aggression and violent hooliganism, but historically these tendencies can also be used as a framework for under-
standing cultural activities and political protest. Through his analysis of the international match between Denmark and the German-Austrian team he shows how this specific match developed into a political manifestation in a time where riots and political manifestation were otherwise unknown at sporting events. The article emphasizes the close connection between sports, politics and masculinity.

The following three articles all analyse constructions of masculinity on the political left.

In the article ‘En riktig revolutionär. Klass, kön och politiskt motstånd i den svenska 68-vänstern’ (‘A real revolutionary: Gender, class and political resistance in the Swedish radical social movements in the 1960s and 1970s’) Helena Hill takes a gender perspective on the ‘new’ social movement in the 1960s and 1970s as her point of departure. The main argument is that the dominating masculinity in these movements was constituted in intersectional interplay between gender, class and political affiliation. In the article two debates within these movements are analysed: the first deals with the discussion about revolution vs. reform; the second is the debate about whether the private sphere should be included in the political project of social change. The article shows how the understanding of such terms as ‘worker’, ‘revolution’ and ‘left wing’ in the social movement of that time carried masculine connotations. As a consequence, women and the project of gender equality was relegated to a secondary position and a very specific form of masculinity became hegemonic.

The same conundrum is to some extent present in the next two articles, which analyse contemporary social movements on the radical political left in very different parts of the world, South Africa and Denmark. Here focus is on the contradiction between on the one hand fighting for equality (between races, genders and classes), and on the other hand using political methods that, perhaps unintentionally, reproduce oppressive forms of masculinity.

In the article ‘Fighting to the last drop of our blood: Invocations of radical struggle masculinity among black student politicians in South Africa’ Bjarke Oxlund focuses on black politically active students at the University of Limpopo in South Africa. The article is based on one year of fieldwork among these students, and one of Oxlund’s main points is, that these radicalized student groups still draw upon the masculine discourses which were central to the ANC’s struggle against the apartheid regime. Oxlund argues that forms of masculinity related to this struggle have become hegemonic in student and youth politics in South Africa. This can be seen in several ways, for instance, in the milita-
ruristic rhetoric employed (using titles such as general, commander, colonel and lieutenant) and in the expectations these young men expressed towards themselves and each other, such as that real men stay calm and do not cry. This masculinism not only leads to the marginalization of black female students but it also consolidates the local hegemony of these young men claiming to be willing to ‘fight to the last drop of their blood’.

With Ann-Dorte Christensen’s article ‘Resistance and violence: Constructions of masculinities in radical left-wing movements in Denmark’ the analytical scope is shifted from South Africa and the historical traces of the anti-apartheid struggle to the neighbourhood Nørrebro in Copenhagen, where the most radical left-wingers in Denmark are active. The article analyses the constructions of political identities and masculinities in Anti-Fascist Action (AFA), which is one of the most radical, confrontational and sometimes violent parts of the Danish radical left wing milieu. The article shows that the construction of hyper-masculinity and violence is rooted in the political learning as well as the confrontations with the police and the Neo-Nazis. One of the main findings is that the norm of violence and ‘machismo’ imply dominance and oppression of women as well as men who cannot live up to the norms.

In totally different contexts Oxlund and Christensen emphasize the same point: the gap between on the one hand the left wing’s political ideals and support of gender equality and on the other hand a political practice that includes violence and suppression of women and men who are perceived as soft and feminine.

Finally, in the article ‘Constructing radical right populist resistance: Metaphors of heterosexist masculinities and the family question in Sweden’, Ov Cristian Norocel analyses the political rhetoric of the Swedish extreme right party, Sverigedemokraterna (‘the Sweden Democrats’). Through metaphorical analysis of articles published in the party’s periodical Norocel demonstrates how the leader of the party, Jimmie Åkesson, constructs the Swedish nation as a family, headed by a weak and feminine ‘nurturing parent’, in the form of mainstream political parties. Against this weak nurturing parent, Åkesson constructs himself as a ‘conservative son’ offering an alternative in the shape of a youthful, steadfast and masculine political leader, willing and able to defend the national family against external threats – to re-establish Swedishness and heteronormativity. In the light of this analysis it is thought provoking, to say the least, that the Sweden Democrats made the transition from political outsiders to being represented in parliament in the Swedish 2010 elections.
In sum, the articles make a productive contribution to the understanding of research on men, resistance and political radicalization. We hope this special issue will stimulate further research and debate.

Ann-Dorte Christensen and Sune Qvotrup Jensen

References


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