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CARING MEN AND MASCULINITIES ON THE BALKAN SEMIPERIPHERY: TRANSFORMATION THROUGH HYBRIDISATION AND CONTRADICTIONS

Abstract. *The paper's theoretical framework is situated at the intersection of critical studies on men and masculinities with the theory of semiperipheriality. It analyses major trends in the transformation of gender regimes, including fatherhood, from the end of the 1980s until today. The analysis shows there is no simple unilinear development in the trend of men's growing engagement in caring. Instead, the emancipatory effects of care are becoming quite ambiguous for both genders since progressive social change has been taken over by a process of de-development of the semiperiphery within the larger landscape of neoliberal globalisation. To capture the change, the author introduces the novel concept of male hegemony built on opportune hybridity.*
Keywords: *men, hegemonic masculinities, care, Balkans, semiperiphery, fatherhood*

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present a wider theoretical framework for understanding the processes entailed in the complex transformation of men and masculinities in the contemporary Balkans, especially with regard to their practices and discourses related to care. The theoretical framework is situated at the intersection of masculinity studies (Connell, 1995: 71; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005 : 833, 853) and critical studies on men and masculinities (Hearn, 1997; 2004; 2019) along with the theory of semiperipheriality (Hughson, 2015). It is used to describe and explain major trends in the transformation of gender regimes, including fatherhood, in the Balkans from the end of the 1980s until today. Over the period of three decades, change has not been simple, one-dimensional and unilinear, and the social expectations at the start and end of this period may be seen as somewhat asymmetrical. While 30 years ago, the inclusion of men into caring was seen as a 'normal' step in achieving equality between women and

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men within the overall progressive change (as defined by researchers and policymakers in socialism), at the end of this period care is becoming appropriated as a 'tool' for changing men to better adapt them to the neoliberal conditions of life, including the change of their subjectivities and identities. There is a deep and structural change in the contexts for caring on the semiperiphery in terms of practices, discourses, identities, agencies, emotions, commitments, subjectivities, as well as institutions, communities and everyday life strategies. The emancipatory effects of care are becoming quite ambiguous for both genders since gradual social change has been taken over by a process of *de-development of the Balkan semiperiphery* within the larger landscape of neoliberal globalisation in the form of corporate-driven neocolonialisation.

To capture the change in its essence while acknowledging the prevailing commonality in the form of the dominant power structure, I introduce the novel concept of *male hegemony built on opportune hybridity.* I also try to identify the most important contradictions fuelling or hindering the transformation of care as an emancipatory gendered practice and discourse, as well as the progressive transformation of genders through and by caring. In fact, transformation is taking place through and accompanied by contradictions largely driven and fuelled by the global and transnational processes the semiperiphery of the Balkans is exposed to. It is materialised in hybrid forms, with hybrid practices, strategies and ideological constellations, rather than in simple models of gender equality oriented 'caring masculinities' (Elliot, 2016: 252, 253). However, while those changes seem diversified and ambiguous on the micro level, they correspond well to the macro changes to the political, economic and social structures of the neoliberal global order. The speed of the general change coupled with the still present social memory of socialism mean that it is vividly experienced on the semiperiphery. The change results in an often contradictory and confused search for a new gender identity for men that is able to embrace caring as a relevant part of their humanness.

Theoretical Framework: Researching Men and Masculinities on the Semiperiphery

Understanding of the general trends in changes in 'caring masculinities', but also the contradictions that arise during that process, can benefit from bringing together studies on hegemonic masculinities, critical studies of men and masculinities and the *theory of semiperipheriality* (Hughson, 2015). The semiperiphery perspective embodied in the theory of semiperipheriality is not simply a descriptor (in terms of physical location) but an epistemic tool that enables the global and transnational to connected,

via regional and contextual, with the micro level of social change, in this instance, change experienced by individual men. Accordingly, on an aggregate level, the change experienced by individual men also leads to a change in hegemonic masculinities.

In this text, the semiperiphery perspective is used to account for the macro-structural forces at play in societies on the periphery of Europe that are former socialist countries. The key underlying question is whether positive quantifiable changes in men's behaviour in terms of stronger engagement in caring and a general increase in positive attitudes is actually in line with the goal of higher level of gender equality or is, to some degree at least, a new way of empowering men that adds to their already established *patriarchal privilege* (Connell, 2002: 142, 143).

