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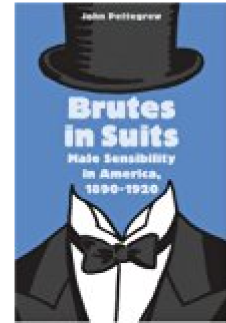
John Pettegrew. *Brutes in Suits: Male Sensibility in America, 1890-1920.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007. xi + 409 pp. $60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-8603-4.



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Published on H-SHGAPE (November, 2008)
Commissioned by James Ivy

Et Tu, Brutes in Suits?

What should we blame for putting violent behavior at the core of manliness: nature or nurture? John Pettegrew, a historian of ideas, answers in *Brutes in Suits* that both sources contribute to the association, but dissecting the turn of the twentieth-century origins of the latter gives us an understanding of why today's sociobiologists emphasize the former. In doing so, he posits that the nation's culture informs our conceptions of how evolutionary traits influence modern manhood and that they take precedence over biological forces in explaining why modern American men accept hypermasculinity as a way of asserting authority and maintaining their place in society. Scholars looking for an explanation of why and how the cultural elite of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era created, justified, and integrated the fundamentals of modern manhood into American intellectual life will applaud this work, but those seeking an explanation of how the rest of the nation accepted violence as a natural part of manhood will come away wanting.

Hypermasculinity–"an animalistic mind-set embracing man's putative instinct for violence; a ramped-up disposition, contagious through its excitation, and easily calibrated with a yearning for adventure, combat, and the experience of killing"–told men that power derived from traits bequeathed by a primordial ancestor (p. 330). This new masculinity differed from the old in that it depended on Darwinian thought. This was no accident. Late nineteenth-century thinkers emphasized primal male traits; by the twentieth century, a culture of manliness and physical differentiation seeped through the nation. The fiction of American men's primordial impulses taught and maintained the idea that authority rested in vestigial, rather than progressive, sources. These thinkers left modern men with a flawed ideal that never shook free of its creators–or Darwin's–subjectivity. It is this system that Pettegrew analyzes through tools borrowed from feminist studies, literary studies, and anthropology. But, contemporary observers cannot understand how biology and culture share the responsibility of shaping gender roles because they foist patriarchal thought onto them as a guiding principle. The irony here is that men clung tighter to manliness based in a mythical past, even as the nation grew "civilized." *Brutes in Suits* opens with an examination of where the idea that men are naturally dangerous came from, follows that germ as it spread through the cultural institutions of America, and closes with a look at its modern manifestations in war making.

Modern manhood's big bang came when Frederick Jackson Tuner explained individualism's origins and its role in America by pointing to natural selection. Turner's thesis conjoined scientific rhetoric and an emotive attitude toward the evaporating frontier, which reflected a need for rugged individualism born of organic sources. In establishing this relationship, he precipitated devolutionary manhood's role as a remedy for modernity's corrosive effect on the individual. A conundrum arose when more people, including faux-Rough Riders and New Annie Oakley-esque Women, claimed the rights of individuals. Men began questioning who could lay claim to the

authority that came with manhood and began looking for expressions of that quality that differentiated genders.

Brutish manhood seeped into American thought through a variety of independent, but overlapping, institutions. Hunting and killing literature, like Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan* (1914), made violent oratory men's *lingua franca*, which let middle-class readers understand manhood based on a subconscious environmental determinism because of its "zoomorphic subjectivity" (p. 77). Naturalist writing fostered the idea that getting together with other men and hunting helped one "regain premodern virtue by reconnecting with American natural splendor," and dressed killing in a shroud of "honor," even as some people questioned the efficacy of that label (p. 85). While men believed themselves inherently deadly, making that trait explicitly male required public ritual. Enter college football: despite that critics like Thorstein Veblen called it an "evolutionary problem or mistake" which taught "exotic ferocity," undergraduates at Stanford appreciated the game's ritualistic barbarism because it separated both the most brutish men from their gentler brethren and men from women (pp. 132, 139). Rather than acting as a steam valve though, the game maintained a body of republican "citizen-soldiers." Hence, Veblen's fears came true, because football made American men cling to barbarism as a defining trait. At the same time, a "war in the head," passed down from Civil War veterans, affirmed and solidified killing traits, bequeathing them to future generations as part of American nationalism (p. 204). This mindset informed American imperialism. Once the mechanized fighting of World War I made killing too inhumane for romance, doughboys began learning that killing, like football, was fun because it was a part of their intrinsic desires. This violent pathogen spread into the late twentieth century once heat-of-passion laws gave a legal expression to a range of emotions, "love, desire, and commitment ... jealousy, shame, and anger" (p. 292). This let men kill with the purpose of protecting their gene pool. Limiting these rights to heterosexuals further refined violence's use, especially once Charles Atlas's "The Insult That Made a Man Out of Mac" advertisements demonstrated why women (purportedly) chose strong men as the "best" mates. As a result, modern men depend on a loose control of their supposedly violent natures as the lynchpin of manliness, not because of sexual selection, but because "biology depends on culture for its expression" (p. 318).

Hypermasculinity is alive and well in contemporary America. Sam Fussell, for instance, juxtaposes the devolution of American manhood and progress of American civilization in his memoir entitled *Muscle: Confessions on an Unlikely Bodybuilder* (1991), wherein he set his concurrent physical and intellectual development against each other as he perfects his physique and writes his first novel. At the same time, thinkers like Lionel Tiger bemoan the passing of a gendered utopia based on an "essential purposefulness" that make feminists into bullies who force men into unruly hypermasculine behavior that is their only expression of maleness (p. 329). The future holds little promise for brutes in suits. The "eye war" of today rests on a pornography of killing that seeps into the home front, threatening American men with a lack of purpose in the future once conflict becomes more automated.

