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Coloniality of Gender and Knowledge: Rethinking Russian Masculinities in Light of Postcolonial and Decolonial Critiques

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Abstract

This article explores how the legacy of European colonialism and its role in transforming gender relations globally, shapes post-Soviet Russian masculinities. It points to historical connections between European and Russian/Soviet colonial projects, both of which relied on the notion of 'progress' in gender relations. Drawing on analysis of biographical interviews with a diverse sample of Russian men interviewed in Russia and the UK, this work identifies how the research participants use the core modern/colonial narratives to establish their individual masculinities. Shifting from a common conceptualisation of Russian masculinities as 'traditional', 'conservative' and 'macho', I show that they are instead, closely bound up with the European project of modernity/coloniality. The study advances the analysis of postcolonial masculinities and posits an agenda for decolonisation of sociological research on global masculinities.

Keywords

coloniality of gender, coloniality of knowledge, eurocentrism, masculinity, modernity, Russia

Introduction

Combining sociological research on masculinities with postcolonial theory is a fast-growing research trend (Aboim and Vasconcelos, 2021; Matlon, 2016; Mfecane, 2020). Such scholarship situates microanalysis of local or migrant masculinities within the larger historical dynamics of colonialism and postcolonialism, arguing that research on some global masculinities would be deficient if oblivious of colonial histories. The

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application of a postcolonial lens to historical and present-day masculinities has refined the analytical apparatus of a hierarchy of masculinities (hegemonic, complicit, marginalised, subordinated) (Aboim and Vasconcelos, 2021) by advancing 'our understanding of the complex range of positions between dominance and resistance that characterise postcolonial societies' (Ouzgane and Coleman, 1998: para. 7). Such research also contributes to the project of decolonising sociology (Connell, 2014, 2016; Kabesh, 2013).

However, rethinking global masculinities from postcolonial perspectives so far has mostly taken place within the geographies of West-European empires and their former colonies denoted in the literature as Global North and Global South, or First World and Third World. The present article challenges this analytical tradition by introducing contemporary Russian masculinities as formed through and within the violent history of Russian/Soviet colonialism and the European project of modernity/coloniality. Russia and other post-Soviet and post-socialist East-European countries (comprising the Second World) are structurally different from the Global North and Global South (Blagojević, 2013). Nevertheless, both of the predecessor states that dominated the region (the Russian empire 1721–1917 and the Soviet Union 1922–1991) are among the largest imperial formations in history, and there is much evidence that global coloniality is actively at work in this part of the world (Dzenovska, 2013; Krivonos and Näre, 2019).

Drawing on analysis of biographical interviews with a diverse sample of Russian men interviewed in Russia and the UK, this work identifies how the research participants use the core modern/colonial narratives to establish their individual masculinities. The study highlights the constructions of masculinity predicated on nationalist comparisons between the 'West' and the 'non-West'; and performances of masculinity that link the notions of manhood with colonial domination. It argues that it is hardly possible to understand post-Soviet Russian masculinities and the nature of masculine entitlement in Russia without attention to the 'connected histories' of colonialism (Bhambra, 2014) and persisting structures of global coloniality (Quijano, 2000a).

The study approaches masculinity as a historical and ideological process (Haraway, 1989) and understands the core modern/colonial narratives as interrelated statements about human groups and societies that cluster around notions of *civilisation*, *progress*, *development*, *advancement*, *evolution* and assert social, cultural, political and economic superiority of Europe/West over the rest of the world (Patil, 2009). These Eurocentric/western-centred hierarchies apply to semi-peripheral regions like Eastern Europe (Blagojević, 2013) and non-western (post-)imperial powers like Russia (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2012). However, as discussed below, in such spaces Eurocentrism is mediated by the local historical and contextual differences.

Building on the 'coloniality of knowledge' (Quijano, 2000a) and the 'coloniality of gender' (Lugones, 2007) frameworks, the study makes two key contributions. First, it shifts from a common conceptualisation of Russian masculinities as 'traditional', 'patriarchal' and 'macho' (Kay, 2006; Sperling, 2015; Wood, 2016) to demonstrate that they are, instead, closely bound up with the European project of modernity/coloniality. Following the scholars who call for a fully historical understanding of masculinities and rigorous contextual analysis (Blagojević, 2013; Connell, 2014), the present work brings the colonial/imperial history of Russia as well as the history of Russia's intellectual dependency on Europe/West into discussion on Russian masculinities. Second, this

article provides an empirical illustration of how gender can work as a tool of coloniality by ordering human lives and cultures into Eurocentric hierarchies. It demonstrates that the narrative of the West as the most progressive place for gender equality and sexual freedoms is one of the core modern/colonial narratives and the legacy of several centuries of European colonialism, which deeply transformed gender relations around the globe (Lugones, 2007).

Although the study was conducted several years before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, in the conclusion I reflect on how my research is relevant for understanding this war.

