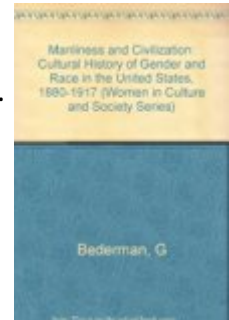




Gail Bederman. *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995. xiii + 307 pp. \$27.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-04138-4.



Reviewed by John McClymer

Published on H-SHGAPE (October, 1996)

In 1903 Theodore Roosevelt added his voice to a growing chorus of concern over the danger of "race suicide," i.e., the decline in the birth rate among so-called Old Stock Americans. He thereby made himself, in Gail Bederman's phrase, "a patron saint of large families." On a western speaking tour a few months later T.R. "found to my utter astonishment that my letter ... had gone everywhere, and the population of each place invariably took the greatest pride in showing off all the children." (p. 203). The crowds would call out to the president "No race suicide here!" At what Bederman calls a "typical interchange" at a dinner of the Society of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick at Delmonico's restaurant in New York City on St. Patrick's Day, 1905, one of the Sons received a telegram informing him that he had become a grandfather. T.R. read the message aloud: "Patrick just arrived. Tired after parade. Sends his regards to the President. No race suicide in this family." When the cheering quieted down, T.R. proposed a toast to the health of the son, father, and grandfather and "above all, of the best of the whole outfit, Mrs. McDonnell, the mother" (p.204). Bederman points out that "only men took part in these

interchanges" and notes how such ritualized boasting genuflected at the notion that women were "different, purer, and outside the conversation." She continues: ... In the context of this public affirmation of male sexual potency, reverence for pure, passionless womanhood reaffirmed its *difference* from virile manhood. Furthermore, the tone of the "no race suicides here" exchanges was just ribald enough to implicitly exclude respectable women from taking part. The humorous, pleasurable allusions to male sexual potency, veiled and proper though they were, marked the discussion as masculine" (pp. 205-206).

Bederman's treatment of this episode is worth recounting at length because it illustrates the considerable strengths, and not inconsiderable shortcomings, of her *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*. She persuasively documents some of the ways in which the Victorian ideal of "manliness" with its identification of proper manhood with "sexual self-restraint, a powerful will, a strong character" gradually gave way to a glorification of "masculinity," a word which only in the

late nineteenth century began to suggest "aggressiveness, physical force, and male sexuality" (pp. 18-19). T.R., the epitome of manliness, played a key role in this shift, she suggests. By warning of "race suicide" he helped make "it possible, for the first time since the eighteenth century, for respectable American men to publicly celebrate male sexuality" (p. 205). His highly publicized African safari provided similar impetus to celebrations of male aggressiveness (pp. 207-213).

Bederman is equally persuasive in showing the parallel between fears of "race suicide" and the prevalence of neurasthenia, another danger peculiar to Old Stock Americans, particularly those of the middle and upper classes. Medical authorities associated this nervous affliction with the ideal of manliness because they thought its causes lay in the demands modern civilization placed upon such people to discipline their appetites (pp. 86-87). And she clearly links both to contemporary notions of evolution. Supposedly only the "highly evolved" were at risk of neurasthenia because only they had developed a high enough level of civilization to be subject to such demands. Yet evolution glorified strength, not nervous debility. Similarly, the basic measure of "fitness" was the ability to reproduce. Declining birth rates signaled extinction. How, to use Madison Grant's phrase, could the "great race" pass away? How could the "fittest" not survive? Bederman's exploration of how Roosevelt, educator and psychologist G. Stanley Hall, and feminist and activist Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrestled with that question is always provocative and frequently incisive. *Manliness & Civilization*, as a result, could have been an important book. It might have made important contributions to our understanding of some of the key cultural developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It might have helped reshape scholarly discussions of gender, sexuality, and race.

One clue to why it does not lies in Bederman's handling of the St. Patrick's Day dinner in New

York City. For her the fact that the "race suicide" interchange took place at an Irish-American function is irrelevant. Her focus is upon the common ground T.R. and the McDonnell clan found in their celebration of virile manhood. Yet the concerns that led Francis Amasa Walker and others, such as the sociologist Edward A. Ross, to raise the "race suicide" spectre in the first place had to do, not with declining birthrates among whites, as Bederman has it, but with the discrepancy between the birthrates among Old Stock Americans and those of first and second generation immigrants as revealed in the 1890 and 1900 federal censuses. Had Walker, Ross, Madison Grant, or Theodore Roosevelt considered the McDonnell's part of the "race," they would have never feared for its "suicide." The censuses showed clearly that Irish-Americans, Franco-Americans, and numerous other European nationality groups in the population were more than holding their own. That, indeed, was the problem. So, when the male McDonnells boasted to the president that there was no race suicide in their family, there was an edge to the remark which Roosevelt likely appreciated even if Bederman does not.

