

Review Essay

New Directions for the History of Manhood in America

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ADVOCATING THE MAN: Masculinity, Organized Labor, and the Household in New York, 1800-1840. By Joshua Greenberg. New York. 2008.

JOLLY FELLOWS: Male Milieus in Nineteenth Century America. By Richard Stott. Baltimore. 2009.

Two decades ago, scholars began studying the history of American masculinity, for reasons that are now fairly clear. Gender roles in American society changed rapidly during the 1970s and 1980s, in response both to feminist demands for gender equality and to changing economic incentives for women to enter the wage labor force. Disgruntled American men (mostly white) created a “men’s movement” in the 1990s, producing an array of groups that ranged from divorce reformers who decried the supposedly anti-male bias of family courts, to mytho-poetic men’s groups who retreated to the woods to reclaim their virility, to Promise Keepers who vowed to renew their commitment to conservative Christian ideals of responsible fatherhood and marital fidelity. The phenomenon cried out for a historical explanation. The answer scholars provided was that manhood was a historically variable experience, rather than a timeless phenomenon.

The majority of historians who have looked at the history of American manhood emphasize that male identities are culturally constructed, and thus highly variable. Maleness does not represent some biological essence or transcendent subjectivity. As Michael Kimmel puts it, “Manhood is neither static nor timeless.

. . . [It] does not bubble up to consciousness from our biological constitution . . . Manhood means different things at different times to different people."¹ The core methodological assumption in this line of scholarship, namely that masculinity is a cultural construction, builds upon concepts in feminist scholarship and cultural theory and has been reinforced by scholarly practices which encourage the study of discrete periods and groups. Both the assumption and the practice have encouraged scholars to focus on the subjective construction of male identity in different periods, regions, and especially, social classes, in effect offering snapshots of particular manhoods as they intersect with events at particular moments in time. It has become a truism that scholars are describing diverse *masculinities*, rather than looking for larger patterns in male identity in general.

While this focus on particularity has produced some enormously significant scholarship, particularly for the study of sexuality, it had tended to divert attention from inquiries that might compare patterns of male behavior across societies and time periods. One especially salient question for the history of manhood emerges from recent scholarship on long-term changes in patterns of violent and aggressive behavior, which is mostly rooted in social history and criminology, rather than cultural theory. Scholars who study patterns of violence tend to approach male aggression as a phenomenon present in all or most societies, as well as a problem that societies must find ways to deal with. Although their data by no means suggests that all men are aggressive, it shows that in societies with disruptive levels of interpersonal violence, those acts of violence are far more likely to be committed by men than by women. Cultural constructions of manhood are likely one factor that influence men's inclinations to act aggressively in particular situations, although they are not the only factor. Other types of male experience and behavior, too, might usefully be compared across time and place. The two books under review here suggest that a more active attention to commonality as well as difference could be fruitful.

Joshua Greenberg, *Advocating the Man: Masculinity, Organized Labor, and the Household in New York, 1800-1840* (New York, 2008), frames his study of early nineteenth-century New York City workingmen in the context of existing scholarship on both the history of manhood and labor history. American historians have typically argued that dominant norms of manhood in eighteenth century America were patriarchal, but that the development of a wage labor system challenged manhood norms across classes. As men ceased to be involved in training their sons or apprentices, women gained authority within the family, and norms of manhood for middle class men (historians have argued) came to center on the qualities that made them successful businessmen. An older ideal of men as masters of households was supplanted by a newer ideal of men as breadwinners.² Complicating this picture, a few recent historians have questioned the assumption that white men in nineteenth century America dissociated themselves from the "separate sphere" of women and children and found instead that white middle class men continued to invest considerable time and energy to fulfilling their domestic roles.³ However scholars have usually suggested that white working-

class men resisted the hegemony of middle-class values, and escaped to the taverns and the streets where they created autonomous masculine subcultures. Instead of defining themselves as breadwinners, they expressed their manhood by participating in a boisterous, democratic public culture organized around fighting, drinking, and adherence to an ethos that valued male camaraderie, physical courage, and personal honor.⁴

Greenberg's study of organized workingmen in New York City before 1840 suggests that white American men experiencing the market revolution may in fact have had more in common than historians have acknowledged. He finds that the white workingmen who joined labor unions were usually married household heads rather than bachelors, and that the priorities of the labor movement reflected the members' desires to meet their family obligations, rather than to escape from them. Rather than rejecting the middle-class focus on breadwinning and responsible fatherhood, labor unions and the political parties they created shaped their agenda around their members' family concerns.