The Coloniality of Power, Knowledge and Gender

The necessary starting point for approaching coloniality of gender and coloniality of knowledge concepts is the framework of global coloniality itself – the system of power relations resultant of western colonial expansion, which has outlived the colonial era and spread beyond the immediate geographies of the western empires (Quijano, 2000a; Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2012). If colonialism refers to political and economic structures of domination, then coloniality is a projection and reflection of these structures in contemporary social practices, identities, beliefs, representations, images, materiality and other aspects of everyday life (Abashin, 2020).

Originally coined by Peruvian sociologist Quijano (1992), the concept of coloniality is theorised as a constitutive but silenced part of European modernity. Decolonial and postcolonial scholarship demonstrates that the rhetoric of modernity was used as a tool to justify all forms of colonialism since the early 16th century. Today non-European people continue to live under the domination of the European/Euro-American vision of modernity (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2012). The old colonial hierarchies of European/western versus non-European/non-western continue to shape the international division of labour, accumulation of capital, knowledge production as well as the very standard of 'being a human', according to which only people of European descent are afforded full humanity, while non-European people, languages, political regimes, religions, economies and legal systems are racialised as underdeveloped and therefore inferior (Mignolo, 2000; Quijano, 2000a).

According to Quijano (2000a), the concept of 'coloniality of knowledge' denotes a global structural epistemic imbalance, a system of knowledge production that privileges European/western knowledge, theories, concepts and ways of knowing over other non-western/non-European knowledge systems. The works of postcolonial feminists focusing on the Global South contexts (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988) demonstrate that as a research field, gender and sexualities studies are an integral part of a western-centred economy of knowledge. In this larger economy, Anglo-American theories of gender and sexuality, born out of historically informed analysis of local dynamics in socio-political life, have acquired the status of an unquestionable intellectual authority in the world. These theories were not only unreflexively transferred to completely different socio-political contexts, but also served as a tool of cultural imperialism by popularising the evolutionist assumption that every country will go through the same stages of development and eventually acquire levels of gender equality and sexual liberation akin to the western world (Mizielinska, 2006).

In her recent work on masculinities from a global perspective, Connell (2014: 217) wrote that the 'coloniality of knowledge has ironically made it difficult to appreciate the coloniality of masculinity'. She notes that her own work on hegemonic masculinity, written and published in Australia only gained attention and recognition after being re-published in Britain and the USA (Connell, 2014: 228). As argued by Connell, sociological research on men and masculinities has developed within the western-centred economy of knowledge production, where the idea of 'traditional' masculinity is associated with the past (and non-western regions of the world), and the notion of 'modern' masculinity is connected to the present (and white middle-class men of European descent) (Connell, 2014: 224). This logic leads to interpreting the difference between western and non-western masculinities as 'progress', celebrating a decline in 'patriarchal' patterns of non-western masculinities as a sign of 'development'.

Argentine feminist philosopher Lugones (2007) extended Quijano's formulation of the coloniality of power through introducing a 'coloniality of gender' perspective. Lugones argues that colonisation imposed European understandings of gender and sex onto the diverse pre-existing gender systems of the colonised societies, in some of which women had occupied leadership positions and owned land (Oyěwùmí, 1997). The Eurocentric concept of gender thus became another tool of coloniality; it introduced the gender binary opposition, and defined women as subordinated to men in every aspect of life. Lugones showed that the relationship between gender and race is of mutual constitution in that the imposition of race, as a cultivation of difference between Europeans and non-Europeans, worked to subordinate the colonised populations, and the imposition of gender worked to subordinate the colonised women. Despite the end of colonial administration, 'the coloniality of gender is still with us' (Lugones, 2010: 746). It continues to operate through the intersection of gender, class and racial hierarchies, through the construction of the European/western ideal of gender and sexual relations as normative and/or superior to non-European systems of gender and sexuality.

Lugones (2007: 187) demonstrates that without attention to global coloniality, scholars of gender 'keep on centering . . . [their] analysis on the patriarchy' and reproduce modernity/tradition dichotomy 'without any clear understanding of the mechanisms by which heterosexuality, capitalism, and racial classification are impossible to understand apart from each other'.

