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Review of Daniel Gerster, *Schulen der Männlichkeit:
Internatserziehung und bürgerliche Gesellschaft in Großbritannien und
Deutschland 1870–1930*

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DANIEL GERSTER, *Schulen der Männlichkeit: Internatserziehung und bürgerliche Gesellschaft in Großbritannien und Deutschland 1870–1930*, Hamburger Beiträge zur Sozial- und Zeitgeschichte, 64 (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2024), 573 pp. ISBN 978 3 835 35722 8. €46.00

In recent times, a deluge of media commentary has declared us in the grip of a crisis of masculinity. From alarmed reports on the rise of the ‘online manosphere’ to anecdotal diagnoses of ‘something weird’ about modern men, the narrative of crisis has been evoked to explain phenomena as varied as mental health decline, rising youth violence, and even—in one particularly notable case—US President Donald Trump’s controversial imposition of tariffs.¹ The concept of masculinity in crisis is not a product of contemporary discourse, however; it has long featured as the dominant paradigm in the academic study of men and their masculinities, ever since the field emerged in the 1980s as an extension of a gender history that had, up to that point, focused solely on women.

It is in this tradition that Daniel Gerster’s *Schulen der Männlichkeit* intervenes—a monumental 510-page comparative study of all-male boarding schools in Britain and Germany between 1870 and 1930. This book interrogates elite educational institutions as distinct sites where Protestant bourgeois masculinity was forged through institutional structures and everyday practices that tested, reproduced, and, at times, challenged broader ideals. With an eye to the contemporary resonances of his work, Gerster opens with a 2020 incident in which a teacher at Eton College posted misogynistic rants on YouTube, for which he received no formal punishment. Gerster positions his study as a ‘prehistory’ (p. 9) to such cases.

¹ Conor Lennon, ‘Online “Manosphere” is Moving Misogyny to the Mainstream’, *UN News*, 7 Mar. 2025, at [<https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/03/1160876>], accessed 12 May 2025; Christine Emba, ‘Men are Lost: Here’s a Map out of the Wilderness’, *The Washington Post*, 10 July 2023, at [<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/07/10/christine-embamasculinity-new-model/>], accessed 12 May 2025; Madeline Sherratt, ‘Fox News Pundit Believes Trump Tariffs Will Reverse “Crisis in Masculinity”’, *Independent*, at [<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/batya-ungarsargon-trump-tariffs-masculinity-b2728661.html>], accessed 12 May 2025.

Notably, the framework of crisis has increasingly come under fire from scholars who suggest that its prevalence across vastly divergent historical contexts merely proves the inherent instability of masculinity itself. More pointedly, critics have asked whose crisis we are actually conceptualizing—or, as Peter Davies aptly put it, ‘who is *allowed* to have a crisis?’—noting that these narratives tend to centre the experiences of white, heterosexual, middle-class men in Western societies.² At the same time, a study of masculinities in the political sphere has articulated the historiographical imperative to confront a ‘gender blindness’ that has long naturalized men’s gender performance in certain realms.³ This is exactly the starting point for Gerster’s contribution amidst a proliferation of ‘crisis’ narratives: his allusion to the Etonian member of the ‘manosphere’ points to the enduring tensions surrounding masculine ideals within the rarefied world of elite education. By tracing the education and socialization of boys among the Protestant bourgeoisie, Gerster directs attention to a specific milieu that, despite its visibility, has often evaded critical scrutiny or comparative analysis. His study illuminates the persistent tendency of elite men—those most invested in existing hierarchies of power—to see themselves as under threat. Their position renders them particularly sensitive to perceived shifts or challenges, making them both the agents and the subjects of masculinity’s so-called crisis, at a historical moment when it became tangible to contemporaries and was narrated as such.

Contemporary perceptions of crisis also inform Gerster’s chronology. Beginning with the *fin de siècle*—when social change driven by industrialization, emerging women’s movements, and imperial tensions provoked insecurities about middle-class male identity—the study then extends through the First World War and its aftermath, a profound rupture that deepened the perceived ‘disorder’ of gender norms within bourgeois society in both Britain and Germany.

Gerster’s focus on boarding schools represents the culmination of his academic trajectory to date. Having completed his doctorate on Catholic political cultures in Cold War West Germany, he later

² Peter Davies, ‘Introduction: “Crisis” or “Hegemony”? Approaches to Masculinity’, *Edinburgh German Yearbook*, 2 (2008), 1–19, at 4.