More concretely, I take a semiperiphery perspective by insisting on contextual analyses to help interpret research data by linking different theoretical streams with the living realities of the societies that live in those areas. In practical terms, this means there is a gradual 'back and forth' process, from theory to the social reality and back to theory again, often triggered by observation and experience, as well as empirical data that leads to the articulation of context-sensitive knowledge. This approach allows the introduction of new theoretical concepts and innovative ideas encapsulated in grounded theories.

The transformation of men and masculinities on the Balkan semiperiphery is seen here as being closely connected to the changes occurring to gender regimes during the 'transition' to 'democracy' and a 'market economy'. Locating men and masculinities within the wider social context is in line with the necessary de-essentialisation of men and masculinities, yet also closely connected to the critique required of male hegemony and patriarchal relations within the wider framework of oppressive power relations: capitalist, imperialist, colonial, neo-colonial (Hearn, 2019; Walker and Roberts, 2018; Cornwall, Karioris and Lindisfarne, 2016). It is through the contexts of the semiperiphery that global and transnational forces are influencing men and masculinities (Blagojević, 2013a), but it is also in these contexts, through their dominant gender regimes, that local patriarchies shape hegemonic masculinities and provide culture-specific responses, including the acceptance/resistance to hegemonic models of masculinities.

The contextual analysis I apply here builds on my previous work on the semiperiphery. A major structural characteristic of the semiperiphery is that it is constructed, from within and without, as an entity that is 'lagging behind' and 'catching up' with the core (Hughson, 2015). 'Catching up', as a deliberate political and developmental choice of the countries on the semiperiphery, has profoundly shaped their gender orders: for this goal to be achieved, *women's resources have been extensively and intensively used in*

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both the private and public spheres. Seen in this light, the official egalitarian ideology during the socialist era may be interpreted as having been highly instrumental in mobilising women's resources. This is the background to women's high levels of access to education and employment during socialism. Another key characteristic of the (contemporary) semiperiphery is the process of *de-development*, which is qualitatively different from the absence or slow pace of development. De-development is a deep structural change that in economic terms is related to the *depreciation of human, institutional and infrastructural capital* (Meurs and Ranasinghe, 2003: 32), yet it also has extensive social side-effects, including high and structural unemployment, together with the obvious erosion of workers' rights and shrinking of the middle, professional class found on the semiperiphery. The overall framework of the depreciation of human capital has led to the 'surplus of humans' phenomenon, namely, a surplus of both women and men, especially those belonging to the rapidly growing underclass (the uneducated, rural, old, or even the urban, educated, but unemployed labour force) (Hughson, 2015).

These structural aspects of the semiperiphery, as well as many others I have discussed elsewhere, have profoundly shaped gender regimes, which also includes the men and masculinities operating within those regimes, along with their practices and discourses on caring, engaged in privately and publicly. While in this paper I emphasise structural changes occurring in the semiperiphery, I fully acknowledge there are also very relevant contextual differences within the EU when it comes to men, masculinities and caring practices (Scambor et al., 2012). However, I claim the semiperiphery approach has its own epistemic validity and reasoning.

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Methodology: A Critical Re-reading of Empirical Research Projects

The theoretical framework presented here is based on a number of empirical research projects which I have conducted in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, starting from 1989 through to 2018 (Blagojević, 1993, 1993a, 1997, 2004, 2008, 2012; Blagojević Hughson, 2013; Hughson, 2018).

What clearly connects those different empirical research projects, and constitutes their important commonality, is that empirical findings have distinct features that often do not fit easily with the parallel developments seen in the 'core' (First World). This analysis accordingly offers some kind of explanation of those 'deviations from the norm', 'twists' or 'inversions' associated with the gender regimes found on the semiperiphery, while at the same time taking account of the similarities of gender regimes of the core and semiperiphery that are due to the convergence and structural similarities of industrial and post-industrial societies (capitalist and socialist), with a

(more or less) institutionally, normatively and ideologically developed welfare state.

