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Corona, Care, and Political Masculinity. Gender-Critical Perspectives on Governing the COVID-19 Pandemic in Austria

Ayşe Dursun, Verena Kettner & Birgit Sauer *

Abstract: »Corona, Sorge und politische Männlichkeit. Eine geschlechterkritische Perspektive auf das Regieren der COVID-19 Pandemie in Österreich«. The article departs from the contradiction that the importance of care for society was publicly acknowledged during the COVID-19 pandemic, but the pandemic response of the Austrian government did not challenge the structurally devalued status of care. In order to sustain the hegemonic patriarchal-capitalist governance of care and social reproduction in the pandemic government actors had to reframe care. We investigate government discourses that normalised its careless crisis management and interrogate the role political masculinity and affects played therein. Based on our analysis of a set of selected press conferences held in March 2020, we find that a new mode of rational-affective political masculinity was constitutive of the political management of COVID-19 crisis. With help of this hybrid mode of masculinity, political actors reinterpreted care first and foremost as healthcare and caring for the economy, and as caring for the population in terms of biopolitics. At the same time, caring tasks in the 'private' sphere were left to the personal responsibility of individuals and families. In order to generate consent, political actors frequently invoked affects that pertained to risk and danger on the one hand and solidarity and responsibility on the other.

Keywords: rational-affective masculinity, reframing care, care for the economy, solidarity, nationality.

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1. Introduction¹

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 posed serious challenges for governments across the globe, resulting in a set of unprecedented measures to curb the spread of the virus, including government-mandated social distancing rules, economic shutdown, border closures, and travel restrictions. The Austrian government followed a similar course in managing the crisis by strategically shutting down and ramping up social life against the background of fluctuating infection rates. Given the urgency of the matter, the government diverted public resources into key sectors such as public health and the labour market while transferring a greater share of caring responsibilities to individuals and families to care for themselves and others (e.g., social distancing rules, home office policies, temporary kindergarten, and school closures). These circumstances made the imperative nature of care clear to such an extent that even state actors had to revise their otherwise *careless* discourses and acknowledge its life-serving purpose without challenging the secondary importance attached to care work (Lichtenberger and Wöhl 2020). The public discourses that followed served to underpin how the Corona measures were positioned somewhere between solidarity and social cohesion on the one hand, and individual self-responsibility and self-care on the other hand. These were evidenced by the government's flagship campaign "Look after yourself, look after me" (*Schau auf dich, schau auf mich*) and were affectively and emotionally charged.²

While the Austrian government made a sharp fiscal policy U-turn, increased state debts, and invested billions of Euros to support the economy, it predictably assumed that the "private" sphere would be the main site of crisis management. The population, especially its feminised and ethnicised segments (Wöhl 2020), had to rely on their reproductive capacities to help themselves and others get through the crisis, as reflected by the overall increase in women's unpaid and underpaid care work since the pandemic's onset (Mader et al. 2020). As with other structural crises of capitalism, the government processed the COVID-19 pandemic by further externalising care work – a key capitalist-patriarchal³ trait (Fraser 2016). In the context of the current crisis, European governments, including Austria's, have followed a similar strategy of tacit reliance on women's unpaid care work to "fix" the current predicament (Dowling 2021a) without social redistribution – a strategy known to

¹ The authors would like to thank Laura Brandt for her collaboration in analysing the material and Anna Durnova for inspiring feedback.

² We use emotions and affects synonymously to avoid any distinction between social emotions and "asocial" affects (Ahmed 2004; Bargetz and Sauer 2015).

³ The term *capitalist patriarchy* highlights the interconnectedness of patriarchal and capitalist structures, i.e., of exploitation due to gender and class.

perpetuate the class, gender, and race privileges of dominant social groups at the expense of those who are already marginalised (Dowling 2021a; Emejulu and Bassel 2017).

The question our article wishes to address arises from a particular ambivalence: On the one hand, care has been publicly acknowledged as essential work during the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, the Austrian government's response to the pandemic has not come close to challenging the capitalist-patriarchal compromise that devaluates care and renders it invisible. To sustain this ambivalence and thus the hegemonic governing of care and social reproduction, as we assume, government actors had to reframe care within the new context of the pandemic. Since state governing has been historically tied to masculinity, which is traditionally characterised as rational and emotionless, we are interested in what role state and political masculinity and affects have played in reframing care during the pandemic in Austria. Therefore, we ask: (1) Which discourses employed by the Austrian government have served to normalise and generate societal consensus over its *careless* crisis management? (2) Which role has political masculinity and its affects played therein? We contend that the introduction of a specific mode of masculinity, which was embodied by government members, policymakers, and experts, and which we call *rational-affective masculinity*, was integral to how the government reframed care in its attempt to govern the pandemic.