At issue is not simply how to interpret this one "interchange." Bederman claims her analysis of "discourses" about manhood, civilization, race, and gender takes into account the fact that "the ideas and practices comprising any discourse will be multiple, inconsistent, and contradictory" (p. 24). Yet, despite occasional excursions into popular culture, she listens to only a handful of the voices, and those largely of elite speakers, that made up these discourses. So, to return to our example, she ignores the on-going culture wars over who was and who was not "white" which so exercised T.R. and his contemporaries. Whiteness was not simply a matter of color. Edward A. Ross, one of those scholars who most influenced Roosevelt, in a series of articles in the *Century* magazine later collected as *The Old World in the New*, cited medical evidence that the "Slavs are immune to certain kinds of dirt. They can stand what would

kill a white man." Fair skin and blond hair did not necessarily correspond to high evolutionary development.

Bederman carefully describes the ways in which Roosevelt and others "constructed" African societies as prehistoric (see particularly her discussion of how the *Boston Sunday American* reported an address of G. Stanley Hall, (pp. 116-120). But she does not hear the same voices bemoaning the "primitive" character of the southern and eastern Europeans flooding Ellis Island. From ten to twenty percent of all immigrants, Ross contended, were "hirsute, low-browed, big-faced persons of obviously low mentality" who "clearly" belonged "in skins, in wattled huts at the close of the great ice age." They were "descendants of those *who always stayed behind*." Yet, because they were willing to work for lower wages, he charged, they were undermining the racial vitality of Old Stock Americans because the latter, in order to maintain an "American" standard of living in the face of competition from "low standard" immigrants, supposedly restricted the number of children they had.

What sort of sense can the "race suicide" discourse make, if one ignores the central concerns of those who initiated it? One of Bederman's central contentions is that the cultural "trope" of "the white man ... linked white supremacy, male dominance, and evolutionary advancement in one powerful figure. He embodied the notion that nonwhite men were neither manly nor civilized. To speak of the white man was thus to link white males to the power and evolutionary advancement of civilization and to link black males to unmanliness and savagery" (p. 50). Further, she asserts that one of the strengths of her methodology is that, because "it interrogates ... inconsistencies," it "implies a particular emphasis on human agency and the possibility of change." While "only certain types of truths, and therefore only certain possibilities for action, are imaginable under the terms of existing discourses," there are "so many

potential ambiguities and contradictions" within "any discourse [that] many possibilities for dissent and resistance always remain" (p. 24). What of the possibilities for assent? Might the struggles of Italians, Slavs, and other eastern and southern Europeans, like that of the Irish before them, to gain the esteemed status of "white" have reinforced the link between whiteness and civilization? Bederman notes, in her opening discussion of "white" reactions to the Jack Johnson-Jim Jeffries heavyweight boxing match (pp. 1-10), that it was John L. Sullivan who introduced segregation into the sport by refusing to fight African Americans. As with the McDonnells, however, John L.'s ethnicity does not signify.

Bederman shuts out other voices besides the so-called new immigrants. The implications of evolutionary theories for how Americans thought about civilization is one of her chief concerns. Yet, despite references to the works of Richard Hofstadter and, particularly, Cynthia Russett, Herbert Spencer receives one brief mention and William Graham Sumner none. Lester Frank Ward, a main influence on Charlotte Perkins Gilman according to Bederman, rates one paragraph. Instead Bederman privileges the voices of those "American Protestants who accepted Darwinism, but could not bear to jettison the belief that they were part of a cosmic plan to perfect the world" and who "found in 'civilization' a way to reconcile the seemingly contradictory implications of Darwinism and Protestant millennialism" (p. 26). By the end of the paragraph of which the quotation is the beginning, Bederman is writing: "This millennial vision of perfected racial evolution and gender specialization was what people meant when they referred to 'the advancement of civilization.'" How, in less than a page, did the views of a subset of American Protestants become what "people" meant by anything? Did non-Protestants have nothing of moment to say? Certainly plenty of Protestants, whether especially millenarian in their thinking or not, continued to think of civilization in non-evolutionary terms. Did they not

seek to advance civilization? And what of those, Protestant or not, influenced by Spencer and other Social Darwinists? Did they nonetheless cherish millenarian hopes in spite of Sumner's cavalier dismissal of attempts to improve social conditions? Bederman continuously refers to "millennial" expectations of human perfection as if they were as much a cultural given as the greatness of the Founding Fathers. "The logic behind Theodore Roosevelt's "story of heroic racial formation" in *The Winning of the West*, she writes, "revolves around 'civilization's' three basic aspects: race, gender, and millennialism" (p. 180. See pp. 96 and 207 for equally sweeping statements.).

Silenced too are white Southerners. One of Bederman's four chapters focusing upon individual thinkers deals with Ida B. Wells' campaign against lynching which, in Bederman's account, she hoped to end "by producing an alternative discourse of race and manhood" (p. 59). To what was this new discourse an alternative? "Wells, always sensitive to cultural currents, understood intuitively that middle-class Americans were using 'civilization' to remake Victorian ideologies of manhood" (p. 56). Is this what Southern exponents of lynch law were doing? Bederman cites the work of Joel Williamson who, in *The Crucible of Race*, offers a theory about how and why a postwar generation of white Southerners turned to racial violence as well as an extended analysis of such Southern proponents of what he calls "radicalism" as Thomas Dixon. Bederman could have followed his lead, particularly since he stresses the dangers white Southern males perceived to their manhood. Instead she explains in a note that "since this study does not get into issues of specifically Southern views of manhood and race, I have decided to discuss only Northerners' views of lynching" (p. 252). Wells, for obvious reasons, concentrated on Southern views.