To enable theoretical conclusions to be drawn from comparisons of different research projects, made in different historical periods, with different methodologies and foci, covering different territories, related to different cultural end economic local contexts, with different explicit and implicit theoretical assumptions, I engage in a critical re-reading of their results from the perspective of the present level of development of critical studies of men and masculinities. It is not only that the contexts have been changing, but what is known about men and masculinities has also changed dramatically in the last three decades (Hearn, 2019) on the international and regional levels. Moreover, no less importantly, the epistemic practices and ideologies of the core have been heavily criticised in the wave of de-colonisation of the knowledge projects via multiple voices coming from different parts of the world and different colonisation experiences, and thus the critical re-reading undertaken in this paper also considers these emerging epistemic practices.

In a strict sense, 'critical' here operates on two levels: as a critical re-reading of the empirical research through the lenses of critical studies on men and masculinities and the decolonisation critique of knowledge, as well as via a critical re-reading of the change in the social contexts that triggered the changes in the gender regimes and practices of caring.

My re-visiting and re-reading of those research projects is a necessary outcome of this present 'time/context/epistemic perspective'. To more clearly argue my case for the relevance of contextual and structural analysis, I have constructed a periodisation containing three time segments: socialism, 'transition' and neoliberal-globalisation, within which I briefly discuss caring masculinities and their structural backgrounds.

Regarding my own positioning, I am writing this analysis as a critically oriented women's studies/gender scholar living on the Balkan semiperiphery, and, of equal relevance, originating from former Yugoslavia.

Conceptual Framework: Men, Masculinities, Gender Regimes

In this paper, I employ the concepts of both 'men' and 'masculinities' since they do not overlap and their difference establishes an important pillar for this analysis. Men are not only a biological and social category, but also a category of power in patriarchy, and are at the receiving end of the flow of patriarchal privileges (Connell, 2002: 141) even if individually they may try to abolish or minimise negative effects of the patriarchal system of power. A critical approach is needed not only for 'masculinities' as an abstract concept (which is also a social construct), but also for actual men because men

constitute a social category of power (Hearn, 2019: 54). In radical yet realistic terms, the theory, the concepts, the policies, even the critique of men, are all in a vicious circle of the patriarchal imaginary of hierarchies, exclusions, values, and 'rights' and 'wrongs'.

Still, it is important to link men and masculinities since the individual changes experienced by men as social agents change masculinities as social constructs. The term "hegemonic masculinity" is broadly accepted, discussed and criticised in the transnational community of men and masculinity scholars (Connell and Mescerschimt, 2005) along with the concepts of 'gender roles', 'gender' and 'identity', which all have a limited value depending on the purpose/context of research and analysis. However, I would like to stress that the use of concepts strongly depends on the publics in a certain context. The dynamics of both social change, in this case a change in men and masculinities, and the dynamic of the theories which seek to address that change, are both highly context-sensitive. Therefore, while a social scientist and a gender scholar from the semiperiphery must be informed of the latest theoretical developments occurring in the core, they also need to make an extra effort to include the contextual perspective in the interpretation so as to enrich the transnational pool of knowledge about a given social phenomenon, saving that knowledge from the danger of the extreme or false universalism that often dominates core-centred social science. In the specific sense of men, masculinity and care, the semiperiphery approach questions the dominant 'universal emancipatory' criteria for 'good fatherhood' that come out from the core as the most visible area of men's caring, by acknowledging the relevance of the social realities of societies that exist on the semiperiphery.

The underlying assumption here is that the dominant gender regimes seen on the semiperiphery shape both hegemonic masculinities, the behaviour and attitudes of actual men, as well as real practices, discourses on care and the role played by care in transforming men and masculinities. Gender regimes are relatively stable social constellations largely conditioned by macro social forces and structures. Gender regimes are the dominant, 'hegemonic' and most widespread patterns of social relations of men and women, their gender roles, gender identities, and the ways they perform their gender, on a daily basis and throughout the life cycle. Gender regimes are both micro and macro configurations of gendered power patterns. Further, the gender regimes established in the private sphere correspond and even reproduce the gender regimes in the public sphere and vice versa (Blagojević-Šijaković, 1994: 475). Gender regimes are not a simple consequence of patriarchal ideology or simple deliberations of 'a few men', but are deeply connected to the contextual economic, historical, cultural and even political forces. Hence, it is not only the intention of a gendered

individual to accept/reject certain behaviour as much as it is a social pattern that shapes their choices on an everyday life basis. In addition, gender regimes on the semiperiphery have been conditioned, in the long run, not simply by their local patriarchies, but by the characteristics of the semiperiphery itself.

