

Corona and Care. Gender-critical Perspectives on Governing the COVID-19 Crisis in Austria

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The outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in early 2020 has posed serious challenges for governments across the globe, resulting in a set of unprecedented measures of government-mandated social distancing rules, lockdown of the economy, border closures, and travel restrictions to curb the spread of the virus. The Austrian government has followed a similar course in managing the crises by strategically shutting down and ramping up social life against the background of fluctuating infection rates. Given the urgency of the matter, the government diverted public resources into key sectors such as public health and the labor market while transferring more caring responsibilities to individuals and families to take care of themselves and others (e.g., social distancing rules, introduction of home office, temporary closure of kindergartens and schools). Public discourses which accompanied these and other “Corona measures” were positioned somewhere between “solidarity” and “social cohesion”, on one hand, and individual self-responsibility and self-care, on the other hand, as evidenced by the government’s flagship campaign “Look after yourself, look after me” (*Schau auf dich, schau auf mich*).

The imposition that citizens should rely on their “private” reproductive capacities to weather the crisis has been key to its public management and has additionally burdened unpaid and underpaid care workers. Scholarship demonstrates that states and governments, understood as manifestations of social power relations in condensed and institutionalized form, process the structural crises of capitalism by restoring the class, gender, and race privileges of the dominant classes at the expense of the marginalized such as women and migrants. In the context of the current crisis, European, including Austrian, governments have followed a similar strategy of tacit reliance on women’s unpaid care work to temporarily process the crisis without social redistribution.

Against this backdrop, we ask which discourses were employed by the government and how they served to normalize and generate societal consensus over the *careless* management of the current crises, and (2) which role political masculinity and affects played therein. Austria offers an insightful case for this endeavour. With regard to its mode of social reproduction, it is typically associated with the “male breadwinner” model where women are primarily responsabilized for social reproduction and care work. Although this model has eroded due to the integration of women into wage labour and public investment in childcare in the last decades, it continues to exist due to the prevalence of gendered division of labour as well as the flexibilization of the labour market and the feminization of

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part-time work. Emerging gaps in familial and institutional care structures are commonly patched through migrant workers. The ruling Christian-democratic Austrian People's Party (*Österreichische Volkspartei*, ÖVP) has traditionally defended heteronormative gender roles but has refashioned itself as a more dynamic and innovative party under the leadership of the current Chancellor Sebastian Kurz. By analyzing a selected number of press conferences held by the Austrian government during the first lockdown in March 2020, we identified two distinct sets of discourses which addressed (1) risks, challenges, ensuing measures and economy and (2) solidarity, self-responsibility and caring for others (e.g., the elderly, the vulnerable). We find that these seemingly opposing and at times disconnected discourses are bundled together through a hybrid mode of political masculinity which we have tentatively called "rational-affective" masculinity. Rational-affective masculinity helps, first, to appeal to people's reason and hearts at once and, second, to mark the boundaries between public (i.e., state responsibility, institutionalized, paid) and "private" (i.e., individual responsibility, informal, unpaid). We observe policymakers, social partners, and experts whose speeches we studied — all men with one exception — seal a masculinist Corona pact which, after initial public admiration for (paid) care work in the early days of the pandemic, restores the primacy of "the economy" (mainly businesses and wage labor) while care work is put to its place as the unacknowledged condition for sustaining life during and in between crises.