

## The Image of Man. The Creation of Modern Masculinity

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Joanna Bourke

George L. Mosse's book exemplifies the best in a new wave of histories focusing on masculinity in Europe since the second half of the eighteenth century. Not everything in this book is new, nor will many of his arguments be accepted without considerable debate, but whatever the final judgement, this is a sophisticated, thoughtful, and broad-ranging book which cannot be ignored by any serious student of modern gender relations.

Primarily, it is a book about positive stereotypes. Mosse does for our understanding of modern masculinity what nineteenth-century phrenology claimed to do for its practitioners: that is, he provides us with a key to interpreting the relationships that people made between surface appearances and the depths of mind and morality. Of course, Mosse does much more than this. He also maps the national variations and historical transitions of these relationships. He has done some of this before. His seminal works on nationalism, sexuality, anti-Semitism, and warfare each deal (in a much less systematic way) with masculinity. Many readers will also be familiar with his account of the 'knights of the sky', or the romantic manly ideal of aerial combat. Nevertheless, in this book, these disparate arguments are pulled together, elaborated upon, and moulded into a strong narrative.

Mosse dates the birth of modern masculinity as occurring at the same time as the rise of bourgeois society, that is, between the second half of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth. It was a slow process, and many of the older, aristocratic stereotypes (such as duelling) took a long time to die, but it eventually prevailed and the body itself (instead of its adornments) became the chief signifier of manliness.

The masculine body, defined largely through allusion to Greek principles of harmony, proportion, and control, not only conquered the outside world, but also reigned supreme within the individual: physical beauty guaranteed strong willpower, moral fortitude, and martial nobility.

This is the chief difference between modern masculinity and what went before: the modern stereotype emphasises the body. Outward appearances are used to 'read' inner secrets; through physiognomy, for instance, the soul could be decoded from the body. With remarkable consistency, the 'ideal' body throughout this period was derived from ancient Greece. Mosse discusses a host of propagandists, but he stresses in particular the work of Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–68), an archaeologist, art historian, and librarian. In a series of influential books, Winckelmann established the principles of Greek beauty and (most importantly) made these traits relevant to his society. In a society undergoing immense structural and political upheaval brought about by industrialisation, Winckelmann's ideal provided a way of reconceptualising mankind in terms of both dynamic virility and harmonising order. Movement, yes: passion, no; or, in the words of Walter Pater, the ideal of Greek beauty was 'rest in motion'.

It was a difficult thing to accomplish, but men could approach the ideal through gymnastics and athletics. Gymnastics could be traced to the Greeks or, more recently, to the marriage of the noble savage and Greek man with eighteenth-century hygiene movements. Whatever its origins in modern society, by the nineteenth century, this ideal of masculinity was being militarised. For its modern promoters such as Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, gymnastics would deliver up a Germany manhood which was eternally youthful, martially triumphant, and pre-eminently manly. Gymnasts themselves were meant to exemplify the ideal German: they were to be selfless, chaste, fearless, and patriotic. In contrast to England, team sports were devalued: athletics held the key to healthy, moral bodies. This emphasis on health was also important, and gave medicine a pre-eminent role in the modern construction of ideal masculinity. 'A healthy body equals a healthy mind'; ugliness meant disease; shattered nerves were to blame for national degeneracy. The person who neglected his health was a threat to the entire society. Sickness was a moral category.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the modern ideal of masculinity was firmly in place, characterised by 'Greek' physique, a steely character, and nationalism. Yet, it was at this time – from around the 1870s to 1914 – that the stereotype was faced with its greatest threats: feminism, the literary and artistic avant garde, socialism, and a new assurance amongst so-called sexual deviants all conspired to weaken the ideal. Furthermore, many of these new dissenters did not hail from traditional 'outsider' groups, but from men in the middle classes and even the aristocracy who could (or would) not conform to the manly ideal. They proved remarkably assertive and unabashed by their deviancy, flaunting it at times in a most carefree manner. Languor, softness, and sensuality were the traits of this counter-masculinity. Effeminacy and androgyny was uncovered within the heart of masculine society. Yet, this counter-masculinity failed to mount an effective challenge to normative masculinity. In an unfortunate turn-of-phrase, Mosse tells us that the crisis of masculinity at the fin de siècle did not change but 'stiffened the ideal of normative manhood' (107). The First World War saw a resurgence in the ideal of masculinity. Aggression became praiseworthy again. Patriotism was men's life-blood. Sacrifice and honour were keywords and even poets transformed themselves from milksops into 'real men'. Truly, commentator after commentators attested, the war had seen the birth of a new and more virile man.

