



Susanne Kaiser

Political Masculinity

How Incels, Fundamentalists and Authoritarians

Mobilise for Patriarchy

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Wie Incels, Fundamentalisten und Autoritäre für
das Patriarchat mobilmachen)

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**On the connection between right-wing terror, religious fundamentalism and
misogyny**

**A compact outline of the history and the programme of political
masculinity**

About the Book:

»We must re-discover our masculinity,« is the appeal to German men by Björn Höcke, probably Germany's most famous right-wing politician. With this demand, the AfD politician is not alone: From New Zealand to Canada, from Brazil to Poland, right-wing populists, so-called »Incels«, but also Christian pro-life activists are connecting with one another under the banner of masculinity to push women back to a subordinate place in an allegedly natural hierarchy.

Susanne Kaiser offers a compact overview of the history and the programme of this movement. She analyses discussions in the »manosphere«, highlights international connections and asks why right-wing mobilisation deploys the topics of Gender Studies, LGBT rights and gender roles.

About the Author:

Susanne Kaiser, born in 1980, is a journalist and political advisor. She writes for newspapers and magazines such as *DIE ZEIT*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and *Der Spiegel*.

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Introduction

There are a few images from the times of the COVID-19 pandemic that are going to stay in the collective memory for a long while to come: images of deserted city centres, exhausted doctors in overcrowded North Italian hospitals, drive-through testing facilities in South Korea or homeless people in Las Vegas forced to sleep outside, in white squares drawn onto a parking lot, as the enormous hotels in the gambling metropolis stay empty due to COVID. One of those images dates back to July 2020, to the EU summit in Brussels: It shows Angela Merkel and Boyko Borisov, the prime minister of Bulgaria. The head of the German government is wearing a face mask that covers – as recommended by experts – her mouth and nose. Her male counterpart, however, is much more casual: His mask only covers his mouth, while his nose is bare – well, that’s the new »being topless« for men. Merkel points her index finger at Prime Minister Borisov admonishingly.

The »nosy idiots«, predominantly men, who are flitting about on the thin line between nonchalance and negligence, have become a discouraging symbol of the COVID period.¹ But the photo shows more than recklessness in times of a pandemic: It also represents women’s new-found confidence on the political stage. And Angela Merkel is not the only one. Towards the beginning of the coronavirus crisis, a montage of seven faces made global news. The faces were those of heads of state and government who best manoeuvred their respective countries through the crisis and showed the most confident leadership. Without exception, those faces belong to women: the portraits of the heads of state and government of Germany, Taiwan, New Zealand, Iceland, Finland, Norway and Denmark. These women took tough measures to manage the crisis but also used inventive methods. The prime minister of Norway, Erna Solberg, for example held a televised press conference just for children, answered their questions patiently and assured them that it was totally okay to be scared. Chancellor Angela Merkel addressed her fellow citizens early on and explained calmly, clearly and with brutal honesty that up to seventy percent of the population could become infected and that the situation was therefore serious and should be taken seriously. The Finnish prime minister Sanna Marin used social media and the clout of influencers with young people to spread important

¹ Marcus Werner, »Nasen-Depp, Nies-Lüpfen, Corona-Streber: Welcher Masken-Typ sind Sie?«, in: *Wirtschaftswoche* (6 July 2020); available online here: {<https://www.wiwo.de/erfolg/trends/werner-knallhart-nasen-depp-nies-luepfer-corona-streber-welchermasken-typ-sind-sie/25979688.html>}.

information to all segments of society and to not leave anyone behind in the fight against the coronavirus.