Existing research on Russian masculinities serves as an example of coloniality of knowledge and gender. It is mainly based on western theories of gender, ignores the history of Russian colonialism and interprets Russian masculinities as rooted in traditional patriarchy, violence, excessive drinking and nationalism. For instance, an extensive history of Russian/Soviet colonialism is altogether ignored in studies on histories of masculinities in Russia in favour of portraying them as traditional and patriarchal (Ashwin, 2000; Clements et al., 2002; Kay, 2006). Otherwise insightful analysis of militarist masculinities in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia by Eichler (2012), overviewing the developments of the Russian-Chechen Wars (1994–1996 and 1999–2009), does not consider the intense racialisation of North Caucasians that took place during these wars and also does not frame these events as re-colonisation of Chechnya. Even the recent works examining predominantly imperial themes in masculinity of Vladimir Putin (nationalism, militarism, male supremacy) do not account for his colonial ambitions, instead explaining his

power legitimation strategy through the concepts of 'hypermasculinity' and 'machismo' (Riabov and Riabova, 2014; Sperling, 2015; Wood, 2016). Although it is widely acknowledged that Russian/Soviet imperial expansion caused disordering of gender relations in the Caucasus and Central Asia (Edgar, 2006; Kandiyoti, 2007), consideration of the effect it had on the gender relations among the colonisers is severely limited. Coloniality of knowledge and gender hinders adequate contextual analysis of masculinities in Russia. Russia's imperial past remains analytically invisible, while empirical accounts on gender are used as intimidating reminders of the terrors of 'traditional' masculinity, which in the grand scheme of things works to reinforce the superiority of gender relations in the West.

Russia in the Context of Global Coloniality

Russia's place in the Eurocentric system of modernity/coloniality appears contradictory. Not-quite-western, not-quite-capitalist, Imperial Russia was never accepted into the 'club' of successful western empires built around capitalist accumulation (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2012). Additionally, the Soviet Union strived to create an alternative socialist modernity, which condemned western capitalist imperialism. Nevertheless, the Russian case deserves special attention. It is one of the largest imperial formations in world history, and its complex intersection of race, ethnicity, class, religion, geopolitical position and the legacy of Soviet-style emancipation of women complicates the coloniality of gender framework and provides new insights for decolonialising social sciences (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2012).

In the words of imperial Russian historian Matvei Luibavsky, 'Russian history is the history of the country that colonized ceaselessly' (1996 cited in Etkind, 2015: 167). Over centuries and multiple stages of colonisation, Russians slaughtered, displaced and absorbed a plethora of peoples inhabiting territories from the White to the Black Sea, from the Baltic to the Pacific Ocean. The common point of agreement between researchers of Russian/Soviet empire(s) is that, starting from the early 18th century, Russia adopted a practice of selective borrowing of elements of western modernity into its economy, political system and cultural life, and, thus, became tightly entangled in cultural and intellectual dependency on Europe. While some interpret this history of selective incorporation of western modernity as a sign of Russian uniqueness, hybridity and ambiguity (Oskanian, 2018), others claim that the Russian empire and the Soviet Union were mentally colonised by western culture, knowledge and epistemologies (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2012).

Gender divisions stood at the centre of both Russian and Soviet colonisation of the Caucasus and Central Asia in the 19th and 20th centuries and relied on the rhetoric of secular western modernity – bringing civilisation to traditionalist societies and emancipating women from patriarchal oppression (Tlostanova, 2019). The western colonial gender paradox (depicting colonised men as both feminised and possessing primal aggressive masculinity; the colonised women as in need of rescuing from their own men and sexually available seductresses of the white man) worked differently in imperial Russia. For instance, men from the North Caucasus were associated with violence, but were not feminised, while Central Asian women, protected by Muslim and cultural customs, were deemed as backward and ignorant, but not eroticised and did not turn into subjects of systematic sexual exploitation (Tlostanova, 2019).

Following the Russian revolutions of February and October 1917, the Bolsheviks mobilised gender by abolishing the inferior position of women under Tsarist law. The Soviet project of women's liberation through participation in the workforce was one of the central pillars of the socialist modernity, which was also rife with contradictions and paradoxes. Since the gendered division of productive and reproductive labour was not challenged by the Soviet state, and motherhood was constructed as a socialist duty, women carried a double burden of paid and unpaid work, while men were ideologically exempt from domestic responsibilities (Ashwin, 2000). Soviet rhetoric reproduced the distinction between different kinds of Soviet women along ethnic/racial lines, contrasting 'backward' Muslim Central Asian women with 'progressive' Russian/Slavic women (Behzadi and Direnberger, 2020). Thus, the Soviet gender modernisation project both empowered women (through education, work and political representation) and reconstructed neotraditional, colonial gender relations.

According to Tlostanova (2010), the Soviet project of women's emancipation had complicated the contemporary gendered opposition of modernity/tradition by turning it into a tripartite scheme of traditional (subjugated) – Soviet (half-emancipated) – western (fully emancipated) ideal of gender relations. Tlostanova and Mignolo (2012: 53) conceptualise this tripartite scheme as the 'mutant' 'yet decidedly Western' form of modern/colonial gender discourses. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and demise of socialist modernity, 'global coloniality started to affect the post-Soviet space directly' (Tlostanova, 2019: 135). In the sphere of gender, however, there was a delay. In the first post-Soviet decade, the idea of gender equality was associated with the Soviet past and widely discredited. The prominent interpretation was that the Soviet state had 'masculinised' women by granting them financial independence and access to masculine occupations and 'emasculated' men by reducing their authority in the family. The bourgeois ideal of gender relations with a man breadwinner and a woman returning to the private sphere becomes prominent in the 1990s (Gapova, 2002).