Although Mosse recognises diverse masculinities, the normative gender ideal that he identifies was widely shared. No political movement could survive without it. The possibilities for a counter-masculinity which embraced peace not war, solidarity rather than nationalism, did develop within socialist movements but were short-lived as these movements also found that they needed a masculinity stereotype which urged men to be strong, victorious, and beautiful. While in times of relative peace, the factory could be the working man's battlefield; when under threat, more bloody combat was demanded. To survive, socialist men had to be prepared to fight. Religion also failed to provide a consistent counter-masculinity. Evangelical Christianity with its emphasis on man as the tender bridegroom of Christ failed to dismantle the manly ideal. The Evangelical ideal man was the patriarchal head of the family who exemplified self-control as well as gentle paternalism. In other words, this ideal merely smoothed the 'rough edges' of masculinity, bringing it into line with middle-class sensibilities. The mid-nineteenth century emergence of 'muscular Christianity' was proof

of evangelicalism's potential to reconcile the Greek ideal of manliness with piety.

Even groups shunned by this normative ideal attested to its power. For instance, a great deal of this book examines the relationship between normative masculinity and sexual deviancy, particularly homosexuality. Effeminacy scares were an habitual element of modern society. These panics ranged from the decadent crisis in the fin de siècle and the subsequent investigation of homosexuals by sexologists (who 'needed live witnesses'), to their active persecution and slaughter under National Socialism. Yet, so seducing was the stereotype that many homosexuals embraced it: their ideal man could scarcely be distinguished from the Greek counterpoint. Thus, the first and longest lived homosexual periodical in German, *Der Eigene*, frequently lamented the effeminacy of modern society and called for a return to militant masculinity. The need for acceptance within normative society assisted in the process of enabling outsiders to internalise normative stereotypes.

Indeed, normative masculinity depended upon outsiders to define itself. Marginalised groups (in particular, gypsies, vagrants, Jews, habitual criminals, the insane, and sexual deviants) were systematically excluded from stereotypical ideals. They became the exemplars of ugliness, lack of harmony, and effeminacy. The ugly features of the outsider were simply expressions of an inward corruption. Physiognomy reflected morality. This discourse was no where more powerful than in the construction of Jews who were regarded as being incapable of manly gender identities and thus unable to form settled communities.

Mosse's analysis is subtle. He does not equate masculinity with the exercise of 'raw power'. Few historians can equal his ability to discern what differentiates one country from another and although this book is primarily focused on Germany, significant appearances are made by England, Italy, France, and (to a lesser extent) America. These comparisons are extremely constructive. Why were nearly all Frenchmen considered honourable enough to duel, while in German only five per cent could 'give satisfaction'? Why did the English place such great stress on 'fair play', unlike European nations? What distinguished the Italian fascist masculine ideal from its German counterpart? Is America different? Mosse provides stimulating and convincing answers for all questions except the latter (which he does not ask).

The book does have its weaknesses. Mosse is unsure of his audience. On the one hand, he combines elegance and clarity to produce a text open to any general reader. Without a hint of condescension he even manages to tell readers what 'normative' means. On the other hand, he assumes an academic – and a narrowly 'history academic' – reader by refusing to discuss certain topics on the grounds that they are familiar through other historical texts.

