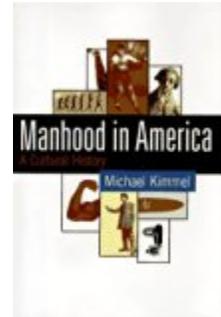


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Michael Kimmel. *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. New York: The Free Press, 1996. xiii + 544 pp. \$30.00 US (cloth), ISBN 978-0-02-874067-6; \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-684-83712-3.

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The work under review is an important contribution to the rapidly expanding genre of men's studies.[1] No newcomer to the relatively young field, the author Michael Kimmel (a professor of sociology at the State University of New York at Stony Brook) contributed a chapter to a groundbreaking volume published almost a decade ago *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies*. [2] Toilers in the field of men's studies join their counterparts in women's studies in insisting that "gender matters" in social and historical analysis. In the preface to his book, Kimmel puts it this way "I do believe that a comprehensive historical account of the American experience can no longer ignore the importance of masculinity—and especially of men's efforts to prove their manhood—in the making of America" (p. ix). Using expert advice, politicians' rhetoric, literary works and films as his materials, Kimmel constructs a history of changing ideals of manhood from the Revolutionary War to the present, observing that the book "is less about what boys and men actually *did* than about what they were told that they were *supposed* to do, feel and think and what happened in response to those prescriptions" (p. 10).

In the first part of the book, Kimmel describes a shift in the ideal of manhood that occurred in the aftermath of the American Revolution. He maintains that at the turn of the nineteenth century, three dominant ideals of American manhood coexisted: the Genteel Patriarch, the Heroic Artisan, and the Self-Made Man. The first two of these were inherited from Europe—the patriarchal ideal emphasizing property ownership and deep community and family involvement while the artisanal ideal was that of "an honest toiler, unafraid of hard work, proud of his craftsmanship and self-reliance" (p. 16). The Self-Made Man, arising out of a capitalist economic system, though

not unique to America was present from the start, according to Kimmel, and came to be the dominant ideal much sooner than in Europe. In this model of manhood, one's identity is derived entirely from "activities in the public sphere, measured by accumulated wealth and status, by geographic and social mobility" (p. 17). The shadow side of this ideal was that Self-Made Man is yoked to the marketplace where his fortunes were as easily unmade as made. He is the embodiment of economic autonomy, the flip side of which is anxiety, restlessness, and loneliness. Manhood was "no longer fixed in land or small-scale property ownership or dutiful service" (p. 23), rather, success had to be earned and manhood had to be proved without end. And the proving ground was the workplace "a native-born, white man's world" (p. 26), where men were in competition with other men. From the early nineteenth century to the present, men's efforts to prove their manhood have contained "this core element of homosociality." Kimmel contends that the economic boom in the first several decades after the Revolutionary War resulted in the triumph of the Self-Made Man and that by the middle of the nineteenth century, it had become the dominant conception of manhood in America.

In mid-nineteenth century America, with a man's economic, political, and social identity no longer fixed, "his sense of himself as a man was in constant need of demonstration" (p. 43). Everything, according to Kimmel, became a test, and the solutions that men chose to cope with this relentless testing "self-control, exclusion, and escape—have been the dominant themes in the history of American masculinity until the present day" (p. 44). Men strove to build themselves into powerful machines capable of winning any contest, they ran away

to work or to seek out the frontier, and they excluded others from equal opportunity to work, to go to school, and to vote. The Civil War which Kimmel describes as “a gendered war in which the meanings of manhood were bitterly contested” (p. 72) also represented a watershed. In the last decades of the nineteenth century rapid industrialization; the invasion of the public sphere by women, blacks, and immigrants; and the closing of the frontier, constituted an assault on Self-Made Manhood that resulted by the end of the century in a widely perceived crisis of masculinity.