Pettegrew establishes where modern man's dependence on physicality comes from and its contemporary manifestations; yet how it insinuated itself in the middle class mind remains unclear. As is the case with any work that takes an overarching approach to its topic, one could nitpick details, but that would provide very little analysis of the book's effectiveness. What follows is an explanation of this work's weaknesses, which appear when Pettegrew deviates from his own stated goal of exploring "post-Civil War elites' assumptions about the origins of male aggressiveness and violence" (p. ix).

First, Pettegrew overreaches his evidence on occasion. In his chapter "Brute Fictions," wherein he analyzes literature that taught men violence, he argues that literary critics served as the primary link between middle-class readers and fiction. Also, he insists that literary genre established a firm contract between authors and readers, defining what readers could understand about a book. But, how does he know readers accepted literary critics' thinking, and was genre such a hard and fast category that authors could not stray from its conventions, within reasonable boundaries, as it suited their own purposes? Another example appears in the chapter on college football. Many of his assertions about the ties between the cultural performance inherent in a Stanford football game and the university's larger institutional mission rest on the assumption that students wanted what administrators wanted for their education and that Stanford exemplified a typical relationship that existed on campuses across the country. But, his sources include only student and local newspapers and a pair of institutional histories. How does he know what Stanford's administrators thought about football's violence and its usefulness? The reader gets no primary exposition of the official culture's values regarding this matter. Considering that Pettegrew apparently spent a good

deal of time on a campus that was so self-consciously devoted to building men, one expects that he would draw on manuscript material generated by the school's administrators. As a result, we never see middle-class or working-class Americans drawing on these ideas, which leaves the reader asking: how did the rest of the nation learn hypermasculinity? While staging football games on coeducational campuses did affirm and maintain gender differences, academics disagree about the usefulness of extracurricular activities to larger institutional goals during these years. Administrators at some schools saw football as something that meshed quite well with the mission of building strong bodies with strong minds inside them, yet others saw football as yet another example that students' desires ran contrary to their wishes.[1]

Second, his criticism of sociobiologists makes one feel as though they are the straw men in the relationship. An apologist for sociobiology's founding father E. O. Wilson points out that "sociobiology does *not* in any way provide an ideological foundation for accepting racism, sexism, genocide, rape, social dominance of the poor by the rich, or any other of the many unpleasant features of human behavior."[2] Indeed, in his foundational text, *Sociobiology* (1975), Wilson talks about human behavior from an evolutionary perspective in only one chapter. Most sociobiologists are not concerned with human behavior, focusing instead on the wide variety on animal species. Additionally, the majority of scholars working in that field would scoff at the idea of an "American" manhood, thinking that classification too narrow. Since the intricacies of sociobiological thought are not within this reviewer's expertise, I will note that my information in this paragraph depends on John Alcock's *The Triumph of Sociobiology* (2001) and informal conversations I entered into with a colleague who teaches sociobiology, because I wanted a better understanding of what Pettegrew took issue with in that field.

Pettegrew's adversary in this debate is not the field of sociobiology in general, but scientists who use Wilson's work as a way of advancing their own political agendas. It is worth noting that Pettegrew does not tack on this criticism of sociobiology as many people looking for a "cause" that justifies their work do. At no point does one get the sense that he sees sociobiological debate as a cause that props up his work on the intellectual underpinnings of modern manhood.

Readers will admire much about this book. Pettegrew largely succeeds at establishing how intellectuals of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era created an environment where American men could become "brutes in suits" and how this is a debilitating condition. The intellectual work is impressive, scholars will mine a lot of this material for lectures, and it will help recalibrate our thinking about how modern masculinity functions.

This book is deftly constructed and offers up insight to a number of different types of scholarship. Pettegrew's approach of exploring manhood's institutional manifestations runs the risk of coming across as a disparate case study where the reader is subjected to a continual "look, here are violent men yet again." But that does not happen. Instead, one is led from Turner to *Field and Stream* to football to imperialism to heat of passion laws in a way that makes sense. Standing alone, none of these manifestations explains why some American men valued violence as a way of creating difference, but together they form a larger mindset. Also, while this is a dense book and its chapters are fairly long, Pettegrew provides the reader with useful subheadings and conclusions. Particularly admirable is his deep reading of the Turner thesis. Historians teaching that topic to advanced undergraduates and graduate students might assign parts of this chapter as a way of fleshing out the complexity of Turner and his work in his own times. Finally, we have here an exposition of how culture is a creative, not suppressive force. In his chapter on football, for example, we see how football as cultural performance emboldened, rather than alleviated, violent behavior.

While it goes unstated, Pettegrew's ultimate goal is creating a work that will do for the study of men what Joan Wallach Scott did for the study of women with her now classic work, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" (1986). Specialists in gender history and the history of masculinity will pay particular attention to this book and address its ideas. In that, it will spark debate within the field for its bold explanation of why modern men feel as though violence is both their burden and right. Generalists in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era will not tackle this book tip to stern, but instead, will pick and choose from various sections that tie together seemingly disparate topics that explain why the creation of the modern United States proved such a disjunctive process.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Lynn D. Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 17, 28, 34; Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Chicago:

The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 41-55; and John R. Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 177-180.

[2]. John Alcock, *The Triumph of Sociobiology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 20.

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Citation: Ryan Anderson. Review of Pettegrew, John, *Brutes in Suits: Male Sensibility in America, 1890-1920.* H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. November, 2008.

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