They are the faces of a new kind of politics and were shared around the world because they represent a new form of female authority. The fact that the political style of those female politicians was different from that of their male colleagues was noticed and discussed by the medial public, especially during the crisis. Magazines, newspapers and news networks like the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, *Forbes*, CNN but also non-Western media like the Indian journal *Yourstory* praised the »new female leadership style« as promising and forward-looking »in an age of new global threats«.² They found that women »are better leaders, as the pandemic proves«.³

Male leadership, however, was considered very critically, portrayed as the political showmanship of »strong men« like Trump, Bolsonaro, Putin or Netanyahu. They used the global crisis to expand their authoritarian rule even faster instead of acting in the interest of the community. Male rule was increasingly seen as a negative counterpart to female authority in the global discourse: Contrary to female leaders, the authoritarian heads of state reacted to the pandemic with truculent denial, put the blame and the responsibility on others, instrumentalised the justice system and the security services, denounced critical reporting and limited the freedom of the press. Even the management consulting firm McKinsey stated in a paper that the old leadership style was in crisis. New times required qualities such as the ability to work in a team, consideration and empathy to overcome new global challenges like the pandemic.⁴

² Cf. e.g. Avivah Wittenberg-Cox, »What Do Countries with the Best Coronavirus Responses Have in Common? Women Leaders«, in: *Forbes* (13 April 2020) available online here: {<https://www.forbes.com/sites/avivahwittenbergcox/2020/04/13/what-do-countries-with-the-best-coronavirus-reponses-have-in-common-women-leaders/>}; Leta Hong Fincher, »Women Leaders Are Doing a Disproportionately Great Job at Handling the Pandemic. So Why Aren't There More of Them?«, *cnn.com* (16 April 2020); available online here: {<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/14/asia/women-government-leaders-coronavirus-hnk-intl/index.html>}; Jon Henley und Eleanor Ainge Roy, »Are Female Leaders More Successful at Managing the Coronavirus Crisis?«, in: *The Guardian* (25 April 2020); available online here: {<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/25/why-do-female-leaders-seem-to-be-more-successful-at-managing-the-coronavirus-crisis>}; Amanda Taub, »Why Are Women-Led Nations Doing Better with Covid-19?«, in: *The New York Times* (18 May 2020); available online here: {<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/world/coronavirus-women-leaders.html>}, and Nirandhi Gowthaman, »Coronavirus: How Have Women-Led Countries Flattened the Curve?«, in: *Yourstory* (17 April 2020); available online here: {<https://yourstory.com/herstory/2020/04/coronavirus-women-led-countries-flattened-curve>} (all online sources last accessed in July 2020).

³ See Michelle P. King, »Women Are Better Leaders. The Pandemic Proves it«, *cnn.com* (5 May 2020); available online here: {<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/05/05/perspectives/women-leaders-corona-virus/index.html>}.

⁴ Gemma D'Auria and Aaron De Smet, »Leadership in a Crisis: Responding to the Coronavirus Outbreak and Future Challenges« (16 März 2020); available online here: {<https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/leadership-in-a-crisis-responding-to-the-coronavirus-outbreak-and-future-challenges#>}.

The rise of women is a global development, and it was noted and recognized around the world. The success stories of heads of state and government of non-Western countries – Singapore, Nepal, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Namibia and Georgia – in the fight against the pandemic attracted attention.⁵ This would not remain without consequences. While the leading media praised female leadership, another discourse, a counter-discourse, emerged: In the semi-public of social media, the comments sections and internet forums the frustration with the new female power found outlets. When the British writer Matt Haig posted the image of the seven female heads of state on Instagram with the note »Time for women to lead the world«, comments like »Incel tsunami incoming« quickly appeared underneath the post.⁶ »Incels« are involuntarily celibate men who follow a radically misogynistic ideology and organise their hatred for women in the so-called »manosphere«, in the male-dominated internet, that is. The term is a portmanteau of the words »involuntary« and »celibate«. With his reference to an incoming tsunami of Incels, the commentator anticipated what now happens on a regular basis when people talk about women who are proving themselves in public spheres that many still consider to be male domains: There is mobbing, there are insults, threats, hate and sometimes even actions, as the attacks on women in recent years show.