³ Christopher Fletcher et al. (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Masculinity and Political Culture in Europe* (London, 2018), 248.

turned to the histories of education and childhood – or *Aufwachsen* – approaching the field from both global and German-speaking perspectives. *Schulen der Männlichkeit* is the product of his habilitation, completed at the University of Hamburg in 2023.

Throughout much of the book, the famous English public school Harrow is set alongside the Prussian *Schulpforta*, housed in a former Cistercian monastery near Naumburg in Saxony-Anhalt. To capture pivotal shifts around 1900, the later chapters incorporate newly founded reform schools – Bieberstein and Salem in Germany, and Bedales in England – which aimed to attract a rising upper middle class and reshape the boarding school *Bildungswelt*. These schools provide a rich source base, enabling Gerster to integrate the perspectives of teachers, parents, pupils, and alumni to show how a broad range of actors shaped and gradually shifted the ‘hegemonic’ (p. 30) bourgeois ideal that students were expected to embody.

Structured around four main chapters, the book unfolds largely chronologically while retaining a thematic focus, with each chapter subdivided into four substantial sub-sections. Gerster opts to treat the British and German cases as parallel but largely separate narratives, allowing each context to be fully developed before bringing them into dialogue. While this yields depth and contextual richness, it often results in the British case leading and the German responding, rather than placing them in sustained dialogue. A more integrated structure that wove the two cases together across each thematic section may have illuminated their interrelations and disparities with greater clarity. At times, this structural choice also creates a sense of covering similar ground more than once, even as the insights and conclusions offer nuances. While the breadth and depth of Gerster’s research is impeccable, the sheer thoroughness and detail of certain sections – particularly the opening contextual chapter – come at a cost to readability. These are, however, minor issues in a study whose comprehensiveness and rigour are undeniable.

One of the book’s significant accomplishments is the elucidation of transnational exchange and mutual influence between British and German pedagogues – exemplified by reform pedagogues Cecil Reddie and Hermann Lietz – which had some influence on educational developments throughout the period, and ceased only with the outbreak of

war. In this way, Gerster anchors his comparative analysis in a context of cross-border transfer, showing developments in Britain and Germany to be related, rather than occurring on isolated national trajectories.

The first chapter traces the parallel development of British and German boarding schools within a broader European 'educational landscape' (p. 64), from medieval religious foundations through periods of reform and modernization. It elucidates how these schools developed along spatial, confessional, and social lines, with distinct organizational structures and social functions. Divergences were particularly pronounced in Germany, where regional and confessional differences persisted into the modern period—unlike in England, where public schools emerged within a more cohesive, nationally framed system that the newly unified German federal state lacked.

Building on this, Gerster turns to the schools' 'social relevance' (p. 73), concluding that they undoubtedly enjoyed greater significance in Britain than Germany. While this reflects a laudable commitment to situating the institutions within wider frameworks, one might question whether Gerster's analysis would have been better served by leaning wholly into the specificity of his case studies: educational institutions of cultural importance, with clear connections to power structures and a certain place in the public imagination, albeit more so in Britain than Germany.⁴ As Gerster himself outlines, these schools served as 'training grounds for a future ruling elite' (p. 66), producing intellectuals, judges, and politicians. In that sense, their significance lies less in their wider relevance or representativeness than in their symbolic weight and social function, and it is precisely this that makes them such valuable windows onto the production and enactment of hegemonic ideals of masculinity in this era.

⁴ Harrow and Eton continue to hold an important position in the British public imagination, closely tied to the enduring significance of class divisions in British society and these institutions' propensity for producing Prime Ministers. For notable examples in the extensive literature and cultural commentary, see Richard Beard, *Sad Little Men: Public Schools, Prime Ministers and Me* (London, 2021); David Turner, *The Old Boys: The Decline and Rise of the Public School* (New Haven, CT, 2015); Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, *The Public School Phenomenon, 597–1977* (London, 1977).

The comparison between these particular institutions is also well suited to Gerster's conception of 'spaces of possibility [*Möglichkeitsräume*] for male-male socialization' (p. 14), derived from Bourdieu. In both contexts, cultivating a homosocial environment for young bourgeois men was seen as essential to protect them from the perceived dangers of the opposite sex – namely, sexual temptation or maternal coddling. Homosocial education was framed as character-building, instilling the social duties and conventions required to live as Protestant men, and encouraging students to embody hegemonic ideals of morality, leadership, and resilience authentically – even as the meanings of these concepts shifted in the late 1800s. In Germany, the *Bildungsbürger* ideal was reshaped, while in Britain, a new archetype of the 'English gentleman' took form. Gerster is careful to stress the continuities too; even the new reform schools of the early 1900s, despite their efforts to distinguish themselves from older institutions, did not fundamentally rethink masculinities. Instead, they reaffirmed a familiar model: the educated man as independent, morally upright, and physically strong.

