Anthropologica

Anthropologica

Gutmann, Matthew. *Are Men Animals?: How Modern Masculinity Sells Men Short*. New York: Basic Books, 2019, 320 pages

Mary-Lee Mulholland

Volume 65, Number 1, 2023

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1109825ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica65120232627

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

0003-5459 (print)
2292-3586 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this review

Mulholland, M.-L. (2023). Review of [Gutmann, Matthew. *Are Men Animals?: How Modern Masculinity Sells Men Short.* New York: Basic Books, 2019, 320 pages]. *Anthropologica*, *65*(1), 1–3. https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica65120232627

Book Review

Gutmann, Matthew. *Are Men Animals?: How Modern Masculinity Sells Men Short.* New York: Basic Books, 2019, 320 pages.

Mary-Lee Mulholland
Mount Royal University

The nature-nurture debate is perhaps one of the most enduring debates within anthropology and one of anthropology's greatest contributions to public understanding of human behaviour. Most famously, Boas and his students championed cultural relativism while successfully critiquing scientific racists and eugenicists who worked to naturalize racialized categories. These same anthropologists, most notably Margaret Mead, also critiqued the biological determinism of gender, sex and sexuality. In *Are Men Animals? How Modern Masculinity Sells Men Short*, anthropologist Matthew Gutmann challenges us to ask why "racialized ideas about biological capacities" have been largely rejected (except of course within white supremacy) "but beliefs about men's biological capacities and animal urges" have not (2019: 229). Drawing on research in the natural and social sciences, including his own multi-sited ethnographic research on masculinity in China, Mexico and the United States, Gutmann argues that the entrenchment of gendered behaviour, specifically toxic masculinity, as biological, is the result of social processes including cultural perceptions of gender and sexuality, confirmation bias and folk science. In the spirit of anthropology's contribution to public understanding of gender and sex, this book is written for a public audience rather than an academic one, and this has some advantages and costs. The book is very accessible and excerpts would make a great addition to undergraduate courses on the anthropology of gender. However, more specialized researchers may be left longing for more concrete examples of recent research that challenges the myth of testosterone and other biological agents of gender.

In order to diminish the widely accepted understanding of masculinity in biological terms, Gutmann employs two strategies. First, using his own fieldwork, Gutmann follows the established anthropological practice of comparison to show how gender and sexuality are not only culturally specific but also historically contingent. He shows how, despite the fact that human biology has remained relatively unchanged over the past tens of thousands of years, there is a vast array of cultural and historical articulations of gender. For example, in Chapter 8, "Reverting to Natural Genders in China," he describes how masculinity and femininity shift under different social and political pressures.

Second, the book looks at pseudo-scientific or folk-scientific claims that gender, especially masculinity, is biological. It examines how confirmation bias, the failure to identify cultural biases in scientific observations, and the impact of shifting political contexts impact scientific claims. In my view, it is this second strategy that is the most compelling and, perhaps unsurprisingly, the one that left me wanting more detail.

For example, Gutmann explores how behaviour perceived as masculine, such as rape, aggression, violence, war, infidelity/promiscuity, and neglectful fatherhood are characterized as determined by masculine biological agents, particularly testosterone. This essentialized understanding of masculinity is best encapsulated by the saying "boys will be boys." Although Gutmann refers to these claims as "folk science," the danger is that there are credentialed scientists who make, support and promote these claims—particularly in fields such as evolutionary psychology and sociobiology.

In Chapter 3, "Monkeys See, Humans Do," Gutmann uses examples from nature to confirm preconceived notions of masculinity and femininity to illustrate how scientists and the public alike fall into a cycle of confirmation bias. Despite the fact that "animals are good to think with," the cultural construction of men as promiscuous predators and women as shy prey is in fact not a universal feature of any animal, including humans. Rather, he documents how scientists often use culturally and human-specific terms to refer to animal behaviour, which in turn confirms that behaviour in humans. For example, there are "hummingbird prostitutes, baboon harems, and mallard gang rapes" (79). Regarding the latter, although "forced copulation" is not a universal behaviour among males of the species and rarely results in successful reproduction (two to five percent of offspring are the result of forced copulation), it is often cited as evidence for biological explanations of human rape (81).

Gutmann concludes this chapter by drawing on the research of feminist scientists such as Rebecca Jordan-Young, who show that there is a wide range of sexual behaviour in animals, including mating for life, sex for pleasure, same-sex sex and more. Therefore, no one type of animal sexual behaviour can be naturalized for humans.

Importantly, while Gutmann criticizes the confirmation bias of biological determinism, he does not discount nature or biology altogether. Rather, like many anthropologists today, he focuses on the biosocial as integrated rather than binary. Here he draws on examples from science, including epigenetics, to show that human bodies (including hormones, brains and DNA) are deeply impacted by social and political contexts, including poverty, violence, and enculturation.

For example, in Chapter 4, "Male Libido," he challenges the research that argues that men's brains are predisposed to being visual and therefore susceptible to pornography by asking whether we might also investigate whether it is actually masculinity that shapes men's brains. Here he claims that children's brains are remarkably similar and that it is only in adulthood that we begin to see gender or sex differences in the brain. He builds on this in Chapter 9, "Can We Change Our Biology?," where he introduces the reader to epigenetics and its potential to better understand the biosocial, including the intergenerational effects of violence and trauma.

Perhaps the book's most original contribution is Gutmann's portrayal of the male body as a fetish. While women's bodies are objectified and rendered inert, men's bodies become fetishes in that they "seem to have power over the same humans who created them" (214). Here he uses the example of the fact that the majority of mass shooters in the US are predominantly young white men, yet their behaviour is often reduced to biological agents such as testosterone rather than their gendered, racialized, and classed existence. Similarly, he compares the problem of reducing men to animalistic traits to the search for the "gay gene." "The problem with talking about the gay gene is, ultimately, that there is no biological material that is shared by all gay men because there is no universally accepted meaning of gay to begin with. The quest for the gay gene is a classic case of fetishizing the body and looking for bodily explanation (genes) to explain cultural categories (gayness)" (216). Thus, for Gutmann, the fetishization of the male body, and in particular, the power assigned to testosterone, sells men short. This in turn limits the potential for alternatives to toxic and hegemonic masculinities, which is detrimental to all of us.