Technological advances, growth in the size of factories, and urbanization led workers to feel increasingly less autonomous and more economically dependent. The proportion of American men who were shop or farm owners was on the wane and less-skilled workers were beginning to outnumber the highly skilled. Social changes were also problematizing men’s ‘self-making’ ability, as the competitive field became increasingly crowded with immigrants and blacks “challenging native-born white men for dominance on what had been their turf” (p. 85). Adding to these pressures, was an influx of women into the public arena in search of higher education and jobs. With the passing of the frontier as a means of escape, men turned to the tactic of exclusion to bolster their sense of manhood using social Darwinist arguments that relegated blacks, immigrants and women to rungs of the evolutionary ladder below white Anglo-Saxon men. With masculinity being increasingly difficult to prove at the turn of the century, Kimmel maintains that the emergence of homosexuals on the public scene served to intensify men’s anxieties. Middle-class men increasingly came to view their heterosexuality as an emblem of manhood, and heterosexual men began to define themselves in opposition to anything considered feminine. These developments illustrate what Kimmel considers to be the central themes of American manhood at the turn of the century “that masculinity was increasingly an act, a form of public display; that men felt themselves on display at virtually all times; and that the intensity of the need for such display was increasing” (p. 100).

The turn of the century also witnessed a torrent of complaints about what was perceived to be the feminization of American culture accompanied by calls for a restoration of national virility. Some laid the blame for cultural feminization on the predominance of women in the lives of young boys as mothers and teachers, while others attributed the problem to the culture itself believing that over-civilization was sapping manly vigor.

Whatever its cause, men feared feminization and being perceived as “sissies,” and attempted to prove their masculinity “at the baseball park, in the gymnasium, or sitting down to read *Tarzan* or a good western novel” (p. 120). Men also mounted efforts “to rescue their sons from the feminizing clutches of mothers and teachers” and created new ways to “manufacture manhood” (p. 157). In a debate that arose over co-education because of its alleged potential for blurring the differences between the sexes, G. Stanley Hall, an influential psychologist, urged separation of the sexes in education in order to make men more manly and women more womanly. Organizations such as the Boys Brigades, the Boone and Crockett Club, and the Boy Scouts were enlisted in the crusade to “rescue boys from their mothers and reunite them with a virile ideal” (p. 168); and fraternities grew—in terms of members and in their importance in collegiate life. Grown men joined fraternal organizations; at the turn of the century one out of every four adult men was on the rolls of the over-three-hundred existing orders which included the Odd Fellows, Freemasons, Knights of Pythias, and Red Men. And finally, men sought to reclaim religion which had come to be perceived as women’s domain with movements such as “Muscular Christianity” which had as its goal the re-masculinization of the church. The end of the century mission to counter feminization with a re-assertion of masculinity “reached its symbolic apotheosis in Theodore Roosevelt” (p. 181) who “was the perfect embodiment of American-as-adolescent boy-man” (p. 187). Despite the ceaseless efforts of American men to prove themselves, Kimmel concludes, they could not find the relief that they sought, and in the new century they would continue with their old methods of self-making “as well as invent some new ones” (p. 188).

The turn of the century crisis of masculinity abated temporarily in the opening decades of the twentieth century, in part, due to the military mobilization during World War I, but, even before the economic crash in 1929, “men’s work was an increasingly unreliable proving ground” (p. 192). During the Great Depression, as men lost their identity of “breadwinner,” they experienced feelings of humiliation within their families accompanied by an erosion of their sense of manhood. In response, men turned increasingly to their sons hoping to achieve some masculine redemption by raising this next generation to be successful men. The popularization of psychology during the 1920s, and in particular Freudian and behaviorist theories, brought with it an increasing emphasis on the role played by parents in child development. And parents were made anxious about any hint

of effeminacy in their sons as a predictor of adult male homosexuality. Psychologists also offered a means of redefining masculinity so that it was no longer dependent upon achievement in the public sphere, but rather “as the exterior manifestation of a certain inner sense of oneself” (p. 206). The “M-F” scale, created by Stanford psychologist Lewis Terman and his associate Catherine Cox Miles in the 1930s, purported to measure masculinity and femininity and “was perhaps the single most widely used inventory to determine the successful acquisition of gender identity in history ... still being used in some school districts into the 1960s” (p. 209). In the logic of the test makers, masculinity and femininity were expressed through certain measurable attitudes, traits, and behaviors thus codifying what had been historical and social arrangements. As a consequence, men who exhibited the gender appropriate indicators could rest assured that they were “real” men without regard to how they measured up in the workplace.