Three Episodes of Change: Socialism, Transition, Neoliberalism

Since I am emphasising the connection between macro contextual changes, gender regimes and the micro-level changes of men, masculinities and care, I now discuss some major trends and findings related to three periods in the recent history of the Balkans. This periodisation is not chronologically clear-cut because structural changes are slow, spill over and develop gradually. However, for the sake of the argument and necessary clarity, I provide some key elements for the analysis in order to show how ideological hybrids, together with immanent contradictions between norms and actual behaviour, are actually supportive of male hegemony over time, at the cost of the majority of women and a growing circle of men. This is how I build the case to show that a new theoretical tool is needed, the concept of *'male hegemony built on opportune hybridity'*, where hybridisation is disclosed as a method of re-invention of male hegemony in the changed circumstances, but also as an effective individual strategy in the lives of a rising number of men.

Caring Men in Socialism: Blending Patriarchal Socialism with Equality between Women and Men

The first empirical sociological research on parenthood (survey) was conducted in 1988 in Serbia, then still part of Yugoslavia (Blagojević, 1993, 1993a). It was designed from a feminist Marxist perspective and inspired by Henry Lefebvre's (Lefebvre,1988) philosophical exploration of everyday life in contemporary capitalism. Although the research was undertaken in a single socialist country, many aspects of the capitalist failure to enable a satisfactory everyday life for the majority of population were fully applicable, especially with regard to the ambiguity and alienation in everyday life. However, the main conclusion of this empirical research was that at the time it was conducted there was indeed a process of the 'modernisation of everyday life', denoted by a movement away from traditional patriarchal values and one towards male/female equality in the private sphere.

The 'modernisation of parenthood', within the larger process of the 'modernisation of everyday life', was explored with respect to two dominant processes: (1) the pluralisation of parenthood, and (2) the decrease of alienation from parenthood. In this research, pluralisation was examined

through the scope of individual differences in relation to the number of desired children, the timing of parenthood, or the separation of parenthood from partnership and acceptance of alternative types of parenthood (non-parenthood as a choice, adoption and parenthood in cohabitation, homosexuality and in vitro insemination) and norms and behaviours which supported gender equality. Alienation in parenthood was explored by considering the following issues: the gap between the desired and actual number of children; motivation for parenthood (traditional vs. modern); satisfaction through and by parenting; family planning and bodily control of reproduction. According to research data, the positive change in terms of greater engagement in fatherhood first involved more educated and urban men, as well as those who were younger. Judging from data, it seemed the positive trend would continue into the future, as soon as 'the crises' was over, involving ever growing parts of the population. The research also found that psychological rewards and affective behaviour in parenthood were more present among more educated men than men with a lower education. Gender differences, in general, were more pronounced in both attitudes and actual behaviour than any other differences (in education, age, or urban-rural divide).

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The research was made at a historical moment when the social and economic 'crisis' was regarded as an aberration from the normal and widely accepted idea of progressive social change being inevitable, including the achieving of gender equality, despite the crisis. However, the official ideology of equality between women and men was perfectly compatible with the over-exploitation' of women's resources (Blagojević, 1991) that proved instrumental to the ambitious industrialisation project of the socialist state. A strong gap existed between the official ideology of equality and women's 'double burden' in practice. Similarly, attitudes were 'more progressive' and in line with the official ideology, as well as the emerging westernised lifestyle of the urban middle class, while patriarchal behaviour in the parenthood domain was still largely present.

The hegemonic masculinity in socialism was changing slowly due to the prevalent ideology, improved life standard, existence of the welfare state and women's greater negotiating power on the micro level related to education and employment. It was expected that positive change would come spontaneously and in a *spirit of collaboration* between women and men on the micro and macro levels. It seemed that patriarchal socialism would eventually give up in the face of the growing westernisation and individualisation, at least once the 'temporary crises' of the 1980s had come to an end. In that possible scenario, hegemonic masculinity would have slowly embraced fatherhood and caring as the path to men's emancipation from prescribed traditional norms, as well as toward true gender equality.