Greenberg finds that as trade union men faced the prospect that they would be permanent wage earners rather than becoming masters over their own shops, they sought to change their employment conditions so that they could continue to be family breadwinners. They focused on winning a "family wage" that would allow them to support their wives and children, as well as benefits that would offer security to their wives and children if they became ill, got injured, or died. Organized men opposed child labor, not only because they feared competition from children's low wages but also because they feared that boys would receive inadequate training for adulthood under the new wage labor system. They championed the ten-hour day, not so much to gain time for leisure as to gain time to spend with their families.

The same sorts of priorities, Greenberg argues, were reflected in the agendas of the Working Men's Party (formed in 1829) and the Equal Rights Party (formed in 1837). Different factions within the WMP divided over the issue of how best to provide for the welfare of children (especially boys). Thomas Skidmore's agrarian plan proposed to abolish inheritance and redistribute property so that all male children would have a guarantee of receiving property of their own when they reached adulthood. Robert Dale Owen proposed a state guardianship system of public education so that all children would receive an equal education. Both of these proposals were too radical for more moderate members of the WMP, who favored reforms that would leave fathers in charge of educating and providing for their own children. But even the moderates favored universal, publicly funded education so that all children would receive an education now that they could no longer count on receiving workplace training in a craft. Similarly the Equal Rights Party, or the Loco Focos, responded to threats to their members' household-based masculine identities. They praised married life, urged members to provide moral guidance to their families, and criticized banks' economic policies because they eroded workingmen's ability to provide for their dependents.

Like other scholarship that examines the particularity of masculine identities, Greenberg's study is narrowly framed, and as applied to the men he examines, his argument is quite credible. British and Anglo-American societies in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were patriarchal. White men in these societies had for centuries described ideal manhood in terms of men's successful fulfillment of their roles as fathers and masters of households. Many adult men in the early modern world derived considerable emotional satisfaction from their domestic relationships, not least because they received so much deference from their wives, children, apprentices, and servants. It seems entirely plausible that married New York City workingmen would seek to retain the respect of their wives and adolescent children and to preserve their image of themselves as benevolent *paterfamilias* by trying to strengthen their roles as the primary breadwinners of their families.

Though I am convinced by Greenberg's finding that organized workingmen in New York City before 1840 sincerely wanted to be good fathers and good providers, I wish he had told us more about how these men's aspirations translated into actual behavior. Since he frames this study as a history of the early New York City labor movement, it makes sense for him to focus on the rhetoric and priorities of labor leaders. But understanding the construction of their identities as men requires us to understand not only their hopes and ideals but also to see how they dealt with their disappointments and frustrations. How did these workingmen actually behave at home as their wages declined and their work became less secure? How did their changing working conditions affect the dynamics of their domestic lives? Did they spend more time with their families, or did they just think they should? How did they react if wives or children questioned their competence as family providers? Given existing sources, these questions may be difficult to answer. Still, Christine Stansell provided a superb template back in 1986 for how a historian might examine workingmen's actual domestic lives.⁵ Using New York City municipal court records she found that when husbands' domestic authority was eroded by declining wages and decreasing job security, they not infrequently responded by battering their wives. Court records provide revealing evidence about workingmen's actual domestic behavior, and might produce a more complex picture of how these men's domestic aspirations intersected with other unstated assumptions about manhood.

Richard Stott's *Jolly Fellows: Male Milieus in Nineteenth Century America* (Baltimore, 2009) is a study not of a discrete group of men in a particular time and place, but rather a study of patterns of white male behavior throughout the United States over more than a century. His book confronts the phenomenon of male aggression and violence head on. Stott's book begins with a look at the rowdy early nineteenth-century culture of all-male sociability (which he calls "jolly fellowship") with its norms of heavy drinking, fighting, and gambling, and then examines how that culture changed over the next hundred years. Stott has long been interested in studying men who engaged in violent and unruly behavior, but his earlier work presented disorderly and aggressive male behavior (at least

in mid-nineteenth-century New York City) as an expression of working class cultural consciousness. His approach in this new book is different. Stott suggests that rough, aggressive male behavior was expected in the context of all-male sociability both in early modern European and Anglo-American societies, but that a “moral revolution” made such traditional forms of behavior increasingly disreputable during the nineteenth century.