Not just female politicians become the target of verbal and sometimes concrete attacks but all women in the public eye who claim success in »male domains« – even in seemingly innocuous ones – such as female football commentators or women in »male« movie roles. During the 2018 World Football Championship every match that had been commentated by a woman was followed by a hate-filled shitstorm on social media that degraded the female commentators because of their gender.⁷ And as ridiculous as it may sound: A lot of men consider the masculinity of the Ghostbusters sacrosanct. When the trailer for a female version was released in 2016, it was criticised as being dumb and unworthy in the comments on YouTube – not because of the trashy ghost story, as one might think, but because the leading parts were played by women. The clip had more than 46 million views, more than one million »dislikes« and 260,000 largely derisive or even openly misogynistic comments.⁸ For comparison purposes: The trailer for one of the most successful films ever, *Star Wars: The Rise*

⁵ Cf. e.g. Avivah Wittenberg-Cox, »8 (More) Women Leaders Facing the Coronavirus Crisis«, in: *Forbes* (22 April 2020); available online here: {<https://www.forbes.com/sites/avivahwittenbergcox/2020/04/22/8-more-women-leaders-facing-the-coronavirus-crisis/>}. The article judges the measures taken by the female heads of state against the pandemic to be effective.

⁶ The post is available online here: {https://www.instagram.com/p/B_NVSj5pv7R/}.

⁷ Cf. e.g. »Weibliche Stimmen im Fußball. Hass gegenKommentatorinnen macht Schule«, ntv.de (22 June 2018); available online here: {https://www.n-tv.de/sport/fussball_wm_2018/Hass-gegen-Kommentatorinnen-macht-Schule-article20493382.html}.

⁸ The trailer can be watched online here: {<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3ugHP-yZXw&app=desktop>}.

of *Skywalker* from 2019, had fewer views (44 million) but only reaped 114,000 dislikes and roughly 90,000 comments, which are non-discriminatory.⁹

The counter-discourse doesn't just play out in obscure forums on the dark net but right in the public eye, within the liberal progressive discourse, as a direct reaction to it. That content by and with women is treated in the manner described above is no coincidence but rather the well-organised work of misogynistic trolls and haters. This becomes clear as soon as one takes a look at the comments sections for content by women systematically and on mainstream media. No matter the topic, as soon as terms like »feminism« or »patriarchy« appear in the headline, in introductory sentences or in the text the following happens: The comments section is flooded by polemic statements, pages upon pages of which have to be deleted by moderators because the content is inappropriate, abusive, offensive or inflammatory. The comments that remain hardly convey a debate on content but merely refer to the events within the discussion by expressing astonishment about the many hate posts, for example. The actions of the trolls have thus fulfilled their purpose and stifled any discussion about female power or achievements, every criticism of patriarchal structures. Even completely banal articles are affected by this as shows the example about a »Stroll through Patriarchy« in which a female author reports about a hiking tour she did, as a woman on her own, through the Odenwald in the summer of 2010.¹⁰ The text appears unspectacular in feminist terms and is hardly provoking. Nevertheless, *ZEIT Online* was forced to delete most of the comments.

The counter-discourse can also be observed in everyday life, during the COVID-19 lockdown, for example, in the »renegadism« of the »renitent men on the streets« as *Philosophie Magazin* noted: They refused to obey the lockdown and wear masks because they felt that their masculinity and their moral identity were threatened and they publicly professed that they had broken the rules, by tweeting about it for example.¹¹ A study on the gender dimension of the compliance with nose and mouth covering to stop the spread of COVID-19 found that men

⁹ The trailer can be watched online here: {https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Qn_spdM5Zg}.

¹⁰ See Cornelia Korinth, »Die Wildnis bin ich«, in: *Zeit Online* (19 June 2020); available online here: {<https://www.zeit.de/kultur/2020-06/feminismus-wandern-odenwald-frau-familie-maennlichkeit-patriarchat-10nach8/komplettansicht>}.