The evolving gender order in Russia in the 2000s and 2010s is characterised by tension and diversification. While Putin's political regime relies on refuting western political projects of gender equality and non-discrimination of LGBTQ rights, western discourses of gender equality as an indicator of modernity and progress firmly took ground on Russian soil. In the public, media and legal spheres, there is a growing number of women-led initiatives promoting gender equality, which meet a neoconservative, anti-feminist backlash (Andreevskikh and Muravyeva, 2021). This backlash has a seemingly strong nationalist flavour but in essence stems from western anti-feminist arguments (Essig and Kondakov, 2019). Thus, post-Soviet Russia finds itself in a vortex of imitation and rejection reactions to the West, fascination and rebellion against its civilisational 'superiority' (Blagojević, 2013: 179).

The Study

The research findings discussed below derive from a larger study of post-Soviet Russian masculinities, which aimed to explore how masculinity is defined, experienced and negotiated by Russian men living in Russia and those who at some point of their lives moved out of Russia, to a western country with a different past and present construction

of gender. The leading research questions were: is there such a thing as Russian masculinity? Does immigration and a new social and legal environment change Russian men's ideas about masculinity? Formal ethical approval was gained from the University of Manchester. Empirical research followed the university's ethical procedures and was based on life-story interviews with 40 research participants accompanied by a set of questions about masculinity and femininity. Twenty participants were interviewed in Russia (Samara and Ulianovsk) and another 20 in 10 non-capital UK cities. The rationale behind the 20/20 split was to get sufficient and comparable data for examining key ideas about masculinity. Self-identification as a Russian man and heterogeneity of the sample were the main recruitment criteria. I interviewed people who were as diverse as possible in terms of age (ranging from 18 to 66), socio-economic class, occupation, education and family status. The core research assumption was that while all men are different, from the point at which they attempt to signify and 'do' a credible masculine self, their behaviour will be patterned (Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2002). All interviews were gathered during 2013–2014 in public venues, conducted in Russian and voice recorded with participant permission. They ranged from two to five hours and in most cases spanned more than one session. Although the state-sponsored homophobia in Russia may have deterred respondents from speaking openly, the data contains multiple accounts promoting and critiquing homophobia.

This research project was not originally designed to focus on the core modern/colonial narratives and/or analyse Russian masculinities as postcolonial. This theme emerged as part of the inductive and deductive coding process that I undertook during the thematic analysis of the interview data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The first round of thematic coding highlighted the most prominent reference points in masculinity construction (e.g. military service, fatherhood, professional achievements). Reading the interview transcripts, I noted that while talking about masculinity and gender relations, the interviewees abundantly relied on the idea of white supremacy, Islamophobia, engaged in racialisation of migration and used the Eurocentric concept of 'civilisational progress' to build national hierarchies. Many vivid and emotional reflections came in response to the question: 'Do you think ideas about what it means to be a man and a woman are different in other countries?' In many instances, however, the respondents raised these issues themselves without being prompted. Following this realisation, I re-read all interview transcripts through the lenses of postcolonial studies and decoloniality (Bhambra, 2014; Mignolo, 2000; Quijano, 2000a) to identify all interview extracts that feature references to Russian/Soviet empires, the European project of modernity/coloniality and the core modern/colonial narratives. The next step involved a back-and-forth iterative reading of transcripts and theory. The coloniality of gender framework (Lugones, 2007) and the literature on postcolonial masculinities (Connell, 2016; Kabesh, 2013) were particularly useful in interpreting the empirical findings. The discussion of findings is organised around two key themes: the constructions of masculinity predicated on nationalist comparisons between the West and the non-West; and performances of masculinity that directly link the notions of manhood with colonial domination. For direct quotes used below, I indicated in brackets whether a respondent was interviewed in Russia or the UK. Pseudonyms are used throughout to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

Eurocentric Russian Masculinities

Participants in this study used the core modern/colonial narratives and specifically the language of 'civilisational development' while reflecting on different configurations of gender relations and what it means to be a man. The examples below show that gender plays a vital role in differentiating between 'backward' societies and 'civilisation', a stage of development, which supposedly only the western countries have progressed to. Interestingly, the interviewees always positioned Russia as being somewhere in between the 'civilised' West and the 'less civilised' contexts. Anton's (UK) quote is a typical example of this trend:

> In contemporary society, masculine and feminine characteristics have intermingled with each other. Everything is so mixed up nowadays, to the extent that any particular [gender] scheme just doesn't exist anymore. In Russia it does, though. And in the Arab world it exists to an even greater degree. It depends on the level of development of society. The more developed a society is, the more freedoms this society enjoys. Unfortunately, in this sense Russia is far behind, let's say, Western Europe, the States, Australia. But at the same time, the Arab countries, they are even more behind than Russia. It will come to Russia, too. Everything comes later to us. Russia is just a country which lags behind. Well, give it another 30–40 years or so.