Caring Men in Transition: Blending the Crisis of Masculinity with Machismo

Instead, the 'temporary crisis' has proven to be something qualitatively different: the dissolution of Yugoslavia, wars and a 'transition', principally through and by wars. The overall trend of 'modernisation' was interrupted. As economic and political crises were taking over, the general level of animosity and antagonism towards the 'Other' started to grow, well manipulated by the political elites. Women were also denoted as 'Others' and exposed to growing misogyny in public discourse in a manner which did not exist in socialism (Blagojević, 2000, 2005). Violence in general, including hate speech, war violence, criminal violence and domestic violence, was becoming further normalised, a trend that continues until today (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2008).

In terms of the prevailing gender ideology, instead of the previous notion of the gradual, collaborative and spontaneous achievement of gender equality, a strong shift was made toward re-traditionalisation, re-patriarchalisation and re-familiarisation (Milić, 1995, 2004). On a micro level, the 'transition' was mainly translated into the practical 'survival economy' based on diversification of resources from both formal and informal economy, and the interrelated *self/sacrificing micro-matriarchy* (Blagojević-Šijaković, 1994: 478) as the dominant arrangement of gender relations. The concept of *self/sacrificing micro-matriarchy* was coined to denote micro-level (family) gender organization which, on one hand exhausts women's resources through provision of goods and services for the family members, while on the other hand provides women with identity based on heroic sacrifice. This ideological shift has been very instrumental for the even greater extraction of women's resources (time, energy, skills, emotions, health, knowledge, physical strength etc.) than occurred during socialism by way of women's over-exploitation due to their double burden (Blagojević, 1991).

On the other hand, the militarisation, wars and conflicts has guided men's changing hegemonic masculinities in two directions – 'masculinity crises' or 'masculine domination' – through and by violence. While in 'real' everyday life, individual males were increasingly experiencing a sense of victimisation due to both the wars and the 'transition', the official ideology of machismo and 'toughness' was invading the public space (Pavićević and Simeunović-Patić, 2011). A new type of hybrid hegemonic masculinity emerged, one with a 'tough' appearance (machismo) yet also increasingly unstable and vulnerable ('masculinity crisis'). This hybridisation of hegemonic masculinity was well expressed in the growing misogyny and prevalence of hate speech against women in public, often simultaneously accompanied by considerable dependence on women's resources in the

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private sphere. It was also associated with the strong desire of many men to withdraw into the family, into themselves. For example, in answer to the question "How important is your family in relation to your job", only 4% of men and 2% of women stated their work is more important, while the great majority of both genders saw them as equally important or gave priority to the family (Hughson, 2013).

Fatherhood, even more than partnership, became the main axis of the privacy desired by men. However, when faced with the actual situation of having to take responsibility for children, many men simply were refusing that responsibility. The best illustration is the proportion of single mothers among single parents in the Balkans (around 80%), of whom only a small proportion (some 20%) regularly receive alimony for the children. The patriarchal states in the Balkans, as research on single parents shows, have been generally quite cynical in this regard, not truly being supportive of single mothers (Blagojević, 2012). During the 'transition', men also more often opted not to have children at all, a big change from the traditionally high value children held in men's sense of self-actualisation. For example, the Gender Barometer for Serbia in 2012 shows that as much as 50% of men aged 20–50 had no children, a 5% rise since 2006 (Hughson, 2013).

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Parallel to this process of men changing, *self-sacrificing micro-matriarchy* as a dominant pattern was also transforming from the start of the transition until its later stages, while the old/new more egalitarian model was again on the emergence. Research shows that a *self-sacrificing micro matriarchy* has not really become an alternative to the ideology of equality already firmly established by the majority of women and a growing number of men. While that sacrificial model was embraced by older generations faced with an obvious lack of choice during the 1990s, younger generations of women in the 2000s were rejecting it (Hughson, 2013). Younger women are the fourth, even fifth generation of women in the workforce, and the legacies of socialism are not easy to erase from family histories. Young women have started to outnumber young men in higher education as well, adding to both their expectations and empowerment.

Research reveals that young men, on the contrary, have felt traumatised by the new role of 'breadwinners' imposed by the retro-ideologies, especially in the harsh conditions of the transition. Although they value family life almost as much as women, they feel frustrated by not being able to be 'providers', for being unable to be economically independent of their parents, let alone marry and have children, and often blame women for such failures. This frustration is well demonstrated by the fact that many men in fact feel they are 'bigger victims' of the transition, yet women feel the opposite (Hughson, 2013). The gap between genders has started to widen, with ever more asymmetrical expectations.