Austria serves as an insightful case for studying the role of political masculinity and affects in governing social reproduction for at least two reasons: First, despite a degree of homogenisation across different national economies in the course of neoliberal globalisation, as remarked by Dowling (2021b, in this HSR Forum), welfare and care regimes have varied across countries. The mode of social reproduction in Austria is typically labelled as the *male breadwinner* model, where women are primarily responsabilised for care work. Although this model has been eroded over the last four decades by women's integration into wage labour and public investment in childcare, it continues to exist because of the prevailing gendered division of labour as well as the flexibilization of the labour market and the feminization of part-time work (Gresch and Sauer 2018). Emerging gaps in familial and institutional care structures are commonly patched through "care extractivism" (Wichterich 2016), i.e., through "live-in care" and "migrant-in-a-family" models where migrant workers – mostly women – are hired for care work (Aulenbacher, Bachinger, and Décieux 2015). Second, the ruling Christian-democratic Austrian People's Party (*Österreichische Volkspartei*, ÖVP), who are currently in a coalition with the Green Party (*Grüne*), has traditionally defended hierarchical and heteronormative gender roles, but recently refashioned itself as a more dynamic and innovative party under the leadership of

the former Chancellor, Sebastian Kurz.⁴ Nevertheless, the ÖVP and Kurz neither abolished the “brotherhood breadwinner” structure (Marx Ferree 2020, 3) nor the masculinist foundation of the Austrian state (Kreisky 1995). Kurz, to the contrary, has adopted “a calm, reasonable and clean-hands style of populism, and triggered symbolic violence by activating the ideal of the masculine subject who is able to act autonomously and to control the effects of his action” (Löffler 2020, 21).

To explore the reframing of care during the COVID-19 pandemic in Austria and the role of political masculinity and affects therein, we analysed press conferences held by the Austrian government during the early days of the first lockdown in the aftermath of 10 March 2020 when the government officially announced a set of *Corona measures*. At these press conferences, political masculinity was performed, embodied, and constructed by several political actors; more specifically, government members and social partners. Two distinct sets of discourses can be identified in the selected press conferences, which addressed (1) risks, challenges, and ensuing measures as well as the economy while also addressing (2) solidarity, self-responsibility, and caring for others (e.g., the older, the vulnerable). We will argue that these seemingly opposing and at times disconnected discourses are bundled through rational-affective masculinity. As we will show, rational-affective masculinity helps to, first, simultaneously appeal to people’s reason and hearts and, second, (re-)draw the boundaries between public (i.e., state responsibility, institutionalised, paid) and “private” (i.e., individual responsibility, informal, familiarised, unpaid), while aiming to leave the gendered division of labour untouched.

In the following, we define the research gap that our study aims to fill (section 2). Next, we outline a theoretical framework that tackles masculinity and affects as specific forms of governing the pandemic (section 3). Then, we discuss our methodological considerations on affective governance and political masculinity and present our data (section 4). In the next step, we discuss our main findings (section 5) and, lastly, we finish by drawing a few forward-looking conclusions based on our analysis (section 6).

2. State of Research: Taking *Care* of Structural Crises

Critical scholarship establishes that crises are structural rather than incidental in capitalist societies (Demirović et al. 2011). Feminist conceptualisations of structural crises centre around social reproduction, meaning work “that takes place mainly at the household level (e.g., caring for children, the

⁴ Sebastian Kurz stepped down as chancellor on 9 October 2021 amid allegations of corruption.

elderly, the sick, everyday housework)” (Bakker and Gill 2019, 507). Feminists have characterised the systematic externalisation of reproductive costs by the capacity to generate value as a key contradiction of capitalist-patriarchal societies, which consequently undermines the material conditions under which the labour force is reproduced (Federici 2012; Fraser 2016; Winker 2015). This structural *carelessness* (Aulenbacher, Bachinger, and Décieux 2015) culminates, as Silvia Federici describes, in a “permanent reproductive crisis” (Vishmidt 2013, Federici interview), which intensifies as it interlocks with other distinct, though structurally related (e.g., financial, ecological) crises (Brand 2009; Fraser 2016). The crisis of reproduction is further provoked as governments draw on women’s care capacities to process crises in other fields. It has been observed that during economic crises, women and girls’ unpaid care work in the household as well as their underpaid care work in informalised sectors grow substantially (Elson 2012). For instance, the public management of the 2008 economic and financial crises indeed displayed a recurring strategy that sought to mitigate, at least temporarily, the crises’ effects by further resorting to women’s unpaid care work (Lang and Sauer 2015; Young 2003). However, “if pressure is put upon the domestic sector to provide unpaid care work to make up for deficiencies elsewhere, the result may be a depletion of human capabilities” (Elson, quoted in Rai, Hoskyns, and Thomas 2010, 2) to an extent that people become unable to reproduce themselves and others due to missing resources such as time and money (Dowling 2021a).

Scholars have made similar observations during the current COVID-19 pandemic crisis. A time survey conducted during Austria’s first lockdown showed that women – mothers in particular – were disproportionately burdened by school and kindergarten closures, with some even noting that they would need 36 hours each day to juggle home office, home schooling, and other caring tasks (Mader et al. 2020). In heterosexual families where men are usually the main breadwinners and women are part-time workers, the gender care gap grew during the COVID-19 pandemic: Women worked about 14 hours per day, 8 of them unpaid, while men worked about 13 hours, only 7 of them unpaid (Mader et al. 2020). Similarly, others have noted that care work has been re-traditionalised – i.e., privatised and feminised – during the pandemic (Derndorfer et al. 2020; Lichtenberger and Wöhl 2020).

