

# Book Reviews



**Roy F. Baumeister, *IS THERE ANYTHING GOOD ABOUT MEN?* New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.**

Roy F. Baumeister is Francis Eppes Eminent Scholar and Director of the Social Psychology Area in the Department of Psychology at Florida State University. In 2007, at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, in San Francisco, Professor Baumeister presented an invited address with the same title as his most recent book. The address has been made available by the author at <http://www.psy.fsu.edu/~baumeistertice/goodaboutmen.htm>. It presents an overview of what is developed further in the present volume and serves as a good introduction to it.

In the acknowledgements to *Is There Anything Good About Men?*, Professor Baumeister notes that among his colleagues “quite a few advised me not to write this book. They thought that saying anything favorable about men is taboo and could seriously damage my career.” (p. vii). This comment is telling, for why should it occur to anyone that speaking well about males might be harmful to one’s academic life and reputation? In fact, to do so in academe today generally generates one of two sorts of responses: (1) an immediate side-stepping of the discussion at hand about men to the reiteration of claims about how poorly women are doing in the Western world overall and how “out of balance” matters stand for women in academe in particular, or (2) dismissive looks of disdain.

I wonder whether anyone left Professor Baumeister's address. More important, I wonder how many members of the American Psychological Association decided not to attend his presentation merely on the basis of its title.

Of the two responses mentioned, the first is notable insofar as it represents a tactic among some academics to dismiss the importance of talking about the situation for boys and men, in academe and at large. There continue to be ample discussions of how girls and women are doing, and these are well-attended and enthusiastically received. They are *de rigueur* for nearly any conference in the social sciences and no one would be tolerated who interrupted a speaker explaining how more must be done, for example, for young women in college. The second response is alarming, since dismissal of any topic in academe is tantamount to declaring that intellectual life in the university is over. Might I like to renew the argument for the validity of phrenology? If I raised the topic, I should not be interrupted by someone saying that brain science is worth talking about instead. And what if someone were to scoff at me while presenting, leave the room, or decide in advance not to attend my session? They might miss a provocative presentation that provided me, say, with an opportunity to compare the success of Gall's "science" with that of Freud's "science." Unless they had attended my presentation, they would not have heard that the "whole climate of opinion" psychoanalysis created might have had originated in what people like to believe and that such tendencies are much like those that drew the interest of so many to the central idea of phrenology. My point is that obstructing and dismissing should not be part of the world of academe. They are, however, handy tools for propagandists and zealots, many of whom now mask as scholars and teachers in academe.

I suggest to all that they have a look inside Professor Baumeister's new book, which has much the same style of his address. Witty and friendly, it is a book that offers an explanation of "why men have dominated culture and ruled the world" (p. 4), echoing Steven Goldberg in his *Why Men Rule* (1999). It is not that "men were naturally superior to women" or that "men must somehow be working together to keep women down ... and to oppress women" (p. 4). Against the "men are smarter than women" or "men are wicked conspirators against women" proposed explanations is one founded on "some basic likes and dislikes" found in men and women, respectively, and the different ways each sex treats the other (p. 4). Acknowledging that "culture grew out of the way men related to each other, more than out of women's relationships" (p. 4), a datum established two decades ago by anthropologist David Gilmore in *Manhood in the Making* (1991), Professor Baumeister's book is fundamentally "about how culture works," not about preferences within a given culture (Chapters 7 and 9; see especially p. 138).

The author exhorts: "Gender Warriors Please Go Home" (p. 6), a subheading of the opening chapter. In this chapter on his "odd, unseasonal question" about men, he makes the fundamental point that "most women don't really see men as the enemy, except as taught by some highly politicized Women's Studies classes" and that "likewise, most men don't see women as the enemy" (p. 6). He is surely correct about most women outside of academe. Professor Baumeister adds: "The feminist view of what male society is all about is wildly off the mark" (p. 7). Having read this sentence, one must wish the author well and hope he is safe. It is not long ago that an author such



as Esther Vilar was threatened with bodily harm for speaking out against feminists by some who read her book *The Manipulated Man* (1971). Forty years ago may seem to be a long time, but if such behavior by presumably high-brow readers was possible then, perhaps our author is right to worry about his career now. Or perhaps we are now even more an academe in which ignoring all but what we want to hear is more likely going to be the tactic used to discredit Professor Baumeister's book. I note in passing that 'ignore' is the root of the word 'ignorance' and witness to the prevalence of the tendency throughout academe to ignore that with which one disagrees on ideological ground. In fact, a talk in favor of the scientific merits of phrenology is more likely to be attended than one on what is good about men, assuming that most academics educated since 1990 have heard of phrenology. But they have heard about patriarchy.