The Second World War, like the First World War turned out to be only a temporary respite for American men in the struggle to prove their manhood. First there were difficulties in coping with the aftermath of the war when, in the 1950s, “the suburban breadwinner father didn’t exactly know who he was” (p. 236). Anxious about overconformity, middle-class men were nevertheless “unable and unwilling to break free of domestic responsibilities to become rebels on the run” (p. 257). Kimmel characterizes the 1950s as a decade of discontent and containment, that was to give way in the 1960s when “all of the marginalized groups whose suppression had been thought necessary for men to build secure identities began to rebel” (p. 262). Many men, Kimmel observes, were not in sympathy with the challenges from blacks, gays, and women and by the mid-1970s were calling for “men’s liberation” to free themselves from the constricting roles to which they had been consigned. Kimmel characterizes the main theme of this movement, “that changing men’s *roles* would somehow magically transform the enormous economic and social structures that held those roles in place,” as theoretically naive and concludes that in the decade of the 1970s “men were still searching, but they still hadn’t found what they were looking for” (p. 290).

There is evidence, Kimmel claims, to suggest that American men in the 1980s were more confused about the meaning of manhood than at any previous point in history. With a dearth of heroes for role models, men instead sought out negative models to attack. For example, the “sensitive New Age guy” of the 1970s became an object of ridicule and scorn under a new label–

“the wimp.” A small but vocal group of men, who Kimmel labels traditionalists, mounted a “men’s rights” backlash against feminism portraying men as the victims in American society and urging a return to the ideals of Self-Made Masculinity. In addition, a new generation of masculinists came on the scene seeking a secure gender identity by employing the same strategies as their late nineteenth-century predecessors—searching for “homosocial preserves where they could be real men with other men,” for “vigorous ways to demonstrate their hardy manhood,” and for “ways to ensure the the next generation of young boys would not grow up to be an effete elite” (p. 309).

Kimmel singles out the “mythopoetic” search for the deep masculine, whose most well known celebrants are Robert Bly and Sam Keen, as “by far the most interesting and seductive example of contemporary masculinism” (p. 316). He believes that “Bly, Keen, and the other leaders of the mythopoetic men’s movement tap into a deep current of malaise among American men,” namely, fear of feminization which translates into the loss of the ability to claim “manhood in a world without fathers, without frontiers, without manly creative work” (p. 321). The contemporary masculinists maintain that the cause of men’s malaise is incomplete separation from their mothers, and recommend as a cure that they run off “to the woods, where they can escape the world of women ... and workplace responsibility and drudgery” (p. 317) and through bonding with other men recover their manhood. Kimmel points out that this “mythopoetic call of the wild runs into the same problems that faced turn-of-the-century masculinists” (p. 317). Namely, that it displaces “men’s grown-up problems of economic contraction, political competition, social isolation, and interpersonal incompetence ... onto overdominant motherhood and absent fatherhood” (p. 317-18).

Kimmel suggests that the “problem with men isn’t that they have not separated enough from mother, but that they have separated *too much*” (p. 318). Proving manhood becomes equated with repudiating the feminine and abandonment of the emotional skills of nurturance, sensitivity, caring, and responsiveness. Kimmel makes a plea for men to reconnect by developing emotional resources in shared parenting that would “allow their sons to experience nurturance and care as something that all adults do” (p. 318) and by assuming responsibility for being nurturant, compassionate, and accountable at home and at work. Kimmel concludes, “frankly, I’d prefer more Ironing Johns and fewer Iron Johns.”

In an epilogue titled "Toward Democratic Manhood," Kimmel asserts that at the close of the twentieth century the model of Self-made manhood, the only marker that men have of their success as men, "leads more than ever to chronic anxiety and insecurity" (p. 330). As a remedy, he urges that men abandon the failed quest that stretches back over nearly two centuries to prove their masculinity through self-control, exclusion, and escape. Kimmel insists that "we need a new definition of masculinity for a new century" and that it should be "democratic manhood" which "means a gender politics of inclusion, of standing up against injustice based on difference" (p. 333). His recommendation is to change the "meaning of manhood" from an identity based on competition, domination, and power to one based on accountability, responsibility, and hope. Kimmel stresses that he is *not* calling for androgyny, i.e., a blurring of masculinity and femininity, instead he says "we must begin to imagine a world of equality in which we also embrace and celebrate difference" (p. 334). This change will not come about through a revolutionary upheaval but as "the result of countless quiet daily struggles by American men to free themselves from the burdens of proof." Moreover, Kimmel believes that men will be helped in this transformation by the very people they have tried so desperately to keep out—"feminist women, gay men and lesbians, and people of color" (p. 335). Kimmel concludes: "the battle to prove manhood is a battle that can never be won. Only by renouncing the battle itself ... can we American men come home from our wars, heal our wounds, and breathe a collective sigh of relief."