We contribute to this scholarship by focusing on the gendered aspects of governing the COVID-19 pandemic crisis with a focus on care work. This is important because government discourses and policies set political norms and priorities and prescribe a code of conduct for the population in times of condensed and interlocking crises. These norms and practices that serve to navigate a specific population through a crisis are not reinvented anew, but draw on and reinforce existing social relations, as research on the growing gender care gap during a crisis shows. However, revisions and reallocations

can also be part of governing a crisis; for example, when the existing social norms fall short of accommodating a new situation, as reflected in the symbolic reevaluation of certain caring professions and reallocation of public resources to some caring sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our interest is to study how these continuities or discontinuities are communicated and legitimised as part of the political strategy to govern the current crisis. More precisely, the current article studies *how* the Austrian government re-signified care to handle the intensified crisis of social reproduction during the pandemic and which political masculinities and affects were employed to this end. In which ways is the Austrian population summoned to take over care? Which rational and affective convictions does the government employ? To what extent are they gendered and which possible effects do they have? In answering these questions, our research should allow a deeper understanding of the gendered governing of the COVID-19 pandemic and ultimately contribute to our understanding of how political actors govern capitalist-patriarchal crises in both rational and affective ways.

3. Theoretical Considerations: Neoliberal Transformations of Political Masculinity, Affectivity, and Biopolitics

Masculinity studies have shown that masculinities are manifold and subject to constant transformation because manifestations of male power and dominance change as gender and other social power relations and structures change (Kreisky 2014, 15). The specific formation of masculinities – and femininities – is thus interwoven with historically evolving struggles and social conditions (Connell 1995, 79). Amid the emergence of the nation state, the capitalist accumulation regime, and the bourgeois society in the 18th century, masculinity started becoming associated with the public sphere (i.e., politics and the state), while femininity started becoming associated with the “private” sphere (Lang 2004). Correspondingly, hegemonic masculinity became tied to the ideal of rationality, while emotionality was considered rationality’s feminised “Other” and banned from the emerging public sphere.

This public vs. private and rational vs. emotional distinction, also called the “liberal emotion dispositive” (Bargetz and Sauer 2015, 95), has served as a marker of bodily, sexual, and emotional “difference” and as the ideational ground for the gendered division of labour and (liberal) biopolitics, i.e., the governing of the population (Foucault 1978/1979). Biopolitics assigns caring tasks of reproducing the population (through generativity), the workforce (through care work that restores workers, like cooking and cleaning), and the

rules and norms of the society (through child rearing) to women, which are essential for generating surplus value for capitalist accumulation (Federici 2006). In short, this includes the notion of the “caring housewife” and “loving mother” who cares “out of love” (Bock and Duden 1977).

These common dichotomies – public vs. private, rationality vs. emotionality, production vs. reproduction – are constitutive of modern statehood and integral to the governing of patriarchal-capitalist societies (Ludwig 2016; Sauer 2001). The modern state is masculinist and has been constructed as rational and emotionless (Sauer 2016). Accordingly, political masculinity, which is “any kind of masculinity [...] constructed around, ascribed to and/or claimed by ‘political players,’” and embodied by men or women (Starck and Sauer 2014, 6), characterises the capacity to exercise state power, express competence to govern, and make binding decisions, and thus has to perform rationally and in a non-affective way. While the image of this ideal political and state masculinity changed in the 20th century, for example from martial to bureaucratic and managerial masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), its foundations have remained relatively stable over time.

These dichotomies have been blurred over the course of the neoliberal restructuring of the state and societies of the Global North. The flexibilization of labour from the 1970s onward resulted in the decline of family wages and thus of the male breadwinner model (see Dowling 2021b, in this HSR Forum). This led to women’s integration into the labour market – mostly as part-time workers (Weiß 2012). Furthermore, other demographic factors, ageing in particular, have required more care work (see Dowling 2021b, this HSR Forum). In line with these developments, social reproduction needed to be restructured, as *some* caring tasks formerly carried out by familiarised women were gradually reallocated to public, private, and non-profit sectors. These processes were accompanied by a “common trend towards increasing emphasis on individual responsibility for, and informalization of, social reproduction,” (Bakker and Silvey 2008, 8) drawing on the care capacities of poorly paid migrant women from the Global South (Isaksen, Devi, and Hochschild 2008; Lutz 2016; Wichterich 2016).

The erosion of the once-distinct separation between the public and “private” spheres has constituted a new hegemonic masculinity in Western Europe⁵ and led to the emergence of “new modes of male subjectivation and new techniques of male self-governance” (Sauer 2014, 86). Neoliberal masculinity is characterised as “risk-taking,” “market-related,” and “financialised” masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 851) and has become particularly apparent during the public management of the 2008 financial crisis (Sauer 2014).

⁵ In this article, we focus on Western Europe; however, hegemonic masculinities vary in different regions of the world.

In parallel to the shifting boundaries of public vs. private, affects and emotions have become an important part of public life and a new form of capital as well as a means of neoliberal governance (Penz and Sauer 2020). Affective skills, which were traditionally considered as feminine affective capital (like friendliness, compassion, empathy, and patience), have become imperative to improving efficiency and productivity in labour market areas typically associated with men. However, the adaptation of feminised affects by men has not yet resulted in the depletion of the patriarchal gender regime but has rather contributed to its normalization (Sauer 2014, 90f.). Likewise, it has not resolved the structural carelessness of capitalist economies. In its neoliberal construction, hegemonic masculinity draws on the ideal of the “strong” and “rational” man *and* on his ability to use his affective capital and emotions in a sensitive way to touch and move others. Affective governing succeeds through gendered processes, not least through the masculinization of emotions (Penz and Sauer 2020, 135).