¹¹ e.g. Frank Castorf, who does not want to be bullied into washing his hands and gave an interview on the subject; cf. Philipp Hübl, »Maskuliner Trotz«, in: *Philosophie Magazin* (19 May 2020); available online here: {<https://philomag.de/maskuliner-trotz/?fbclid=IwAR02ab71tjKW>}. Another prominent example is the former US-baseball player Aubrey Huff, who shared via Twitter that he would rather die from Covid than wear »a damn mask«. Julia Marcus, for example, addresses the connection between the refusal to obey rules during the Corona crisis and masculinity in her article »The Dudes Who Won't Wear Masks«, in: *The Atlantic* (23 June 2020); available online here: {<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/dudes-who-wont-wear-masks/613375/>}.

were less likely to wear masks during the pandemic because they perceived them as »embarrassing«, »a sign of weakness« or »uncool«.¹²

The reactionist counter-discourse is created by tension. The real social conditions and structures are still patriarchal, another thing the coronavirus has made clear. Especially when it's about equality in the workplace and in the family. »In the coronavirus crisis, women sacrifice more. Old role patterns are suddenly back,« the mainstream media agree.¹³ There is talk of »re-traditionalization« and »a reversion to the fifties«.¹⁴ The old patterns of hegemonial masculinity continue to have an effect. At the same time, however, there is one crucial difference between the past and the present: the media response. As a society we denounce these conditions as injustices and condemn them. We make clear that women being pushed back into old roles in times of crisis is anything but obvious but a fact that we note with disconcertment and indignation and that we criticise. That is the dominant discourse.

On the one hand, male privileges continue to exist to this day and are deeply rooted within the structures of our society; on the other hand, the patriarchy finds itself in ethical, normative and discursive difficulties. There is consent within society that equality is a desirable goal. This view dominates in public, which also becomes manifest in the discussion on the exemplary female heads of state and government. Because the fact that they are discussed in public as the new elite of female leadership makes visible how unusual women in political top positions still are. In fact, merely eighteen countries (out of more than 200) are governed by women and with approximately 550 million people, they are home to just seven percent of the global population.¹⁵ At the same time, however, many believe that these heads of state are the future and should soon become normality. As though under a magnifying glass, these extreme times during the pandemic made us recognise this tension more clearly than ever before. A tension that is a significant reason for why we have been experiencing a flood of degrading and often downright hate-filled rhetoric against women for several years.

The polemics against equality in form of reactionist interventions in forums for men, comments sections or on social media are but a small part of a large movement whose agitations

¹² Cf. the study conducted by Valerio Capraro and Hélène Barcelo (May 2020): »The Effect of Messaging and Gender on Intentions to Wear a Face Covering to Slow down COVID-19 Transmission«; available online here: {<https://psyarxiv.com/tg7vz/>}.

¹³ Cf. e.g. Kristin Joachim, »Frauen in der Corona-Krise: Viel ›home‹ und wenig ›office‹«, tagesschau.de (04 June 2020); available online here: {<https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/corona-frauen-101.html>}, or Jutta Allmendinger, »Die Frauen verlieren ihre Würde«, in: *Zeit Online* (12 May 2020); available online here: {<https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2020-05/familie-corona-krise-frauen-rollenverteilung-rueckentwicklung>}.

¹⁴ This observation is supported by various studies, including one conducted by the WZB Berlin Social Science Center entitled »Erwerbsarbeit in Zeiten von Corona« (15 April 2020); the study is available online here: {<https://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/216101>}.

¹⁵ Wittenberg-Cox, »8 (More) Women Leaders Facing the Coronavirus Crisis«.

against women and women's rights can be observed in many areas of society and politics. I am going to show that there is a well-organised network of misogynistic actors that work on a global scale in various examples. We can find degrading rhetoric in the writings of Catholic clergymen, the statements of radical anti-abortionists, the verbal rowdiness of authoritarian politicians. It can be considered a reaction to the profound shock to the male identity in recent decades and as a fierce defence of masculine privileges and male dominance, which de facto still exist but are being questioned in our system of values. In this book I want to show that in the midst of this tension, hegemonial masculinity, which has become problematic, has politicised itself.