Thus far in my review, I've tried to lay out the basic arguments that Kimmel develops in his survey of the history of manhood in America over the past two centuries. The reader will want to consult the work itself to see how richly Kimmel clothes these arguments with illustrations drawn from the rhetoric of experts and politicians as well as from theatrical productions, films, music, and the literature of the times. Kimmel constructs a compelling panorama of the changing meaning of manhood in America and of how, in the past one-hundred years at least, it has been defined in large measure in opposition to, or in repudiation of, everything considered "feminine." He makes a convincing case for the destructive consequences of the devaluation of feminine attributes such as nurturance, sensitivity, and compassion—for men as well as for women and for their children. I wish that I could be as sanguine as Kimmel about the possibility of redefining manhood to incorporate these traditionally feminine qualities while downplaying the traditionally

masculine traits of competition, aggression, and domination. The solution that Kimmel offers strikes me as too easy and too simple, i.e., explaining to men that they should give up trying to be Self-Made Men because it is a project doomed to fail and that they should instead embrace a democratic manhood founded on egalitarianism and celebration of difference.

I will briefly discuss two reasons for my scepticism about the viability of Kimmel's plan for enlisting men in the cause of democratic manhood. The first has to do with the limits of rational appeal as a means of bringing about profound psychological change. Kimmel himself frequently resorts to psychodynamic interpretations in explaining the course of events in the history of American manhood. And, a basic conviction in this approach is that irrational, unconscious forces play a significant role in human relations. It therefore strikes me as inconsistent, if not contradictory, for Kimmel to suggest that men will be able simply to put aside such things as, for example, striving for power in response to an appeal to rationality. My second cause for doubt grows from Kimmel's portrayal of feminism and his belief that feminist women will rise to the challenge of helping American men transform the meaning of manhood. Kimmel represents feminism as monolithic, whereas, it is anything but. Christie Farnham, editor of the *Journal of Women's History*, recently commented on the problem of knowing exactly what it means to be a feminist considering how many varieties there are "domestic feminism, socialist feminism, radical feminism, cultural feminism, and even power feminism, to name a few" (p. 6).[3] Moreover, Farnham notes that "if there is one lesson feminists learned in the eighties, it was that we are a very diverse group" (p. 9). In this context, it is exceedingly difficult to imagine that "feminists" will miraculously unite to help American men achieve the democratic manhood that Kimmel envisions. On the contrary, Farnham warns that feminists of all stripes are currently losing the media war wherein feminism has been defined as (and which is currently the common meaning of the term on the street) "male bashing." If this current conception of feminism is not strenuously challenged, Farnham warns, the movement could "become dormant in the 21st century as it did in the middle of the 20th" (p. 8). Farnham believes that feminists need somehow to regain the initiative in the media seized by leaders of second wave feminism in the 1970s. These "masters of media," as Farnham describes them, "captured the imagination of the nation and changed the way we understand the world" (p. 9). "Feminists must reassert control of the terms of the national

debate,” Farnham says, by throwing “their energies into creating new images and slogans which will speak to the 21st century.” And, perhaps, that is also an avenue that Michael Kimmel and others sympathetic to the cause of democratic manhood should explore.

Notes:

[1]. Scholarship in men’s studies comes from a variety of disciplines including history and psychology. For examples of the former see Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880- 1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffen, eds., *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993). For examples of the latter see R. William Betcher and William S. Pollack, *In a Time of Fallen Heroes: The Re-*

Creation of Masculinity (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993), Ronald F. Levant with Gini Lopecky, *Masculinity Reconstructed: Changing the Rules of Manhood—At Work, in Relationships, and in Family Life* (New York: Dutton, 1995), Christopher McLean, Maggie Carey, and Cheryl White, eds., *Men’s Ways of Being* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996).

[2]. See Michael Kimmel, “The Contemporary ‘Crisis’ of Masculinity in Historical Perspective,” in Harry Brod, ed., *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men’s Studies* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987), pp. 121-153.

[3]. Christie Farnham, “Editor’s Note: Male Bashing or What’s In a Name? Feminism in the United States Today,” *Journal of Women’s History* 8 (Summer 1996): 6-9.

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