On the other side, men who are fathers are increasingly participating in various activities related to children, together with their partners. However, during both the 1990s and 1980s men were 'entering' fatherhood by taking over the more pleasant and rewarding duties, like playing with the kids or going for walks and doing sport. Compared to previous times, men's actual behaviour in the private sphere was more egalitarian than their attitudes on gender equality (Hughson, 2013). This is due to the fact, as shown by research, that positive, egalitarian, collaborative practices between women and men were not given adequate discursive expressions since the public space, especially the media, was fully saturated with conflictual, 'gender war' messages, and misogyny.

Caring Men in Neo-Liberalism: Blending Individualism with Populism

While the transition was one day expected to lead to better living conditions for the majority of the population in the Balkans, it has instead had quite ambiguous effects. At present, the region is exposed to the harshness of neoliberal developments entailing corporate and financial takeovers combined with 'captured states'. While, on the one hand, a process of the crystallisation of the power of the political elites is underway, on the other there is growing anomie and apathy among the disempowered citizens. The undervalued human capital of the semiperiphery together with rapid technological change have produced the 'surplus of humans' phenomenon that has transformed many women and men into the precariat. Yet, men's 'side of the story' has often remained unresearched and invisible.

The region's tough economic conditions together with the flourishing neoliberal system of values and increased crime and violence have all operated to redefine gender ideology once again, further destroying the collaborative model and introducing a high level of competitiveness between women and men. Gender equality as a progressive idea has been largely co-opted by the neoliberal ideology, thereby antagonising both men and women in large numbers. On the other hand, populist discourses incorporate the anger and frustration of many men, and fears of many women. Populism is creating an atmosphere in which men's anger can be legitimised and gender relations as an issue used to mobilise, capture and disseminate that anger. In such an atmosphere, the concerns of men and women about gender equality can hardly be productively resolved.

Nevertheless, a few efforts, albeit weak and scattered, are underway in the region that seek to engage with men and masculinities from a position of advocating gender equality. In different countries across the Balkans (Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia), studies of men based on the IMAGES methodology have been conducted in the last several

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years, bringing to light several interesting facts and figures. In Serbia, the IMAGES research was conducted in 2017 and showed that in many ways there is a continuation of the trend of men participating more in fatherhood than before. There is also strong consistency with the first research study at the end of the 1980s that was mentioned, revealing that urban and more educated men often show a greater inclination to accept gender equality in their parenthood practices/attitudes (Hughson, 2018; also see Stanojević, 2015). The intersectional approach of considering all research mentioned from the end of the 1980s until 2018 has revealed growing differences among men and that the pluralisation of attitudes and behaviours is a continuous trend.

However, for the first time, in comparison to the previous research, the youngest generation of men are also expressing the most conservative attitudes in relation to gender equality (Hughson, 2018). This is a point of yet another profound change, and cannot be regarded as a coincidence or irrelevant aberration. Instead, it may be seen as a historical shift, denoting a moment when gender equality in the region is no longer embraced as a spontaneous and inevitable civilisational common good based on collaboration between genders, but as something that can be challenged or, worse still, co-opted by non-democratic, exploitative and authoritarian regimes. This finding also needs to be interpreted in the light of yet another important research finding: that the lives of young men are extremely focused on violence, irrespective of whether men are the perpetrators or the victims of violence, or (often) both. It is within this new emerging *violent hegemonic masculinity* that *caring masculinity* should be examined, as its extreme opposite.

In a social atmosphere which largely legitimises violence, quantitative expression based on a survey of what gradual positive change towards more gender equality in the domain of parenthood looks like does not really disclose the contradiction between the masculinist populist ideology, as embraced by many men in their day-to-day discourses, and their 'good fathers' behaviour. It is difficult to capture this contradiction in standard surveys, although it can be revealed by qualitative research, especially when it has a feminist theoretical background. For example, in-depth interviews with divorced fathers shed light on hybrids of attitudes, suggesting a contradiction: accepting gender equality as being inevitable while, on the other hand, as a sort of special concession which is sought for the loss of the 'patriarchal dividend'. Divorced fathers approach parenthood not from the standpoint of an egalitarian relationship with their former partner, or their equal responsibility regarding the child/children, as much as from the perspective of the psychological rewards that paternity brings. There has been an obvious tendency to instrumentalise former partners and minimise and ignore their role. To a smaller extent than with divorced fathers, previous research

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in the region also indicated that men tend to see partnership, and women, as highly instrumental in 'starting a family' and not as a goal per se. Thus, while fatherhood can be seen as a 'ticket' to changing male gender identities in a direction that would link caring with gender equality, a context burdened by violence against women, misogyny and populism will succeed in translating 'care' into yet another male patriarchal privilege. The same tendency was confirmed by an analysis of two focus groups that included men who opted for 'atypical', that is, caring professions (teachers, nurses). It was shown that their choice of a caring profession was mostly seen as purely pragmatic, and often only transitory.