This neoliberal transformation of affects and masculinity has impacted politics and governing. Affective political masculinity complements rational political masculinity to govern a population in line with societal norms and ideals that still serve the capitalist-patriarchal structure of societies. This combination of political affectivity and rationality is furthermore part of the neoliberal biopolitical masculinist governing of the population and its reproductive relations. Rather than setting strict rules, neoliberal biopolitics targets the subjectivities and bodies of people leading them to use their affective capital to optimally persevere in the public and the “private” sphere (Foucault 1978/1979).

4. Considerations about Methodology and Methods

The key institutional medium of political communication during the COVID-19 pandemic in Austria has been the government press conferences, through which political actors assessed the situation, announced official measures, and provided incentives for the population to behave in certain ways during the crisis. Press conferences served to centralise and control political communication and content such as statistical information (e.g., infection, death, and recovery rates; occupancy rates in intensive care units), codes of conduct (e.g., social distancing, wearing a mask, home office), and priorities (e.g., protecting vulnerable groups, saving jobs).

The public Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF) broadcasted all government press conferences on COVID-19 measures at noon or in the evening at primetime. We selected five public press conferences, which were held on 10, 13, 14, 16, 17, and 18 March 2020 that announced and addressed key

Corona measures pertaining to introducing a lockdown, closing shops and borders, restrictions on going out, short-time work (*Kurzarbeit*) and teleworking, distance learning, and financial aid for businesses. These speakers at these selected press conferences were former Chancellor Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP; 10, 13, 14, and 18 March); Vice-Chancellor Werner Kogler (Grüne; 13, 14, and 18 March); then-Health Minister Rudolf Anschober (Grüne⁶; 10, 13, 14, and 18 March); Interior Minister Karl Nehammer (ÖVP; 10, 13, and 14 March); Minister of Finance Gernot Blümel (ÖVP; 13, 14, 16, and 18 March); Minister of Economy Margarete Schramböck (ÖVP; 14 March); Governor of Austria's Central Bank (OeNB) Robert Holzmann (16 March); OeNB Vice-Governor Gottfried Haber (16 March); President of the Austrian Economic Chamber (WKO) Harald Mahrer (14 March); Andreas Treichl (WKO; 16 March), and President of the Austrian Federation of Trade Unions (ÖGB) Wolfgang Katzian (14 March). Transcripts from the five selected press conferences, as well as videos from four, were made available by the ORF.

To reconstruct which affects and modes of political masculinities were deployed in combination with specific social issues and policy areas, we based our qualitative content analysis on the transcripts and video sequences from the selected press conferences. We used Philipp Mayring's qualitative content analysis method (Mayring 2015, 11, 33, 51) to analyse the press conference transcripts. First, we descriptively identified which issues and themes were addressed in the press conferences. Following Mayring, we structured the issues presented at the press conferences around different aspects of care-taking. The address topics included information about current trends regarding the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., the spread of the virus in Austria, the situation in neighbouring Italy); arising health and economic risks (e.g., economic downturn); public measures to curb the spread of the virus (e.g., lockdown, school and kindergarten closures, mandatory masks in shops and public transport); public measures to maintain the population and economy (e.g., securing basic supplies, financial support for companies, short-time work, rent deferments); and recommendations and codes of conduct (e.g., social distancing, hand-washing, staying at home, looking after each other – especially vulnerable groups).

In a second step, we analysed which affects and feelings political actors deployed both in their verbal and body language while addressing the issues and themes of political action we had identified beforehand. We paid attention to the language used in combination with a specific issue and studied which topics were governed by affective language (e.g., speaking in warm and friendly terms about solidarity, togetherness, and empathy) and which were governed by rational language (e.g., speaking in certain and stern terms

⁶ Anschober resigned from office on 13 April 2021.

about the economy and the healthcare system; Flam and Kleres 2015). While matching the spoken words with their bodily representation from the videos, we analysed the setting, facial expressions, gestures, style of speech, tonality, and atmospheres (Argyle 1975; Knudsen and Stage 2015). Affective expressions of sternness, determination, strictness, and feelings of risk and danger were coded as rationality indicators, while performed empathy, softness, and feelings of solidarity and togetherness suggested care and affectivity.

As a final step and based on the previously identified issues and themes (step one) and the affects through which they were communicated in words and manner (step two), we identified the political masculinity of male and female politicians constructed at the intersection of affects and rationality. We did not distinguish between male and female politicians, because rational-affective masculinity is constructed and performed independently from individual biological sex. We defined rational political masculinity as being composed of a set of policy issues and specific affects. Whenever political actors communicated notions and invoked feelings of danger and risk, spoke about topics like caring for the economy, and exuded political competence and authority over these matters, we considered these as practices of rational political masculinity. We identified three thematic subcategories through which rational masculinity was constructed: (1) Economy and work, (2) challenges and risks, and (3) anti-pandemic measures. Sternness, determination, strictness, and feelings of risk and danger displayed in words, gestures, and facial expressions were coded as indicators for political rationality.

