

Matthew Gutmann

Are Men Animals? How modern masculinity sells men short. New York: Basic Books.

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DAVID W LAWSON

University of California, Santa Barbara

In *Are Men Animals?*, anthropologist Matthew Gutmann sets out to debunk the popular trope that “*boys will be boys*,” i.e., that the undesirable behaviors of the rougher sex can be chalked up to an uncompromisingly deterministic view of human nature. If men are dangerous by design, then we can’t blame them for simply following their nature, can we? It’s a timely, provocative topic. The book is aimed at a popular audience, crammed with personal anecdotes and observations, with the overall objective of demonstrating that masculinities are far more diverse than some might expect. But frustratingly, Gutmann appears more invested in condemning researchers working on sex and gender for inadvertently letting men off the hook, rather than actually accounting for why men behave the way they do, and identifying factors that drive global variation in gender norms. These questions are left largely unexplored, leaving an explanatory void after a framework of “bioskepticism” has been established.

Gutmann takes aim at the speculated role of hormones, genetics, and evolution itself in shaping men’s (bad) behavior. His critiques are well-founded. It doesn’t take much digging to find past and present examples of poor scholarship on these themes, and his call to hold scientists accountable for the use and misuse of their findings is warranted. Yet Gutmann’s evaluation is uneven and shallow, repeatedly falling back on outdated dichotomies of biology vs. culture (or

nature vs. nurture) that reinforce popular misunderstandings, rather than bringing conceptual clarity to the topics at hand. Most glaringly, the reader is repeatedly informed that because masculinity is demonstratively malleable, biology cannot be meaningfully implicated. For example, rising homicide rates in Haiti following the 2010 earthquake are positioned as evidence that biology plays no role in violence – since it would be impossible for human physiology to adapt to rapid environmental change. This is a crude misrepresentation of how evolution works, failing to recognize that, even in non-human animals, context-driven phenotypic plasticity has long been anticipated and demonstrated, such that individuals with the same genes, brains and bodies respond flexibly to local environments. By Gutmann’s same logic, I could use data on my dog’s daily mood swings to argue that it had been unburdened from its animal nature, had developed culture, or perhaps free will.

A focus on finger-pointing, also does little to highlight the vitality of contemporary anthropological scholarship on gender. Illustrating this point, early in the book, a series of case studies are presented to highlight examples where men’s behavior counters popular notions, (e.g., ritualized homosexual behavior among the Sambia of Papua New Guinea). Yet, these examples are treated merely as ‘gotcha!’ moments (try to explain that, biology!), with little elaboration on why such alternative masculinities came to be in certain places and times. It’s as if the objective of anthropology is only to retort “It’s more complicated than that,” rather than to account for human diversity on its own terms. Gutmann also does little to engage with a now large body of anthropological scholarship on the evolution of culture itself, or the work of evolutionary social scientists in studying the roles of learning and development in ways that eschew a neat separation between biology and culture. The final chapter of the book provides a

discussion of epigenetics, but remains more concerned with point scoring for culture over biology, than in illustrating what can be specifically learned about the construction of gendered behavior.

*Are Men Animals?* succeeds in demonstrating that masculinities are diverse and men are capable of positive change. In these respects, it is a very welcome contribution to public conversations on men and masculinities. However, these observations are not novel for scholars of gender. I would have liked to see a more forceful examination of what it really means to blame a fixed nature for bad behavior, and the origin of such prescriptive beliefs on sex and gender more generally, that predate the science on trial here. Why do all societies form gender stereotypes, and why do these stereotypes vary across societies in patterned ways? In this sense, the premise of the book is never fully interrogated. Isn't all men's behavior, including the actions of better men, unquestionably natural? Surely appealing to nature to defend bad behavior is a prime example of the naturalistic fallacy. And even if we accept a harsh separation of biology and culture, if behavior is not biologically determined, is it then best understood as culturally determined? Does this also open the door for men to escape responsibility by blaming their upbringing, religion or influential peers? There is a missed opportunity here, not only to explain the commonalities and differences in men's actions worldwide, but to consider how best to combine deterministic models of human behavior, including theories of cultural influence, with questions of men's culpability.