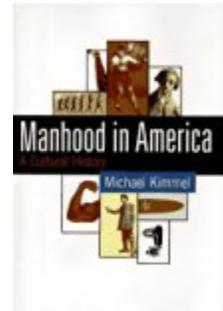


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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.

Reviewed by Natalie Coulter (University of Guelph)
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Michael Kimmel claims that men do not have a history—despite the fact that men have traditionally dominated history books—and he is right. With the exception of a few monographs by scholars such as Anthony Rotundo and Robert Griswold, very few historical works have explored the experiences of being a man in America, and even fewer have questioned how masculinity as a construct has shaped that experience.

Manhood in America is not Kimmel's first attempt at unearthing the meaning of manhood; he has published a series of articles and anthologies on the topic of masculinity dating back to the late 1980s. But this work is different. In *Manhood in America* Kimmel manages to place the construction of masculinity within the context of American history and popular culture.

The basic premise of Kimmel's work is that American manhood is deeply entangled within American history and the understanding of the first can only take place after the second is examined. Kimmel begins his exploration of American manhood in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century America. This period, Kimmel claims, saw the birth of the Self-Made Man. According to him, the Self-Made Man was "a model of manhood of which derived identity entirely from a man's activities in the public sphere, measured by accumulated wealth and status" (16-17). As a model, the Self-Made Man has shaped the construction of masculinity in American culture up until the present era.

Kimmel proceeds to follow the evolution of the Self-Made Man. At the turn of the century, industrialization, the closing of the frontier, and increasing numbers of

women and immigrants into the public realm of work forced the Self-Made Man to challenge and confirm his masculinity in the arenas of sport and leisure (as opposed to work). During the first half of the 20th century men were faced with numerous challenges to their masculinity. Two wars, a depression and the creation of suburbia all played a role in altering the concept of masculinity. By the 1960s, men—and women—were "discontented" (258) and yearned for something more, although they did not necessarily know what that something was. In the final section of the work, Kimmel leads the reader into what he terms the "contemporary crisis of masculinity" arguing that in the present era men are searching for the meaning of manliness.

One of the strengths of this work is the vast array of primary resources from which Kimmel draws to make his arguments. He has researched everything from comic books and old Playboys to advice literature and political pamphlets. And Kimmel has successfully supported his findings with secondary sources from a number of disciplines such as art history, sociology, and consumer studies. Overall *Manhood in America* is a fascinating and well-organized book which greatly contributes to our understanding of both masculinity and popular culture. This work is a valuable resource for anyone interested in the relationship between the perceptions of gender and popular culture.

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