Affective political masculinity is defined as a combination of affects and issues like solidarity, responsibility, and a “we.” Whenever political actors – male and female – communicated notions and feelings of solidarity, responsibility, and empathy; availed themselves to imageries of a national “we”; and softened their position of political authority while reinforcing paternalism, we considered these practices of affective political masculinity and identified the following thematic subcategories: (1) “Austrians,” “Team Austria,” “We”; (2) solidarity, (self-)responsibility, individual contribution; and (3) protecting the older and the vulnerable. Here, too, we traced the physical embodiment of affective political masculinity by analysing video segments.

5. Governing the COVID-19 Pandemic in Austria: Ambivalent Care Between Rational-Affective Political Masculinity

This section presents our findings and shows how rational-affective political masculinity was communicated and performed at the press conferences held

by the Austrian Government in March 2020 and demonstrates how this particular political masculinity helped re-define the scope and content of care in governing the pandemic. We found that rational-affective political masculinity built on a set of discourses, which, on the one hand, addressed issues pertaining to the economy, wage labour, risks, challenges, and government measures. On the other hand, rational-affective masculinity made propositions about a common national identity (Austrians, Team Austria, We), solidarity, (self-)responsibility, and protecting the population – especially vulnerable groups like the elderly.⁷ We observed that these distinct yet concurrent sets of rationalised (economy, wage labour, risks, challenges, and measures) and affective discourses (national identity, solidarity and [self-]responsibility, protecting the vulnerable) served to further consolidate the public vs. private and thus the production vs. social reproduction divide by ascribing different, even opposing rationalities to the management of each sphere. Our analysis found that, in its political communication, the Austrian government asked for resilience, patience, and sacrifices when addressing issues related to care. When addressing the economy, wage labour, risks, challenges, and measures, the government representatives declared immediate action and money. However, we also noticed a certain spillover in situations when the government asked employers and self-employed persons for resilience, understanding, and patience. We additionally observed that this rational-affective mode of political masculinity held true across the political spectrum, including social partners and organised labour. Finally, we found that the demonstrated rational-affective political masculinity was part of the biopolitical governing of the crisis through redefining care as caring for the economy rather than caring for the people.

5.1 Risks, Challenges, and Caring for the Economy

Our data shows that one key function of rational-affective political masculinity is to discursively and affectively reflect and construct situations and scenarios of risk and challenge that serve to rationalise state measures and incentivise compliance among the population. Feelings of immediate risk and threat were mediated during the press conferences through statements such as “We are currently experiencing a challenging time”⁸ (Sebastian Kurz/SK, 13 March 2020) or that COVID-19 mortality rates were 10 to 30 times higher than that of regular influenza, “as has always been feared” (SK, 10 March 2020). Risk and danger were moreover invoked by citing hard facts such as infection rates and pointing to the alarming situation in neighbouring Italy,

⁷ Hasenöhl (2021, in this HSR Forum) analyses affective government communication strategies in Mali.

⁸ All quotes are translated from German into English by the authors of the article.

where “in a prospering region like Lombardi, parts of hospital infrastructure are no longer functional and what this means for individual people, one can hardly imagine in this very minute” and that the news coming from the region “reads like war reporting” (Rudolf Anschober/RA, 13 March 2020). These statements underlined the worrisome developments for which drastic *Corona measures* had to be taken and were sometimes accompanied by the acknowledgement that “the steps we are taking are severe limitations” (SK, 13 March 2020). Through rational claims, these measures were presented as inevitable to “at least slow down the spread of the virus in Austria” (SK, 13 March 2020) and to prevent a similar course “as in our Southern neighbour [Italy], which many [Austrians] love” (RA, 13 March 2020). Constant risk assessment (“We must evaluate the situation on a daily basis”; SK, 13 March 2020) was thus integral to both managing the COVID-19 pandemic and to rational masculinity in Austria. Risk assessment was often tied to an affective appeal to self-responsibility and solidarity to help contain the spread of the virus – “every single one of us, we must be aware, has a responsibility” (SK, 13 March 2020) – which required a “general change of behaviour” (RA, 10 March 2020). Change of conduct was not only requested from the population but from companies, as illustrated in former Chancellor Kurz’s statement: “This is only a request, but nevertheless a request with emphasis: I ask Austrian companies to grant teleworking to employees where possible” (SK, 10 March 2020).

Policymakers and experts tied risks that were related to the pandemic and ensuing measures to economic and financial risks. For example, Kurz spoke of “massive economic consequences” caused by anti-COVID-19 measures (SK, 14 March 2020) but promised that the federal government would tackle the matter “very intensively” so that “we can do to best support employees, but also businesses, in this difficult phase.” He noted that safeguarding jobs in the most-affected sectors would be a priority (SK, 14 March 2020). Likewise, a representative from the Austrian Economic Chamber (WKO) assured the population that all measures would be taken to safely carry Austrian companies through the crisis, and that this was “our obligation, [...] our mission, this is what we are here for and this we will do” (Andreas Treichl/AT, 16 March 2020). Vice-Chancellor Werner Kogler (Grüne) prepared the population for the “dramatic impact” of the *Corona measures* on the Austrian economy and employees, but also offered hope that public financial aid would help maintain the “cycle of the economy” and provide the “economic body with fresh blood” (WK, 14 March 2020) – comparing the economy to a sick body. Finance Minister Gernot Blümel (ÖVP) and social partners introduced a COVID-19 short-time work model to secure jobs (Gernot Blümel/GB, 14 March 2020), while Minister of Economy Margarete Schramböck (ÖVP) announced that the *Corona short-time work* model would be allocated 400 million EUR, would be organised in a less bureaucratic way, and would offer broader coverage than