»We must re-discover our masculinity,« appealed Björn Höcke of the political party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in a speech given in Erfurt on 18 November 2015. »For only if we re-discover our masculinity do we become manly. And only if we become manly are we able to defend ourselves.« Höcke's sigh of the beset man is not an isolated incident but a symptom of a political conflict that is staged on the field of gender relations. Masculinity can be used to mobilise the masses and make politics, demands for a restoration of »real masculinity« and the patriarchy fall on sympathetic ears, from people who refuse to wear masks to Incels. Masculinists, right-wing populists and anti-abortionists gather under the banner of male dominance to mobilise against the »gender ideology«. There is a recurring motif in this process that plays a crucial role in the thinking of many of the protagonists of politicised masculinity: That there was a natural order in the relations between the sexes, a natural hierarchy in which man was superior to woman – if only there weren't the social experiments of left-wing, green and gender activists. The modern idea of equality – be it in the eyes of the law or in economic terms – was breaking with this natural order.

This newly emerging discourse on masculinity manifests itself in the rise of right-wing populist parties and strong men like Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro. Misogynistic agitation runs like a golden thread through the statements and programs of populist and authoritarian parties and politicians. Hardly anything else unites recent authoritarian aspirations as much as the fight against the »gender craze«, against the relativization of male power that is perceived as a degradation. The new discourse on masculinity is closely connected to the political commotions of recent years.

The tension that exists between the real and the ideal gender relations has brought forth something sociologist Michael Kimmel, who specialises on the study of masculinities, has called »aggrieved entitlement«. Men with a misogynistic worldview, states Kimmel, believe that they were entitled to a woman and a traditional male, i.e. ruling, role within the family and

society. They derive this supposed entitlement from »tradition« – and for this it is irrelevant whether they are referring to an actual or a merely imagined tradition. If their expectation remains unfulfilled, they feel humiliated: Women were ignoring them, were not interested in them.

Politicians like Trump, Bolsonaro or even Höcke have moulded this very aggrieved entitlement into a political program of male sovereignty. They use the frustration, the disappointment and the anger of those who are convinced that they have been left high and dry and lure them with the promise of restoring the privileges they are owed. It's not for nothing that restoration is the means by which right-wing politicians become elected: »Make masculinity great again.«

The example of Poland shows that this promise wins elections. According to the polls, the odds were bad for Andrzej Duda's re-election before the presidential election in June 2020. He and his national-conservative party Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice, PiS for short) had governed the country for five years with almost no opposition and had increasingly transformed the constitutional democracy towards an authoritarian system. This method was now being questioned for the first time during the election in the summer of 2020 and the division of the Polish society was made clearly visible by an opponent vying for the presidential office who could be considered the opposite of Duda in every regard. The challenger Rafał Trzaskowski, mayor of the capital Warsaw, represented a cosmopolitan, liberal and pro-European politics. Since prognoses and polls had predicted a narrow election result, Duda employed at the last minute a means that had previously helped with elections in Poland and in other parts of the world: He mobilised against the LGBTQ movement. Two weeks before the vote, at an appearance in Silesia, Duda called it »neo-Bolshevism« and an »ideology« that »is more destructive than communism« and »sexualises children«.¹⁶ On top of that, Duda paid a visit to US-president Donald Trump at the White House just four days before the election – it's highly unusual for a president to leave his country so close to the vote. In doing so, the Polish president determined the context in which the election would be held: Once more, he illustrated to his fellow countrymen what was on the line in Poland – the »traditional Polish values«, the »traditional family«, the nation state – and that the decision about his future was also a decision about the future of Poland. Like the USA, so his message, Poland was finding itself in the midst of a fierce »battle of cultures«.

¹⁶ On this, see Gloria Geyer, »»Destruktiver« als der Kommunismus: Polnischer Präsident bezeichnet Förderung von LGBTI-Rechten als »Ideologie«, in: *Der Tagesspiegel* (14 June 2020); available online here: {<https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/destruktiver-als-der-kommunismus-polnischer-praesident-bezeichnet-foerderung-von-lgbti-rechten-als-ideologie/25914850.html>}.

The run-off vote between the sitting president and the challenger Trzaskowski was conceivably narrow, but in the end Duda's calculations panned out: He was re-elected with 51 to 49 percent. The example of Poland has shown that politicians deepen societal tension by inveighing against minority rights and politicising masculinity and get more votes as a result. Poland, it must be feared, could merely be the most recent example of this development.