After studying the sections on "feminism" and "the imaginary feminist" (who will appear throughout Professor Baumeister's book) (pp. 8-10), as well as the remainder of the introductory chapter, the reader will go on to be acquainted in detail, in the second chapter, with the two explanations to which the author's own is given in counterpoint: that "men really are better AND worse than women" (p. 38). This claim represents the starting point for "the theory we've never tried" (pp. 38-39) which is at the heart of Professor Baumeister's study. Here the reader might reflect back on the subtitle of the volume: "How Cultures Flourish by Exploiting Men." The "trade-off theory of gender," which the author proposes, states that men and women are "different but equal" (p. 38) and that "being better at one thing is linked to being worse at something else" (p. 40), since, obviously, no one is good at everything (or is that true for certain women?).

Professor Baumeister takes seriously certain claims of evolutionary psychology and biology, including that of innate biological differences. It would be a shame if any reader of this review were to move on after reading the words 'evolution' and 'biology', not even having taken a look at the link to Professor Baumeister's address. If you are still with me and have not looked at the address, please do so now. It provides all that I could by way of details about why the "theory we've never tried" is feasible. I will bring only three points to the prospective reader's attention because they seem essential to me.

First, men *do* include the best among human beings, but they also include the *worst*. This has to do with biology and is seen in the greater presence of men as compared to women at the extremes of the so-called normal distribution: more geniuses and more mentally defective human beings among all males. The second is the relative paucity of representation in the gene pool of men who have lived. We are more "woman" than "man," and not only embryologically (as I like to point out to my students after I ask them: "By the way, why do men have nipples?"). This is because of the expendability of males in the order of things (see Chapter 8) as well as the limited chances for *most males* to have had access to females in the drama of reproduction (see Chapters 4 and 10). Finally, there is Professor Baumeister's point about preferences as having to do with motivation and therefore with what might draw an individual to one field of activity rather than another—for example, to engineering rather than one of the social sciences or humanities (see Chapter 3).

For the rest, I recommend this book because of the good humor in which it is written. If Professor Baumeister is against anything or anybody (which I doubt), it is those who would ignore some serious issues about the currently precarious situation of boys and men and might in so doing fail to estimate accurately the cost of disregarding what is good about men in 21<sup>st</sup> century culture.

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**Paul Lonardo, *STRIKE IX: THE STORY OF A BIG EAST COLLEGE FORCED TO ELIMINATE ITS BASEBALL PROGRAM AND THE TEAM THAT REFUSED TO LOSE*, Concord: Infinity Publishing (2009).**



American males are expected to be good sports. In the United States boys routinely undergo non-consensual genital cutting (although subjecting girls to any form of circumcision is illegal in this country); young men are required to register for selective military service (although young women are not); and men are persistently underrepresented in higher education classrooms (although, as the American Association of University Women reports, women have earned the majority of bachelor degrees since 1982, and they now also earn most graduate degrees). American men are, moreover, often disadvantaged by parenting and gender-equality laws, and their average life expectancy is lower than women's (currently, 75.3 years versus 80.4, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). The fact that most American males currently accept these disparities is a testament to their customary stoic response to trying circumstances.

Men are, however, overrepresented on the playing fields of the United States; consequently, male athletic teams supported by many American educational institutions are subject to legal remedies governed by Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972, which states that "[n]o person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance," with expedient exemptions granted to single-sex schools and voluntary youth organizations such as the Y.M.C.A. While the Education Amendments Act is supposed to affect all aspects of higher education, it is generally applied in cases where women are underrepresented in athletics. Usually, the prescribed remediation adversely affects men's teams. Title IX compliance often involves the elimination of men's teams rather than the addition of women's teams. Scarce resources have made gender equality for athletes a zero-sum game. Paul Lonardo's *Strike IX* documents the final season of Providence College's baseball team when college administrators had decided that achieving gender equality in sports would entail the loss of men students' opportunities to play baseball, golf, and tennis at this majority-women-student school.

At Providence College, conforming to federal gender-equality quotas and providing the same resources for students of both sexes trumped students' need for gender equity and the provision of appropriate supports for both sexes to excel. Imposed standards of gender equality, rather than real indicators of different male vs. female students'