Anton used different countries' 'achievements' in gender equality to measure their societal development. While Western Europe, the USA and Australia are imagined as modern spaces where people enjoy individual freedoms, the Arab and/or Muslim world is portrayed as lagging behind in terms of development. This lack of development, in Anton's view, manifests itself in adhering to 'male and female characteristics'. Notably, Russia is portrayed as backward too, but, first, not as backward as the 'Arab world' and, second, already on a trajectory whereby it will catch up with the West. As argued by Tlostanova (2010), socialist modernity has turned the Eurocentric gendered opposition of modernity/tradition into a tripartite scheme of traditional–Russian/Soviet–western. As Anton's quote demonstrates, this tripartite scheme persists in the post-Soviet subjects' imagination.

Valery (Russia) reproduced a similar hierarchy positioning 'mass consciousness' in Russia as in-between 'developed' 'white' Europe and 'non-white' Africa. Notably, the figure of a 'European man', to which many respondents referred to, was specified by Valery to be white. Through a blatantly racist statement, he makes it clear that migrants are excluded from whiteness and acknowledges Russian cultural inferiority vis-a-vis the West:

> Our [Russian] people and our mass consciousness are much younger than European culture . . . We can't compare with Europe, which is 500 years, 600 years older than us in cultural development. When our Peter the Great only introduced a beard tax, they were already having the French Revolution. However, talking about their [cultural] level of consciousness, I only mean the white Europe, not all those intruders who came to Europe from Africa for an easy life. White people in Europe they of course think completely differently.

The research participants stressed that the West is the source and transmitter of civilisational development. Praising the relatively new practices of self-care among Russian

men (using aftershave and moisturising, regular exercise and healthy eating), Danil (Russia) noted that 'everything comes from the West, from a more advanced civilisation'. He further explained that due to western influence contemporary Russian men are becoming more 'sensitive and compassionate', which according to him, was a progressive step towards western masculinity.

Piotr (Russia) interpreted a high level of homophobia in Russia and the infamous anti-LGBT law passed in 2013, as clear signs of Russian 'backwardness'. He said: 'I only want our people to become more modern, to stop living in the past.' He added: 'I always try to take a cue from Europe . . . live according to European standards.' To my question about what makes a man a man, he replied:

> [I believe it is] politeness towards the opposite sex. For me it's one of the main indicators. In my personal opinion, 60–70% of our Russian foreigners, I mean visitors, well, *churki*,[1] pardon my language, they don't have it. That's why they can't be masculine in principle. They don't know how to communicate properly. For me, a man first and foremost is a gentleman.

While Piotr's intention to present himself as a European man is pronounced and linked to the ideal of gentleman masculinity, this striving to appear as a 'European' or 'more European than' Arabs, Africans or men from the non-Slavic post-Soviet states was present in most interviews. This is itself a remarkable finding considering a prevailing tradition to juxtapose Russia to the West and conceptualise Russian masculinities as 'traditional' and 'conservative'. For Piotr, gentleman masculinity is not only a sign of belonging to refined social classes, but also a criterion of belonging to humanity. In line with the coloniality of gender framework, Piotr asserts his civilisational superiority over non-Slavic migrants in Russia who are deprived of gender ('they can't be masculine in principle').

Rejection and stigmatisation of non-western ways of being a man was also expressed through disapproval of a subjugated position of non-western (particularly Muslim) women. Within the modern/colonial gender system, the status of women commonly serves as an indicator of progress (Forth, 2008; Lugones, 2007). With a reference to the western cultural construct of 'human rights', Vadim (Russia) explained that he felt specifically disturbed by how Muslim men treat 'their' women:

> I don't know much about it, but I did come across our Muslims from Central Asia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, [Northern] Caucasus republics. Women are not allowed to make decisions. In some Arab countries, a woman is not allowed to do anything; she can't drive or go out without a man. In my opinion, this is a violation of human rights.

Alex (UK) made a similar claim:

> I feel comfortable in any developed western country. I adapt very easily, without problems. If it is a developing country, I have some problems, because their moral principles don't match with mine. I suppose I couldn't live in an eastern country, because I'm against their ideas about women.