The concept of a “moral revolution” or a “revolution in manners” owes much to the sociologist Norbert Elias, who suggested that European society went through a “civilizing process” during the early modern period that changed the structure of human personalities. People became less impulsive, more restrained, and more capable of rational planning. Although Elias’s theory has been challenged on many fronts, it has gotten considerable empirical support from social historians who have traced homicide rates on both sides of the Atlantic over the *longue durée*. These historians have found that men in late medieval Europe were considerably more likely to kill each other, mostly in tavern brawls or local fights, than were men in the late nineteenth or twentieth centuries in either Europe or the United States. (To underline this point, Stott observes that the homicide rate in twenty-first century America, which is one of the highest in the modern western world, is still lower than the homicide rate in the Anglo-American colonies during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries).⁶

Stott is less interested in tracing the long history of this revolution in manners than in looking at its consequences for the experiences and identities of white men in nineteenth century America. The incidence of drinking, rowdy behavior, and violence among most American men declined dramatically between 1800 and 1850, a development for which Stott offers a multi-faceted explanation. The development of capitalism improved the pay-off for self-controlled, sober, industrious behavior, so men in the 1820s and 1830s began to change their work habits, their agricultural practices, and their comportment. The Great Awakening inspired greater religiosity, and produced moral reform movements that increased social sanctions against drinking, swearing, Sabbath breaking, and fighting. Women pressured men to stop drinking and get on the straight and narrow. By the 1840s, men were becoming reformed, and the traditional ethos of jolly fellowship was being marginalized.

Although most men found ways to restrain their aggressive impulses, the data on homicides shows that male violence and fighting persisted and in fact grew to extremely high levels in a few sections of the United States, especially after 1850. Stott devotes the last two-thirds of his book to examining the ways in which subcultures of male violence and rowdiness developed in particular regions, and how they were imagined over the next 60 years. Disorderly male behavior flourished in particular locales, or what Stott calls “moral districts”: disreputable urban neighborhoods such as the Bowery in New York City, California Gold Rush mining camps, frontier settlements in Alabama and Mississippi, logging towns in the northwest, and steamboats on the Mississippi. A subterranean world of “sporting men,” mostly made up of gamblers and professional prizefighters,

emerged in New York City in the 1840s. The Wild West became notorious for its toleration of gambling, drinking, and fighting.

Although these subcultures were increasingly marginal, respectable men continued to be drawn to them, if only as spectators and consumers. Nineteenth century male readers were avidly interested in stories about tricksters, fighters, gamblers, and strong men who tormented the weak. Male audiences flocked to theaters to watch professional boxers pummel each other, and fighters became major celebrities.

One of the most interesting developments in the development of modern American ideologies of manhood occurred at the end of the nineteenth century, with the emergence of an almost paranoid concern that American men were becoming effeminate. In response, American culture at the turn of the century became increasingly masculinized. Middle-class men threw themselves into activities that promised to restore their manhood, or escaped into fantasies of about rugged, unrestrained masculine life. Bodybuilding, western dude ranches, and organized sports were suddenly all the rage. So were literary heroes like Owen Wister's cowboys, Edward Burroughs's Tarzan the Ape Man, and Zane Grey's gunmen—all men who had repudiated bourgeois American conventions and embraced a savage, primitive masculinity.

Historians have offered various explanations for this sudden obsession with sports and virile heroes in American popular and literary culture: middle-class men were demoralized by the entry of women into colleges and corporate offices, the growing bureaucratization of corporate work, and the sudden influx of immigrants into American cities; a society shifting towards mass consumption needed to offer entertainments in order to stimulate consumer desires.⁷ Stott's explanation is simpler. The moral reform movement of the previous century had finally peaked. American men had so fully succeeded in sublimating their aggressive impulses that they needed to find activities that would allow them to let off a little steam, or at least to fantasize about doing so.

Stott's attempt to incorporate the data on the dramatic long-term decline in homicide rates and violence in American society over the past 200 years into the history of manhood is an important one, and he has produced a smart, provocative book. It might have been a better book if he had thought more about how white women figured in these white men's worlds, both in producing the decline in aggressive behavior and provoking the anxieties or resentments that led some of them to retreat into all-male milieus, if only for a short period in their lives. But the book does make a significant contribution, for in approaching violence and aggression as common features of male experience, he has shed light on a broadly diverse range of experiences among white men in different regions of the United States and managed to offer a coherent explanation for patterns of change over time.

One question raised by these two books is how to square their findings with one another. Did American men who aspired to be responsible fathers and moral guides to their households actually spend their time drinking and fighting with

other jolly fellows? Stott seems to have abandoned class as the central analytical category here; he is not suggesting that middle-class men became sober and working-class men ran wild. Might age have been a factor? Regions with high homicide rates tended to be regions with high concentrations of bachelors, where family controls were weak. But as Stott makes clear, some famous nineteenth-century sporting men were married with children.

Reconciling evidence about aspirational norms of manhood with evidence about men's aggressive, disorderly, and sometimes violent behavior is a challenge that historians of American manhood have not adequately confronted. Men's behavior in certain kinds of all-male milieus, as Stott suggests, seems to show that there was a widespread expectation before 1830 or so that men should be ready to engage in fights under certain kinds of circumstances, and that in certain parts of the country, this expectation persisted. But official pronouncements about manhood rarely valorized male violence. Throughout the eighteenth century, in the South as much in New England, the ideal male was described as moderate, rational, responsible, and peaceable. Young men and men of color were often described as unruly and rebellious, but these were not admired traits.