Mosse is too sensitive an historian to ignore women in his portrayal. For feminists readers, there is an occasional awkward moment (as when he writes that in France 'everyone' was allowed to duel) but more generally Mosse is careful to ensure that when he writes 'man', he means it. Mosse recognises that 'Men cannot be seen in isolation; women are always present in men's own self-image' (p. 53). But women are not portrayed as actually contributing to the construction of the masculine ideal. This ideal, in Mosse's rendition, is created by men, for men: women are merely the mirrors within which men reflect their ideal image. Thus, when he looks at the way masculinity was institutionalised, he discusses schools, clubs, and the military, but not the home.

Mosse exaggerates the difference between the physical movements in Germany and Britain. He is, of course, correct to point out the much greater importance of team sports in Britain, but ignores the fact that, outside the public schools and state education in wealthier areas, the chances of a playing field were remote and gymnastics was the main form of public exercise. Furthermore, the story Mosse tells of the increasing militarisation of gymnastics in Europe was matched in Britain as well. From the turn of the century, military institutions such as the army and the War Office began explicitly intervening into physical training regimes in Britain's schools until, by the 1920s, over one-third of physical instructors in schools were ex-army or ex-navy instructors.

It is when Mosse turns to fascism that he will generate the most controversy. According to Mosse, fascism

revealed the 'awesome possibilities inherent in modern masculinity' (p. 180). The body was firmly fused with the will and the mind, and countertypes absolutely excluded from the community. Fascism was not the inevitable outcome of normative masculinity, but was latent in it. Racism was the stimulus that turned these latent possibilities into a murderous reality. One cannot help but be shocked at the immensity of such an argument, and impressed with it. The dark heart of modern masculinity is exposed as fascistic.

The least satisfactory chapter is the final one. It leaps from fascism to contemporary society with only patchy reference to the decades in between. Furthermore, unlike his cynical descriptions of earlier movements, Mosse seems to have suddenly become optimistic: modern feminism and, even more importantly, the questioning of men from within the dominant gender role pose a new and significant threat to the masculine stereotype. Whereas in earlier decades, the threat to masculinity came from intellectuals and other educated men, now popular culture itself began questioning the ideal. Drugs, sexual experimentation, popular music and dance, and a new emphasis on personal identity are portrayed as freeing men from many of the restrictive aspects of earlier ideals. Mosse hopes that the current challenge will soften normative masculinity and allow greater flexibility. Mosse is cautious in his argument, and he qualifies many of his statements, but the extent to which such rebellions threatened the stereotype is, I believe, still exaggerated. The cultural shifts that Mosse identifies are limited to a fairly short period in the life-cycle, they are held predominantly by a specific socio-economic class, and only a small minority of men maintain it as a longer-term rejection. Mosse does admit that popular culture is as capable of embracing a skinhead as Boy George; but where does this leave us? His argument that, since the Second World War, youth culture has celebrated the outsider, is to mistake the surface for the depths. Public reactions to gay subcultures, immigrants, Jews, and those whose bodies do not conform with the Greek stereotype provide us little to be optimistic about. Mosse admits that the question is not so much whether the youth culture will break the back of normative masculinity, but rather how far it will make it bend. However, as his book shows very clearly, much more politically, socially, and economically powerful forces in the past have made it bend scarcely at all (or for very short periods): what evidence is there that a divided, transitional youth culture will fare any better? This entire book attests to 'the great capacity of normative society for co-optation' (p. 191). Many readers will also have trouble sharing his analysis of the modern fitness movement: ask any (male) body builder in any of the fitness clubs in London, and I suspect that very few would declare an interest in androgyny as against the Greek ideal. Bodybuilding continues to be obsessed with the desire to 'pass the test of manhood through acquiring a properly structured body'.

Finally, although Mosse links normative masculinity with the horrors of National Socialism, he does not satisfactorily explain why there was no major backlash against it after the Second World War. Why not? If the stereotype that Mosse so brilliantly exposes was to a large extent to blame for the persecution of Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, and other outsider groups, why did these people not attack it more strongly? This is the history he has not told, and so I await the next volume.

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