Although the 'Muslim' and/or 'Arab world' (terms used interchangeably by the research participants) was invariably depicted as a backward realm of cruel men and

oppressed women, the western ideals of women's emancipation and gender egalitarianism were not always fully embraced by the participants. For instance, Boris (Russia), who was particularly vocal in rejecting the 'Muslim' model of gender relations as 'backward' and based on religious fundamentalism, was also critical of 'civilised' European masculinity. He explained that European civilisation forced local men to repress their primal aggression and made them 'considerate', 'polite' and 'soft'. According to Boris, this is a positive development and a reason why Europe is such a 'pleasant place to visit'. Nevertheless, he was quick to add that Europe 'went too far' in its gender egalitarianism, bringing forward the example of Iceland:

> Now, thanks to the achievements of civilisation, women have absolute rights. For example, Iceland in principle is already a matriarchy. Many women [there] just don't get married. They have children and don't even try to get married. That's what I saw on TV anyway, such an excessive feminisation, in my opinion . . . As for Iceland, I think they went too far. What does the Iceland's case tell us? It tells that men in the West don't feel very well. In my understanding, they are losing their male functions of a breadwinner and defender . . . Europeans, in essence their women have taken full control and responsibility over themselves. The state supports them and they just don't see a point in cohabiting with a man. They're just not interested in him as a man.

Boris's negative portrayal of both 'European' men and 'Muslim' men signals that he views gender arrangements in Russia as an optimal compromise between the demands of contemporary civilisation and time-honoured masculine functions of providing and defending. Through depicting the 'Muslim world' and 'European world' as fixed, defective and deviating from reasonable arrangements in gender relations, he creates space for composing his own identity. His masculine identity is constructed in objection to imaginary identities of 'European' men as feminised and losing control over 'their' women, on the one hand, and Muslim men 'muddled' by ignorance, lack of education and religious fundamentalism, on the other. Such a masculinity construction technique reflects what Forth (2008: 5) calls the 'double logic of modern civilisation'. On the one hand, civilisation promotes the interests of white European men as superior to all other groups of people, but, on the other, threatens to undermine the very foundations of the male privilege – their domination of women. Therefore, while most research participants expressed aspirational identification with 'civilised' western masculinities (Krivonos and Näre, 2019), some believed that the lack of alertness to the effeminising effects of civilisation can lead to the end of manhood.

In summary, the above narratives demonstrate that gender can work as a mechanism of modern/colonial power by ordering human lives, bodies, cultures, sexualities, migration experiences into hierarchical structures. Contrary to the habitual representation of Russian masculinities as 'traditional', 'patriarchal' and antithetical to the western ideal of 'progressive' masculinity, my interview data reveals a strong pattern of Eurocentric attitudes and performances of masculinity. These performances relied on the core modern/colonial narratives and allowed the research participants to elevate themselves above the 'non-European' and particularly 'Muslim' men. These performances also revealed a deep sense of inferiority in relation to the West and western men.

While the Eurocentric constructions of 'progressive' and 'regressive' masculinities worked very similarly among immigrant and non-immigrant men, references to the colonial past and performances of colonial masculinities mostly took place among the participants interviewed in Russia. This could be explained by the fact that as a group, immigrant men in my study were more privileged, educated and had a first-hand experience of life in the UK, where critique of British colonialism is more commonplace than in Russia.

Colonial Russian Masculinities

According to Connell (2016: 306), '[t]he masculinities of empire were necessarily bound up with the enabling of violence – violence sufficient to overcome the considerable military capabilities of colonized societies'. Masculinities of the colonisers adjusted to the need to dominate the colonised people and be violent against the racialised others in the name of civilisational progress. This continues to proliferate in contemporary states with pronounced neo-imperial ambitions, as shown by Ehrenreich's (2005) analysis of how the American invasion of Iraq influenced national masculinities in the USA. Performances of masculinity that linked the notions of manhood with colonial domination were widely present among the men I interviewed in Russia. My data shows that colonial manifestations of masculinity can be constructed along different axes, such as employing the rhetoric of civilisational progress for justifying killing, regrets about the end of empires and the loss of greatness, and equating manhood with capitalist expansion. Due to the space constraints, I illustrate each of these themes with one example from my data.

Violent Coloniser Performance

Kirill (Russia) was particularly vocal in expressing Islamophobic and racist views of non-whites and 'Muslims' who migrated to post-Soviet Russia and Europe. He called them 'uncivilised', 'fanatically religious', 'imprisoned within traditional gender paradigm' and suggested executions and closed borders as a solution:

> I think the objective reality is that there are some nations which you can't change, can't do anything about. Some representatives of these nations go to university and become different people, they rise up above their tribal lifestyle; but the rest of them, even those who are living in France, find nothing better to do to their women than cut their clitoris. What can you do about them? It can't be remedied. If a person does this operation on a six-year-old girl with a kitchen knife in Paris, well, what then? I think the only solution is to have his head cut off, that's it . . . I think it's easier to kill people who behave like beasts than to reform and re-educate them. I see that all this 'regress' [backward people] from Tashkent or Dushanbe, they are all coming here. And those who are coming aren't people with PhDs, so to speak. So, I don't approve of all this. I think it's necessary to put up barriers. Slavic – or to be more precise, Russian – people didn't manage to civilise these nations in 70 years of Soviet rule, so now it's necessary to fence ourselves off from them.