the existing short-time work model (Margarete Schramböck/MS, 14 March 2020). Schramböck emphasised that the “economy is based on trust” and confidence that “when I leave my house in the morning, I can buy myself a coffee [and] *Kipferl* [Croissant] at the bakery, that there are contracts for businesses which assure that the salaries can be paid, that the rent can be paid, that the business can go on” (MS, 14 March 2020). Sebastian Kurz underlined that “our approach is clear; we want to do everything humanly possible to prevent unemployment and insolvency in companies. Our approach is, whatever the cost, to save Austrian jobs” (SK, 18 March 2020). To this end, the government launched a four-billion EUR *Corona crisis fund*, including liquidity aid, through loan guarantees, bridging loans, tax deferrals, and additional support for individual and family firms and businesses from disproportionately affected sectors such as tourism, gastronomy, and culture.

Overall, we observed that policymakers as well as representative from the Economic Chamber (WKO) and the Federation of Trade Unions (ÖGB) – all of whom normally represent conflicting and contradictory interests – gave the impression of harmony during these press conferences. The ÖGB President noted that trade unions and the Chamber of Labour (AK) were ready to cooperate and look for solutions in order to minimise the impact of the crisis on workers. They appealed to businesspeople to make use of COVID-19 short-time work instead of putting people “out onto the streets,” because “we will need all workers after this crisis [...] to get started” (Wolfgang Katzian/WK, 14 March 2020). During his speech, President of the Economic Chamber Mahrer thanked the presidents of ÖGB and AK for their cooperation, remarking that it had been “unprecedented” how quickly and easily social partners – the government, WKO, ÖGB, and AK – were able to agree upon the short-time work model and on allocating 400 million EUR for its implementation (Harald Mahrer/HM, 14 March 2020). The government and the social partners generally signalled competence, mutual trust, and unity, noting that the government and the social partners were “thankfully” able to draft “a very attractive and flexible short-time work model” (GB, 16 March 2020). The emphasis on the importance of a “healthy” – leaping with the body metaphor – economy, the promise of immediate financial help and recovery, and the demonstration of good cooperation helped political representatives present themselves as carers of Austrian jobs and people, stating that they “do not leave anybody behind and do not leave anybody alone” (WK, 18 March 2020). The ambivalence of rational-affective masculinity allowed the government to stress that “the virus threatens what is most important for us all, our health” (SK, 18 March 2020), but also associate the task of caring for a population and its health with caring for the economy and wage labour. This was demonstrated in Vice-Chancellor’s analogy of supplying the “economic body with fresh blood” (WK,

14 March 2020), in reference to the public financial aid for businesses and employers.

The *Corona measures* announced by the government were rationalised against these risks and challenges, many of which were related, though not limited to, the economy and wage labour. Such measures taken in March 2020 included quarantining a number of municipalities in the Austrian province of Tyrol and requiring people who had recently been to these municipalities or had contact with someone who did to self-isolate for 14 days. Furthermore, they included restricting social contacts, introducing home-office or teleworking, closing restaurants, bars, and cafes after 3 p.m., and closing non-essential shops (i.e., everything except pharmacies, banks, post offices, supermarkets, and pet food shops). Other measures included suspending flights to risk zones, limiting hospital visits to paediatric and palliative stations, and closing schools. The announcements of these measures were often accompanied by a call to act responsibly and in solidarity with vulnerable groups: “And the last point from my point of view is very, very important: Let’s pay special attention to the most vulnerable in this situation. That is also our responsibility” (RA, 10 March 2020). Only through these measures, Anshober continued, could “we protect ourselves and also protect the others. That is cohesion as we need it, cohesion that currently works” (RA, 10 March 2020). This quote shows that solidarity, community, and togetherness was demanded, while solidarity merely implied obeying the *Corona measures*, and was emptied of its meaning of mutual care and responsibility. In another example of this form of responsibilised solidarity, Anshober asserted, “If everyone makes their reflections, so to speak, at home this evening, that would be fantastic. What can I do, do I have to go shopping every day in the supermarket? Is every third day enough? A very simple example” (RA, 10 March 2020).