Bederman looks at Wells' campaign through the prism of Northern press reports, even when discussing her publicity campaign in Great

Britain, and seeks to compensate for the limitations of this evidence by attributing to Wells an "intuitive" grasp of her own assessments of Northern "white" culture. So she presumably understood, as Bederman does, that Northern whites accepted Southern justifications for lynching because, "by envisioning themselves as 'the white man,' whose superior manliness set them apart from the more primitive dark-skinned races, middle-class men reassured themselves that manliness remained as strong as ever" (p. 75). On the other hand, perhaps Wells was, as Bederman suggests in recounting her debate with Frances Willard over "the myth of the Negro rapist," less interested in inverting the terms of "discourse" about gender and civilization than in trying to tell the truth about lynching (pp. 65-67). An experienced journalist, she sought to expose Southern white claims that black men were menacing the honor of white women as humbug. In the process, she threw their self-serving rhetoric about manliness back at them. This was a time honored strategy of African American protest dating back to Benjamin Banneker's letters to Thomas Jefferson and before.

A different sort of problem bedevils Bederman's analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman who clearly was seeking to invert the meanings attached to "male" and "female." In doing so, Bederman argues, she "drew on the white supremacist knowledge of civilization which she had originally learned from her father's reading program in evolutionary anthropology, and which she had adopted as her millennial religion" (p. 135). I have already noted some of the difficulties which Bederman's proclivity to find millenarianism lurking behind every project to improve society and the comparable problems posed by her attributing an unproblematic meaning to "white." Both come into play in her discussion of Gilman with all the resulting confusion one might anticipate.

Gilman, Bederman assures us, did not have to "specify 'white'" when she used the term "race."

Her "knowledge of the discourse of civilization," in which "only the white races had the capacity to advance to the highest future stages of civilization," made that "redundant" (p. 134). So, what are we to make of the numerous occasions on which Gilman did specify the race she meant, especially when that was the "human" race? Part of what she sought to achieve, as Bederman points out, was to challenge the notion that all forms of activity were either male or female. Much of what we associated with one gender or the other, Gilman contended, properly belonged to the species as a whole. It was human. This is part of what she meant when she decried contemporary civilization as "oversexed."

This does NOT mean that Gilman did not believe in the superiority of some white "races" over the rest of humanity. It only means that she used the term "race" in contradictory, inconsistent ways. This is precisely what Bederman claimed her methodology would enable her to appreciate. And indeed it should have. But, when discussing Gilman's theory about the role of sexual selection in evolution, Bederman writes that Gilman believed "if it were not for the racially advanced traits civilized women inherited from their fathers (who, unlike their mothers, regularly engaged in race activity and so developed racially advanced traits to pass on to their offspring), women would be the most primitive of beings" (p. 143). One page earlier, discussing "the primitive savage rapist" whom Gilman blamed for women's loss of primal equality and for inaugurating the regime of sexual selection that so distorted women's (and men's) development, Bederman comments that "by making all men, including civilized white men, the evolutionary descendants of the original primal rapist--a figure indelibly coded Negro and therefore unmanly--Gilman was subtly arguing that men had no essential claim on civilization."

Anyone attuned to dissecting contradiction should surely pause at this point. If men had no

claim on civilization, and women would be the most primitive of beings were it not for the traits they inherited from their fathers, whence comes civilization? Actually, there is no reason to pause. Gilman did make the argument that, in human societies, sexual selection distorted evolutionary development. She made the further argument that this distortion was greatest among the most developed societies such as the United States. And she did attribute the unfortunate importance of sexual selection in human development to primal man's proclivity for overpowering and holding captive primal woman. She also explicitly insisted that all humans, male and female, were the heirs of both this primal rapist and his victim. But it is Bederman, not Gilman, who introduces the "subtle" point about the indelible coding of the primal rapist as Negro. She would be less willing to do so, were she more willing to see the variability of meaning in Gilman's use of the term "race." She might also be less willing, were she less eager to attribute "intuitive" understandings (especially to women) as in "Gilman intuitively understood the cultural power of the 'primitive rapist' ..." (p. 142).

There is more to *Manliness and Civilization* than I have space to discuss here, much of it very provocative. Bederman's analyses are always thought-provoking and frequently strikingly original. Unhappily, although filled with stimulating ideas, her book rests upon too narrow an evidentiary base and is marred by too uncertain a command of method to sustain the claims she advances.

Copyright 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact h-net@h-net.msu.edu

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-shgape>

Citation: John McClymer. Review of Bederman, Gail. *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*. H-SHGAPPE, H-Net Reviews. October, 1996.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=643>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.