In quick succession, Kirill recites the core colonial narratives. First, he portrays civilisation as something that white (Slavic/Russian) European people carry to non-white,

non-European people. Second, he invokes the narrative of ‘irreformable others’, who refuse or simply are unable to be civilised and, thus, in Kirill’s words either need to be killed or fenced off. Third, he reproduces the narrative of anti-migrant Islamophobia. Importantly, it is the narrative of ‘a white saviour’ of Muslim women from Muslim men that links all the threads together and is supposed to justify violence (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Whereas in the western contexts such overt manifestations of racism and anti-Muslim bigotry are no longer seen as legitimate, in Russia there are far fewer constraints on what can be said publicly without provoking negative reactions, which is a legacy of racial exceptionalism in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia (Yusupova, 2021).

Kirill’s defence of women’s rights and an appeal to stop female genital mutilation falls neatly in line with Farris’s (2017: 4) definition of femonationalism, an ideology that combines ‘the attempts of western European right-wing parties and neoliberals to advance xenophobic and racist politics through the touting of gender equality’ with ‘current framing of Islam as a quintessentially misogynistic religion and culture’. Furthermore, the white saviour narrative both works as a justification of racism and colonial violence and reinforces the status of men as superior to women, by portraying the latter as in need of salvation (Young, 2003). Kirill’s strong sense of entitlement to control the racialised others’ lives and deaths, women’s rights and bodies, national borders and migration flows should be understood as a lasting legacy of the colonial past and reproduction of global coloniality.

Post-Soviet Nostalgia for the Russian/Soviet Empire(s)

Open celebration of colonial conquest is another common trope for masculinity construction and a distinctive feature in the post-Soviet Russian context, where the violent history of Russian/Soviet colonialism was never officially challenged or condemned. None of my research participants used the idea of colonialism in a critical way. Indeed, they often openly admired the heroism of those who undertook the colonial expansion. When I asked Nikita (Russia) if he thinks that ideas about being a man were different in other countries, he got very emotional:

> I’d like to say something about Russia, about our territory. I have some hard feelings about what’s going on here, that we’re gradually leaving our lands. And I’m asking, who had conquered this territory? Who gave up their lives for it? Who honed their skills in fist fights? Who built this country? These were Russian men.[2] I have a great respect for them. If Russians hadn’t conquered this territory in the past, today we would have been far aside from the territories rich in oil, gas and all other resources.

Nikita expressed deep regrets about the dissolution of the Soviet Union and took the weakening of Russian hegemony over the ex-Soviet territories as a personal humiliation and emasculating experience. He also linked an idea of being a Russian man to the notions of territorial expansion and resistance to imperial ambitions of the West:

> Like a plane at good speed, we [the Soviet Union] were shot down by [western] conspiracy and look what happened to us! It’s degradation, demoralisation and a whole generation of infantile men. Well, some [men] live by these American and English ideals and think that they are

> different . . . They're constantly showing us what they've achieved there across the ocean, but they achieved that not because of democracy, but because no one invaded their territories and levied war upon them.

Nikita views colonial conquest as a crucial arena for assertion of national masculinity and clearly deems the colonised as emasculated. Scholars have previously noted that a dramatic decline in living standards after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the loss of superpower status and dependence on financial aid from international organisations in the 1990s came to be perceived by Russians as a humiliation and demasculinisation (Riabov and Riabova, 2014). Notably, Nikita understands colonisation not only as territorial occupation and economic exploitation, but also as a process, which can take place in the spheres of culture and knowledge. He links the current hegemony of 'American and English ideals' with infantilisation of the new post-Soviet generation of Russian men. Lamenting the loss of Russian/Soviet empire with its vast territories, is thus inextricably linked with lamenting the loss of imperial/colonial masculinity, which in the narratives of my research participants continues to serve as a national value and personal aspiration.

Masculinity and Capitalist Expansion

During the interview, Ivan (Russia) gave a lengthy and passionate speech about the suppression of capitalist development in Russian and Soviet history. He linked masculinity with entrepreneurship, financial risk taking and capitalist expansion, and explained that the abolition of serfdom in Russia in 1861 happened 'too late' and, thus, impeded development of capitalist competition among 'naturally entrepreneurial men'. He used the same point about suppressed entrepreneurial spirit of Russian men and a subsequent lack of capitalist development to explain Russia's historically second-rate status in the world order. Ivan saw the absence of private property in the Soviet Union as the primary reason for the emasculation of Russian men in the 20th century and a large-scale lack of self-realisation among them today. Referring to the last 150 years of Russian history, he said:

> The bravest, the most determined, ambitious and enterprising men, men full of testosterone, had constantly had their hands cut off [in this country] . . . *Raskulachivanie*[3] fell onto the most successful peasants . . . and then came the Soviet Union, where there was no private property at all. The enterprising men always got punished here, either through the state actions or through the lack of possibilities for self-realisation.

