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Book Review: Fatherhood Politics in the United States

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BOOK REVIEWS

Fatherhood Politics in the United States, by Anna Gavanas. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004. 208 pp., \$32.50.

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The fatherhood responsibility movement urges men to take on more responsibility in the family, emphasizes sharing the burden of child rearing, encourages the presence and participation of fathers as more than just a paycheck, and provides support for men to view male family involvement as personally fulfilling. Is this not what women have been advocating since the beginning of the feminist movement? If so, then why has the fatherhood responsibility movement been viewed with suspicion by feminists, given that one might instead see the activities of these men as a long-awaited response to the demands women have been making all along?

In *Fatherhood Politics in the United States*, anthropologist Anna Gavanas argues that the fatherhood responsibility movement may be a positive development, as it advocates an incorporation into the center of the family a father figure that has been noticeably absent from parenting and family life. However, she also found that this movement appears in part to be a rather angry male reaction to contemporary cultural and structural shifts—meaning, feminist inroads that have been made within the last few generations—that have changed the definition of parenting to one that precludes male participation in a way that makes sense to men *as men*. According to members of the movement, the role of father in the family has been so reduced that men are now without a place; men have been “marginalized” within the family, their roles co-opted by women and feminist ideology. It is a masculinization of parenting that preoccupies these men as they attempt to reclaim the family from the feminine sphere, emphasizing the contributions that only men are capable of making on the basis of their biologically determined gender role.

Most important to this study, however, is one of Gavanas’s main contributions to the field of studies on men’s movements: the extent to which she views race and class as structuring the politics of the fatherhood responsibility movement. She distinguishes two “wings” of the movement, clustering the various organizations she encounters according to their racial, socioeconomic, and ideological approaches. The “fragile-families” wing, as she calls it, represents low-income, poor, and minority men and emphasizes equal opportunities for education and breadwinning. The “pro-marriage” wing, however, promotes marriage as the key to fatherhood responsibility for “all

types of men,” although the men in this wing are overwhelmingly white and middle-class.

It is in this distinction between the two wings of the movement that her study becomes particularly interesting. The fragile-families organizations employ a structuralist and economic perspective to family formation, focusing on the barriers that men encounter in the labor market in achieving an income that would allow them to support a family. Their politics highlight “the dissonance between gendered social expectations for men to be natural-born breadwinners and the actual opportunity structures of low-income, poor, and minority men” (p. 75). Tensions and contradictions characterize their approach to gender relations; their rhetoric suggests that men should step up to claim their position as head of the family as part of the process of recovering their manhood, whereas other leaders and members advocate a sharing of leadership and familial responsibility with women.

The pro-marriage wing of the fatherhood responsibility movement, on the other hand, concentrates on men’s moral obligations as husbands and fathers. Its members stress conceptions of gendered and sexual difference between women and men, using words such as “complementarity” to argue for a “natural” gender order. Gavanas found that the pro-marriage wing viewed masculinity as ruled by what she dubs “The Force,” or the notion that all men have innate urges to conquer women and are naturally aggressive and competitive. According to pro-marriage representatives, “these ‘male traits’ need to be contained and harnessed through external incentives” such as marriage and family, thus channeling the Force into constructive goals of breadwinning and responsible fatherhood (p. 46).

Gavanas’s most insightful contribution is when she brings to our attention the extent to which the two wings draw on different historical and ideological foundations for their masculinity politics. African American masculinity politics revolve mainly around rights and recognition in relation to *other men*, whereas the primarily white middle class contemporary men’s movements (such as the Promise Keepers) defend notions of gender difference between men and *women*. For the fragile-families groups, the struggle to achieve manhood as a homosocial competition has a long and developed history in the civil rights movement. Poor and minority men tend to view fatherhood politics as a battle to “catch up” with white middle-class men; white and middle-class men in the pro-marriage group, however, see fatherhood politics as a struggle to reclaim masculinity from the overreaching influence of women.

The data in this book are drawn from ethnographic fieldwork as well as literary sources such as newspapers, policy material, and reports. Gavanas incorporates books written by major actors in the fatherhood responsibility movement, such as David Popenoe and Wade Horn, using their texts as primary data sources. One minor critique of her study is the rather sparse sprinkling of fieldwork data and the heavy reliance on published written material.

Given the two years of fieldwork that she conducted, I was disappointed to find only a limited amount of participant observation data included in the book; I believe that this would have been more effective in bringing to life her subjects within the movement.

More extensive fieldwork data would have also satisfied the questions I was left with at the end of the book regarding the interactional dynamics Gavanas may have observed both during and outside of the movement meetings and conferences. For example, in what ways are these ideologies regarding fatherhood responsibility implemented within these men's homes and with their families? In the last few pages, she suggests a strong dissonance between expressed values and actual behavior of the movement leaders, a moment in the text which only served to pique my interest in further understanding that dynamic within the movement as a whole. In general, the research and analysis felt a little bit too neat, in that the data appeared to fall exactly where one would expect it. I was left with curiosity about the places of fissures and complications; a stronger ethnographic bent to the research would have been able to investigate these sorts of questions more fully than she was able to do.

As a whole, however, Gavanas's book is successful in explaining how race, class, and gender ideologies structure the politics of a particular men's movement within the United States. It is a useful read for those who are interested in learning about the dynamics of men's movements and the debates over the meanings of fatherhood. Although it does not provide any major breakthroughs for theories on masculinity, it is an interesting addition to a body of literature that critically uses a race, class, and gender lens to explain how men are reacting to substantial cultural changes taking place within families.

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Aged by Culture, by Margaret Morganroth Gullette. Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2004. 267 pp., \$46 hardcover; \$18.50 paperback.

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Patriarchy is eroding, and it's not such a good thing. That's one of the conclusions one might draw from Margaret Morganroth Gullette's paradigm-shifting book about age in American culture. Arguing for the new field of age studies, Gullette decries the many ways in which our culture makes people feel that old is bad, while it has also been destroying the job seniority and respect that formerly gave aging some benefits, especially to those white, middle-class midlife men who might be called the patriarchs. Gullette is a