

Gender, Border Expansion, and the Liberal Script: Masculinity and Territorial Legitimacy in US-German-Japanese Relations, 1868-1914

Contemporary political leaders in both liberal and illiberal regimes frequently pitch a masculine imagery of themselves and their countries in order to promote populist and/or repressive political agendas. They construct, control, and contest borders on the international stage by making expansionist claims to legitimacy or by retreating from multilateral institutions that, they argue, violate their own border sovereignty. At the same time, they create invisible borders within and outside of their respective countries to exclude groups and political ideas challenging their claims to power. They justify those actions through paternalism, strength, and a natural right to domination, while discrediting their opponents with emasculating and feminizing rhetoric.

To understand this dynamic between gender and claims to border legitimacy, the project seeks to examine its historical trajectory, focusing on discourses and practices of masculinity in three entangled case studies of both liberal and illiberal regimes: the United States, Germany, and Japan between 1868 and 1914. All three ascended in the late nineteenth century as economic and industrial centers with expansionist ambitions. Starting in 1868, the Japanese Empire underwent a period of thorough political, economic, and social modernization to prevent foreign colonial takeover and to become a leading imperial power in East Asia. Simultaneously, the newly formed German Empire extended its colonial power into East Asia, the Pacific, and Africa. In the two decades after the American Civil War, the U. S. began consolidating its hegemony in the western hemisphere against European influence. All three aspiring empires justified their ascent on the world stage in ways that reveal profound understandings of masculinity. Japan's imperial leadership discredited the country's traditional customs as effeminate and promoted masculine dominance as a prerequisite for colonial expansion and international recognition. German political decision makers employed a chauvinistic rhetoric of entitlement to domination as a rising European power. U.S. policy makers paternalistically pointed to their country's liberal responsibility to guarantee freedom from foreign rule in its sphere of influence. All three consolidated foreign rule by disenfranchising colonial subjects through emasculating and racist arguments, increasingly disturbed each other's territorial expansion and, if need be, prepared for eventual military conflict. This nexus of gender, power, and expansion shaped understandings of territoriality and border sovereignty in inter-imperial relations as well as in all three empires' conduct over others they deemed inferior. The effects of both deeds and rhetoric, as the project will show, lingered well into the twentieth century, oftentimes undermining the liberal tenets of postcolonial politics and development.