Perhaps the official pronouncements about ideal men as responsible patriarchs and the high levels of violent behavior can both be understood as products of a particular system of social control, a system that during the nineteenth-century was being gradually replaced. In eighteenth and early nineteenth century British North America, the main institution for social control was still the patriarchal family. Male household heads could (and did) punish disobedient sons, male servants, and slaves, many of whom were in their teens or early twenties, the ages at which men are most likely to engage in disorderly behavior. A patriarchal system of social control, while coercive, was never particularly effective in controlling male aggression, in part because the patriarchs themselves were expected to use physical force to maintain order in their households. Meanwhile other kinds of law enforcement mechanisms in the early United States were weak. Laws and moral norms had traditionally been enforced by groups of ordinary citizens (usually male), often led by their social "betterers." Adult men were expected to know how to take charge and to be physically intimidating, and the line between force used to "teach somebody a lesson" and illegitimate force was not sharply drawn.

During the nineteenth century, male gender norms may not have changed as dramatically as many historians have suggested. Moral advice literature, at least, suggests that adult men were still expected to behave rationally, responsibly, and peaceably, though now refinement and sympathy were added to the general traits expected of the ideal man, and expectations that men should be self-controlled do appear to have become more extreme. As studies like Greenberg's suggest, most men probably still aspired to be responsible fathers. However, once northern society came to be organized around wage labor, married white men in the North had few occasions to engage in aggressive behavior, except in wartime. Young, unmarried men were now freer from patriarchal supervision, but as Stott astutely observes, incentives for self-control and sobriety were growing. How-

ever these incentives were not equally distributed. The male subculture created in New York's Bowery neighborhood before the Civil War, as several historians have pointed out, was largely a subculture created by young unmarried urban workingmen whose opportunities for upward mobility as artisans were declining. They had fewer reasons to sublimate their aggressions than did young men with better economic prospects. Southern slaveholders, too, were still expected to use physical force and intimidation to control their labor force. It is not coincidental that a culture of dueling and brawling lasted longer in regions where the labor system was based upon slavery.

A serious synthesis of historians' findings on the social construction of masculinity and their findings on patterns of male aggression in America's past is long overdue. Stott's book is a wonderful starting point, and suggests a range of questions that might be asked. What roles did American women play in the so-called reformation of manners? Did the frequency of male violence towards women decline at the same pace as did fighting and violence between males? How did the reformation of manners, and the marginalization of traditional forms of sociability, affect the construction of gender in communities of people of color? How was the use of violence in public related to conceptions of citizenship? Have associations between manhood and violence changed during times of war, especially during the twentieth century when the state increasingly deployed male aggression in the service of its military objectives? Have associations between white masculinity and aggression (I am thinking here of the rise in the support for gun ownership since the 1960s) changed in response to women's growing participation in the wage workforce and in American public life? There is a rich vein of potential insights here, waiting to be mined.

Notes

1. Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 2d ed. (New York, 2006), 3.n

2. Examples include: E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York, 1993); Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca, 2002).

3. Stephen M. Frank, *Life With Father: Parenthood and Masculinity in the Nineteenth Century American North* (Baltimore, 1998) and Shawn Johansen, *Family Men: Middle-Class Fatherhood in Early Industrializing America* (New York, 2001). For similar findings on middle-class men in nineteenth-century England, see John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven, 1999).

4. The class-based-subcultures approach owes a great deal to E.P.Thompson, Sean Wilentz, and others who see class identity developing around particular cultural styles or norms. Among those who posit the emergence of a working-class cultural style of manhood are Elliott Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, 1986); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Chicago, 1986); Richard Stott, *Workers in the Metropolis: Class, Ethnicity, and Youth in Antebellum New York City* (Ithaca, 1990); and Michael Kaplan, "New York City Tavern Violence and the Creation of a Working Class Male Identity," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 15 (Winter 1995), 591-617.

5. Stansell, *City of Women*, especially chapter five, "Women and Men."

6. Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, rev. ed. (Oxford, 2000). The literature on homicide rates has benefitted from a massive effort at Ohio State University to gather data from both sides of the Atlantic on violent crimes over a period of five centuries. Recent contributions include Eric Monkkonen, *Murder in New York City* (Berkeley, CA, 2001), Pieter Spierenburg, *A History of Murder: Personal Violence in Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Malden, MA, 2008), and Randall Roth, *American Homicide* (Cambridge, MA, 2009).

7. Gorn, *The Manly Art*; Rotundo, *American Manhood*; Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago, 1995); John Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York, 2002).