The age of heightened nationalism also left its mark, with education increasingly framed as a means of instilling national belonging – a development Gerster traces closely in his final chapters. By the early twentieth century, nationalism had permeated the boarding schools, with notable contextual differences: Harrow reflected a liberal-imperialist vision of 'Englishness', while Germany's *Land-Erziehungsheime* embraced an increasingly *völkisch* nationalism. In the lead-up to the war, the 'defender of the nation' (p. 365) emerged as a guiding masculine ideal in both; yet Gerster shows that this quickly lost its hold after 1918, despite the starkly different national outcomes. Notwithstanding the drastic upheavals of school life in 1914, when many older students and teachers left for war, a process of normalization was enacted almost immediately and with considerable success. Gerster's findings thus provide evidence against George Mosse's famous 'brutalization thesis', instead pointing to a pluralization of gender ideals, alongside the broader decline of bourgeois gender orders, which accompanied Germany's defeat, regime change, and advancement of women's emancipation.⁵

⁵ George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York, 1990).

In the retrospective accounts Gerster examines, former students portray these schools as completely isolated worlds. While Gerster uncovers their specific spatial dynamics and time regimes, his reconstruction of the local, national, and transnational contexts in which the schools were situated makes it clear that this isolation was never complete. Even Pforta, despite its secluded location, officially permitted visits to nearby villages and spa towns and unsanctioned evenings spent in local beer halls. This permeability was intertwined with industrial transformations: the expansion of the Metropolitan Line brought Harrow into Greater London, sparking fears about the moral dangers posed by students' newfound access to clubs, pubs, and brothels. The daily presence of cooks and housemaids also shaped the students' lives, while improvements in transport and communication systems led to more frequent home visits and regular correspondence between the school, pupils, and parents.

Homosociality, in this sense, underpins one of the study's key strengths: Gerster's sustained attention to the agency of the students. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's 'field of social interactions', he illustrates how students contested prevailing ideals and forged a variety of relationships within these spaces, historicizing the discrepancies and overlaps between guiding ideal and everyday practices, as well as the reciprocal relationship between behaviours and evolving masculinities. A crucial shared feature of the newer hegemonic ideals in both countries was the increased emphasis on the male body as a 'natural' site of masculinity, displacing earlier notions of masculinity as an 'affected performance' (p. 126). This manifested in greater focus on physical fitness, health, and the rise of sport: gymnastics in German schools, rugby and cricket in English ones. The bodily turn further extended to posture, self-discipline, and violence, which was a formative element of school life. Beatings were seen as necessary to effect the transformation into resilient manhood, whether through hazing rituals – such as running the gauntlet or consuming grotesque concoctions – or through formal corporal discipline, dutifully recorded in 'Punishment Books' by teachers whose authority was treated as beyond question.

Former students also recall finding solace in close friendships, whose homoerotic undertones remain ambiguous. Romantic relationships, including between teachers and students, were not unheard

of, although the prohibition of homosexuality became increasingly explicit by the late nineteenth century. Nonetheless, students' first sexual experiences often took the form of mutual masturbation, which was treated as routine and raised little alarm. These contradictions fit with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's argument that homosocial bonds can be sustained, rather than undermined, by public repudiations of homosexuality, which maintain the boundary between the acceptable and the taboo.⁶ As such, this study follows the concept of 'doing gender', showing that masculinity was not simply something possessed, but something continuously performed—an ongoing, routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interactions.⁷

Schulen der Männlichkeit shows that the crisis of masculinity was less a reflection of genuine social decline within this milieu than a construct which, embedded in broader transformations of the era, served to justify reforms, reinforce traditional archetypes, and at times uphold violent practices of elite male socialization. Moreover, the persistence of traditions and the gradual pace of change that Gerster demonstrates reveal more continuity than disruption in the ideals and practices of masculinity within these schools. Gerster's work stands as an impressive achievement: a meticulously researched and ambitiously conceived book that, despite occasional shortcomings in pacing, makes a significant intervention in the historiography of masculinity and education.

⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York, 2015), 27–30.

⁷ Regine Gildemeister, 'Doing Gender: Soziale Praktiken der Geschlechterunterscheidung', in Ruth Becker and Beate Kortendiek (eds.), *Handbuch Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung: Theorie, Methoden, Empirie* (Wiesbaden, 2008), 137–45.

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