Besides *what* political actors say, *how* they say it – i.e., bodily appearance and performance – was an important aspect of rational-affective political masculinity. All but one person (the female Minister of Economy Schramböck⁹) who spoke during the selected press conferences were men. The men appeared neat and tidy in their dark suits and exuded confident demeanours, determination, and leadership to navigate the population through the current crisis. Former Chancellor Kurz’s face was almost free of expression and his mouth, eyebrows, and cheeks hardly moved as he spoke. His characteristic hair was impeccably smooth and gelled backwards, and he always wore a perfectly tailored suit. During his press conferences addresses, the camera was pointed directly towards him and the frame ended at the middle of his upper body so that his hands or gestures could hardly be seen. The

⁹ Unfortunately, the video of the press conference with Minister Schramböck was unavailable; only transcripts were accessible.

background was always white, while the flag of the Republic of Austria was occasionally visible. This setting mediated an appearance of strength, calmness, purposefulness, and national togetherness. Kurz spoke in a calm and determined fashion without much intonation. He rarely looked down at his script, which conveyed a sense of preparedness and control. The full picture can be interpreted as a prime example of political masculinity that aims to mediate professionalism, control, efficiency, and thus rationality in a serious and worrying situation. Minister of the Interior Nehammer (ÖVP) performed in a similar manner, though he did not seem as disciplined and distanced as Kurz: He moved more frequently, occasionally misspoke, and he displayed more facial expressions. By contrast, then-Health Minister Anschober (Grüne) seemed relatively casual as his hair and body moved while speaking and his speech sounded melodic. He appeared more worried and softer compared to the stern looking Kurz and Nehammer. Hence, we may distinguish two types of rational-affective masculinities: Kurz and Nehammer on the more rational side, and Anschober on the more affective side. Still, all three displayed a form of rational-affective political masculinity, but due to their different positions in governing the crisis (Kurz as then chancellor, Nehammer as the interior minister responsible for national security, and Anschober as health minister), they worked with different expressions of rationality and affect to reach the population.

In speaking about economic risks, challenges, and measures, the policy-makers further intensified their rationalised-masculine political appearances. At a press conference about the financial situation and the financial support package for companies, for example, Sebastian Kurz pointed out that the government would “do everything humanly possible to prevent mass unemployment in Austria” (SK, 18 March 2020), while simultaneously throwing a focused and stern look to the camera accompanied by a determined gesture that stressed an obligation to take care of the economy and jobs. In a capitalist market logic, taking care of the Austrian population demanded taking care of businesses above all. Hence, care for the economy was presented as the rational solution to the pandemic crisis. This combination of market-related discourses and appearances on the one hand, and their contextualisation in terms of care and concern on the other hand, showed the precise ambivalence of neoliberal rational-affective political masculinity.

In summary, rational-political masculinity – which worked with hard facts like infection numbers and trends, threat scenarios, and a set of rationalised measures that focused on supporting the capitalist market economy and labour market – was often communicated by using a terminology of finance.¹⁰

¹⁰ Akkan (2021, in this HSR Forum) stresses the restoration of masculinity through the COVID-19 crisis and the lockdown in Turkey.

This rational political masculinity was buttressed through facial expressions and gestures that expressed firmness and leadership. Even though the rational aspects of masculinity were more pronounced in contexts of wage labour, the capitalist market, risks, and measures, they were also accompanied by discursive and performative strategies that appealed to the hearts and emotions of the population and communicated a sense of care. Taking care of the economy was given an actual caring touch through the display of empathy for the population's (and the economy's) vulnerability in the face of risks and measures. Nevertheless, care-taking in the mode of rational-affective political masculinity leads to a hetero-patriarchal re-negotiation of social reproduction, as "taking care" was mainly concerned with running the capitalist economy and thus re-establishing the privatisation of care work.

5.2 Solidarity, Responsibility, and Caring for Each Other

The more caring and affective expressions of rational-affective political masculinity sought to strike a balance between the technical and financial aspects of the COVID-19 crisis and the repressive measures to tackle it by communicating feelings of solidarity, compassion, and gratitude. The aim was to generate feelings of safety and being cared for among the population – and hence created a "We" – and to promote feelings of belonging. We observed that ÖVP actors such as Sebastian Kurz and Karl Nehammer often resorted to notions and feelings of an exclusive identity-based community by referring to the audience as "Dear Austrians." By contrast, Rudolf Anschober from the Grüne addressed the audience as "citizens," indicating a political group. President of the Economic Chamber Mahrer (WKO) reinterpreted the economic aid package as a "red-white-red security network worth four billion Euros" (HM, 14 March 2020)¹¹ by referencing the Austrian flag to evoke feelings of national belonging.

The press conferences established solidarity, (self-)responsibility, and individual contributions, i.e., the self-care and care for others during the crisis, as the main task for "Austrians" and "Team Austria." The sports metaphor "Team Austria" was often used by policymakers to generate a sense of interdependence and mutuality for the sake of a common goal: victory over the virus. Former Chancellor Kurz invoked a national community by noting that Austrian citizens should "stand together" during this time and "make individual contributions" so that "we as a Republic but also as a population get through the crisis" (SK, 14 March 2020). He further stressed that "we all need to make a contribution to defend our health" (SK, 14 March 2020). Vice-Chancellor Kogler thanked the population and all political parties in the Parliament for joining the government in its efforts to curb the pandemic (WK, 14

¹¹ Red-white-red are the colours of the Austrian flag.

March 2020). Minister of Finance Blümel similarly argued that “we will demonstrate a path of how we will together manage the crisis” (GB, 14 March 2020). Minister of Economy Schramböck thanked all employees who “are out there, who make an effort day after day, who work overtime, who make sure that we are [sufficiently] supplied” (MS, 14 March 2020). ÖGB President Katzian stressed that the goal of the ÖGB and AK, while negotiating the terms of the *Corona short-time work* model, was that “no one is left behind” (WK ÖGB, 14 March 2020). He critiqued that he hoped that those who were currently not “on the sunny side of life” due to their professions, but who had attracted much public attention during the crisis because they worked with “every fibre of their hearts,” would not be forgotten after the crisis (WK ÖGB, 14 March 2020) – an indirect reference to public health workers. WKO President Mahrer thanked all social partners for their “willingness to cooperate” (HM, 14 March 2020).