As discussed, the latest research discloses men's growing resistance to any further change leading towards gender equality, even if some positive behavioural changes can be identified. Many men who were socialised during the transition and the wars, and for a long time were exposed to poisonous misogyny and populism, are showing anger, discomfort and frustration as reflected, in one way or another, in their daily lives and caring practices, or rejection of them.

Conclusion

The overriding conclusion is that masculinities are becoming more open to being organised and defined around care, especially fatherhood, and that care, caring practices and emotional expressions related to child rearing are becoming more acceptable and evident. Yet it would be an exaggeration to say that care has become the centre of men's lives and identities in the way it is still the centre of women's lives and identities. More importantly, the increased violence against women and in general, combined with rising resistance to gender equality, is creating a new setting for the redefinition of hegemonic masculinity, one not based on caring and cooperation, but on violence and competition.

A transformation is taking place but it is not unilinear and clear-cut and instead burdened by different contradictions such as: between modernisation and universalisation of fatherhood norms through transnationalisation on one hand, and the re-patriarchalisation of semiperipheral societies on the other; between the ascribed role of man as the 'main family provider', especially during the transition, and stronger demands placed on men to be 'good fathers' (engaged and spending time with their children); between men being engaged as a parent and as a partner, where partnership is seen as instrumental to fatherhood; the contradiction between the 'crisis of masculinity' emerging from the void of masculine identity due to the precariat and active engagement of fathers; between greater care responsibilities for the elderly and care responsibilities for children; between fatherhood

centred around consumption and provision and the alienation of father-hood through and by that consumption, etc.

New hegemonic masculinity is concerned with fatherhood as a resource for identity building and social recognition, as well as for emotional grati-fication. Care in general, in a profession, or care for the elderly, but even for children, is largely perceived as a rational and pragmatic choice which is instrumental to building a new masculinity model, of 'omnipotent man', which replicates and competes with the model of 'omnipotent woman' that dominated in socialism. It is in this territory, a territory of privacy, that the 'gender war' and competition over different resources, including love and care, are now underway. The new masculinity that is emerging as the hegemonic model of masculinity in these times of *de-development* and neo-liberal globalisation is not necessarily being driven by gender equality val-ues as much as by its own need to transform if it is to survive. This is not a 'win-win' resolution that benefits both genders equally as much as a male hegemonic appropriation of a traditional female space of power.

To go a step further, this article has presented arguments to support two major theoretical propositions. The first one is that there is no simple uni-linear development in the trend of men's increasing engagement in caring (on the semiperiphery, but possibly also elsewhere) and, instead, change is occurring through a complex set of contradictions, back and forth move-ments, and the hybridisation of different ideological and value systems. Studies on the Balkans semiperiphery support this claim, although they were only briefly touched on here, in the manner of wide brush strokes. The second proposition is that to understand the true nature of the substance of what might appear 'progressive' change, a complex and holistic contextual analysis is absolutely necessary, including of how global and transnational trends become translated into the local contexts, or how neoliberal coloni-sation influences gender relations on the macro and micro level.

To enable a proper theoretical interpretation of the actual change in men's practices and discourses on care, which in quantitative terms might seem like a 'movement forward' towards gender equality, it is essential to understand how these changes relate and often contribute to male hegem-ony as the dominant power structure. This article suggests that hybridisa-tion, together with the many accompanying contradictions, may be seen as a method of co-opting women's gains, or women's advantages in certain domains, such as the domain of caring, in private and in public. In that sense, the emancipatory effects of care are becoming quite ambiguous for both genders. To clearly describe this ambiguous change, the novel concept of *"male hegemony built on opportune hybridity"* could become a useful theoretical tool in line with the critical studies of men and masculinities that built on feminist theoretical and epistemological contributions.

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