He added: 'the [capitalist] model that exists in the developed western countries, I'd call it fair. If you have a capacity, ambitions and entrepreneurial spirit, you can be active as a man'. According to Quijano (2000b: 343), modernity emerged as 'the fusing of the experiences of colonialism and coloniality with the necessities of capitalism, creating a specific universe of intersubjective relations of domination under a Eurocentered hegemony'. The needs of capitalism were the driving forces of the European colonial project and, as Connell (2014: 225) suggests: 'the creation of a worldwide capitalist economy became a continuing basis of masculinity formation'.

Ivan understands masculinity as determined by entrepreneurial spirit, capitalist competition and financial success. He sees Russia's historical lack of capitalist freedoms as a missed opportunity for development of a full-blown imperial greatness and strong national masculinity, which aligns with Tlostanova's (2010) theorisation of Russian/Soviet empire(s) as a subaltern empire with a deep inferiority complex vis-a-vis the West. Through establishing a link between capitalism, imperialism and masculinity, Ivan explains a lack of self-realisation among Russian men today. In his view, a cumulative effect of systematic prevention of 'naturally entrepreneurial men' in Russia from realising their capitalist aspirations compromised national masculinity in the long-term perspective. According to Ivan, the only way of reviving Russian men's dignity as men is to foster their entrepreneurial capitalist spirit.

In summary, the above quotes point towards the connected histories (Bhambra, 2014) of European and Russian/Soviet colonial domination, violence and capitalist exploitation as a vital terrain for masculinity construction among the research participants.

Conclusion

While research on postcolonial masculinities does not include Russia within the sphere of its interests, this article demonstrates that post-Soviet Russian masculinities are articulated in explicitly modern/colonial terms. Both immigrant and non-immigrant participants mobilise ideas about gender equality (as a current standard of European modernity) to accomplish their masculinities. They respond to Eurocentric hierarchies in a dialectical manner: on the one hand, asserting aspirational belonging to Europe/West (Krivonos and Näre, 2019) and rejecting Arab/Muslim ways of being a man; on the other, undermining 'soft' western masculinities and revoking the history of Russian imperialism as a source of masculine pride. Such narratives reinforce the Eurocentric worldview, position Russia as a secondary European country and stigmatise 'non-European' masculinities as 'backward' and 'uncivilised'. Therefore, the research participants do not challenge global coloniality but realise its norms through means available to them (Matlon, 2016).

The present study shows that Russian masculinities are not just relationally constructed against imagined 'western' and 'non-western' ways of being a man, but directly draw on the narratives and histories of colonial domination. The mainstream portrayals of Russian masculinities as 'traditional' and 'patriarchal' emphasise Russia's otherness, overlook its imperial past and present, and allow 'generalizations in which "the West", however defined, explicitly and . . . implicitly, still figures as a norm' (Blagojević, 2013: 165). This article interprets the continuing application of modernity/tradition dichotomy and Eurocentric theorising in masculinities studies as an effect of coloniality of knowledge and gender.

These insights posit an agenda for sociological research on global masculinities. The decolonising effort is needed within the field through challenging the western-centred economy of knowledge production and recognising the formative role of colonialism in the constitution of gender (Connell, 2016). Furthermore, the application of postcolonial and decolonial lenses in sociological research on global masculinities can be extended beyond the usual focus on the geographies of West-European empires. As argued by Kabesh (2013: 26): 'all masculinities (whether they inhabit a history of colonised and

coloniser) are formed through and within postcolonial conditions'. Any masculinities constructed around a worldview that believes the absolute superiority of the West over the Rest are shaped by colonialism, racism, class hegemony and other intersecting forms of oppression.

I was at the final stage of editing this article when Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As most people with strong connections to the region, I spent the following weeks reading the news and all available analytics, witnessing how the early explanations that personally blamed Vladimir Putin for initiating this war gradually gave way to a more nuanced analysis of Russian imperialism. Indeed, as my study and the interviews conducted in 2013–2014 show, to understand Russia's war in Ukraine you have to look beyond President Putin and other prominent individuals giving military commands, beyond the geopolitical and economic factors in play. Russia's powerful imperial ambitions and identity, masculinised culture and politics, and a long-term inferiority complex vis-a-vis the West is an explosive mixture, which detonated in February 2022. Our only chance to prevent such imperial violence in the future is to critically rethink imperial/colonial pasts and presents. Decolonising the social sciences has paramount importance in this process.

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Notes

1. *Churki* is a derogatory and racist term used to refer to ethnically non-Slavic people from ex-Soviet territories.
2. Nikita says '*russkie muzhiki*', which specifically refers to ethnic Russians.
3. A Soviet campaign of political repression (1929–1932) against the millions of peasants perceived to be more prosperous, with the aim of expropriating farmland and destroying the 'Kulak' social class.

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