These statements of mutual gratitude among political actors were complemented with affects of concern and care for the safety of the population, especially for “vulnerable groups” and “the elderly” (SK, 13 March 2020). Former Chancellor Kurz spoke about defending population health and especially protecting the older persons in “our country” (SK, 14 March 2020). He depicted a dark and dramatic picture when he emphasised that “this crisis will mean disease [and] suffering for the many and also death for some.” This stressing of the government’s need to do everything in its power (SK, 14 March 2020) was at once connected to fear and relief through the government. ÖGB President Katzian noted that the primary political concern in the current situation could be in searching for compromises that were convenient to all parties since this time it was about “fates” and “existences” (WK ÖGB, 14 March 2020). He added that while the motto of the 2008 financial crises was “too big to fail,” the motto of the current crisis was “too many to fail” (WK ÖGB, 14 March 2020). Similar to Kogler’s “liquidity and fresh blood” metaphor, WKO President Mahrer stated that “for us, the health of humans is as important as the health of the Austrian economic motor because we need both: employees for companies [and] their families” (MH, 14 March 2020). Addressing care as healthcare and caring for each other thus still served to invoke feelings of the (self-)responsibility to save the Austrian economy.

We noted that even Kurz shook his head empathetically when speaking about “solidarity” and “protecting the older persons” (SK, 13 March 2020; 14 March 2020). He lifted his eyebrows or used gentle hand movements when thanking doctors, the police, and supermarket and public transportation employees (SK, 14 March 2020). Then-Minister of Health Anschober made a sad face when discussing “the older, but also those with pre-existing diseases” (RA, 17 March 2020). He constantly swung his body, which made him less

stern and more approachable than Kurz and Nehammer, while appearing moved or even insecure.

Like his speeches, Anschöber's facial expressions and gestures helped buttress and transmit an affective mode of political masculinity, which, next to cold-blooded "rational" decisions, was capable of empathy and care. The communication of these sentiments and gestures of care, togetherness, and solidarity conveyed an image of empathetic political leaders who were human and "close to the population" and who jointly and unanimously agreed with the anti-COVID-19 measures. The aim was to create a (national) "We," a caring community. At the same time, it was intended to construct care in a dual sense: As a fact that did not need financial support but was something altruistic that everybody does "out of solidarity" and "out of love" for each other in times of crisis and financial care for the economy. Hence, re-negotiating care through affective political masculinity aimed to create "bonds of love" within the national community. However, this sense of care was based on the sacrifices and self-responsibility of people, especially of those working in "system-relevant" (*systemrelevant*), essential professions such as public health or retail. Caring in this sense was seen as the "common sense" to self-sacrifice in order to care. Through their affective performance, the ministers acted as "carers of the nation." But while care was associated with the economy in one sense, caring tasks in the "private" sphere were considered as conditions for life that happen "naturally" in a solidaristic and morally "good" population. Caring political masculinity as rational-affective masculinity therefore rationalised the carelessness of capitalism even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. Who Cares? Conclusions

During the crisis, a re-definition of care for governing social reproduction was achieved through the discursive and performative deployment of a hybrid mode of rational-affective political masculinity. This mode of governing helped ensure the stability of neoliberal capitalist-patriarchal hegemony by re-interpreting care first and foremost as healthcare and caring for the economy or the population, i.e., biopolitics. The capitalist-patriarchal state has been characterised by careless masculinity; however, the COVID-19 pandemic forced this masculinity to become caring to remain hegemonic. Yet, this shift did not entail any significant symbolic or material redistribution to re-evaluate privatised care work by women or feminised people in directing caring capitalism. Rather, in the case of the Austrian government and social partners, a rational but also empathetic masculinity to generate consent – not only via rationalised measures to counter the pandemic (or the lack thereof

in important social realms such as care) – was viewed as “common sense.” These measures were counterbalanced through the invocation of emotions – the “private” side of politicians – like feelings of empathy, responsibility, and solidarity as well as self-representations as “carers for the nation” themselves: managing the crisis in a particular way that evoked feelings of belonging, solidarity, and responsibility to render the population more governable. While rational political masculinity communicates authority, determination, and rationality both verbally and bodily, affective political masculinity is empathetic in a paternalistic and patronising way that promises to supply the population with safety, trust, and optimism, and to regulate its conduct during the crisis. We observed that the government representatives and social partners jointly constructed a feeling of urgency to which they responded with immediate measures, many of which concerned economic stability, financial liquidity, and saving jobs. We observed actors across the political spectrum sign a *Corona pact* that prioritised businesses and wage labour, while life-serving care work was once again left to the purview of housewives, mothers, care workers, and other women or feminised persons. Traditional gender roles were consolidated in this process, as were the boundaries between “the public” and “the private.” It is this structural implicitness that this article has sought to de-naturalise by disclosing the rational-affective masculinity as the mode of governing the current crisis.

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Emma Dowling

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