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RELATED ENTRIES

Agrarianism; American Dream; American Revolution; Breadwinner Role; Citizenship; Fatherhood; Immigration; Masculine Domesticity; Patriotism; Property; Republicanism; Self-Made Man; Sentimentalism; Work

—Bryce Traister

CRISIS OF MASCULINITY

It was during the late 1960s that historians first developed the notion of a “crisis of masculinity” to describe the nervous concerns that middle-class men had regarding masculinity and the male body during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This idea not only brought scholarly attention to important changes in constructions of manhood in the twentieth century, but also raised questions about the timing of changes in cultural constructions of masculinity, the extent of uniformity and variation in men’s experiences of social change, and about men’s attitudes toward feminism.

During the nineteenth century, expansion in the West, Manifest Destiny, the market revolution, and, later in the century, an emphasis on the “strenuous life” all suggested the possibility of a secure, uncontested concept of masculinity grounded in market capitalism and ideals of activity and usefulness. Toward the end of the century, however, social and economic changes, including urbanization, the transition from entrepreneurial to corporate capitalism, the rise of bureaucratic structures, and changing career paths for middle-class men, challenged this sense of security by reducing many men’s sense of economic independence and achievement. Whereas mid-nineteenth-century men could at least contemplate moving to the West to restore their economic independence and male autonomy, the closing of the frontier in 1890 according to that year’s U.S. Census Bureau report removed an outlet that had enabled men to compensate for the presumed loss of manliness and opportunity. Finally, by the late nineteenth century, an intensifying women’s rights movement challenged men’s sole control over the public sphere.

These developments led many men, sensing a threat to traditional notions of masculinity to generate new articulations of masculinity. Middle-class men hoped that embracing ideals of toughness and physical strength outside the workplace would counteract any perceived effeminization and

emasculatation and restore a secure and uncontested definition of masculinity.

The phenomenon of the crisis of masculinity was first suggested in studies by George M. Fredrickson (1965), James R. McGovern (1966), John Higham (1970), and Gerald Franklin Roberts (1970). Without referring specifically to gender (which had barely emerged as an important scholarly concept) Fredrickson revealed that the social ideal of the strenuous life developed after the Civil War. McGovern discovered an obsession with virile manliness in the life and work of the muckraking journalist David Graham Phillips, while Higham found widespread interest in a “muscular Christianity,” the male body, and physical exercise in late-nineteenth-century American culture. In an unpublished dissertation, Roberts indicated that a “cult of manliness” had unfolded by the time of the Progressive Era. The feminist scholar Ann Douglas also contributed to the development of this new theory, suggesting in 1977 that manhood in that period had been besieged by a process of feminization. By the late 1970s and the early 1980s, the idea of a nineteenth-century crisis of masculinity had become fully accepted in studies by Joe Dubbert (1974, 1979) and David Pugh (1983).

During the late 1980s and the 1990s, however, many scholars began to challenge this thesis. The first and perhaps most important critique was that it was based on an outdated understanding of gender that considers *male* and *female* as separate constructs, rather than in relation to one another. Second, critics charged that it reduced the range of male experience, privileging some aspects while ignoring others. They charged, for example, that the thesis overlooks the ideal of a corporate teamplayer, which incorporated changing career paths and economic opportunities into a new ideal of manhood. Third, the idea that a crisis of masculinity developed in response to feminist advances implies that all men resisted women’s social and political advances during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thus ignoring such pro-feminist men as the journalist Max Eastman, the educator John Dewey, the medical expert William Sanger (husband of birth control advocate Margaret Sanger), the socialist and author Upton Sinclair, the historian Charles A. Beard (whose wife Mary Beard is often regarded as a founder of U.S. women’s history), and a number of presidents of women’s colleges, including Henry Durant of Wellesley and Henry Noble McCracken of Vassar (as well as Vassar’s founder, Matthew Vassar).

Although the crisis of masculinity thesis is of limited value in explaining the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, its emergence in the 1960s and 1970s illuminates

postwar changes in U.S. society that challenged the notion of a stable and unchanging (white) maleness. During the Cold War era, many Americans demanded male toughness, celebrated capitalism and the male breadwinner ideal, and associated Communism with homosexuality. At the same time, however, a growing number of American men, confronted with new opportunities for leisure, became more critical of breadwinner responsibilities. They received support from cardiologists and developmental psychologists, who provided medical and scientific rationales for greater relaxation and self-indulgence. The late 1960s saw a period of stagflation (economic stagnation with inflation), followed by recession and corporate downsizing beginning in the mid-1980s, all of which further eroded the breadwinner ideal. At the same time, the 1960s counterculture and the feminist, civil rights, and gay rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s all critiqued conventional notions of masculinity and proposed a range of alternative masculinities. Such challenges sparked the emergence of various men's movements in the 1970s and 1980s that sensed uncertainty (some scholars and commentators even called it a "crisis") in the meaning of American manhood and sought new bases for male identity. Some male activists and writers began to speak of a "masculine mystique," and Robert Bly urged a recovery of the "deep masculine" in his 1990 book *Iron John*.

By the 1990s the notion of a crisis of masculinity in contemporary life had begun to make news headlines. Concerns were raised about "deadbeat dads" and the emergence of the "angry white man" as a voter type. Groups like the Promise Keepers (a predominantly white men's organization) and the African-American Million Man March demonstrated an attempt to develop a masculine identity among men. It was against this background that a growing number of scholars began to suspect that their predecessors of the 1960s and 1970s had projected contemporary concerns about masculinity in U.S. society backward in time, thereby distorting history.

In fact, both the codifiers and critics of the thesis are correct. American men and masculinities did indeed experience a crisis that began in the 1880s. The persistent thread through this period was an underlying desire by many men for an uncontested definition of manhood, as well as their discomfort with a proliferation of the gender roles available to both men and women—a proliferation that expanded in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries amid postmodern ideas about gender and gendered identities. The crisis of masculinity thesis and its fate in scholarly circles serve as a reminder that men's studies and men's history are better served by attempts to incorporate men's voices and issues to a multicultural

canon of scholarly and cultural criticism, rather than trying to restore men to the center of academic inquiry.

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RELATED ENTRIES

Breadwinner Role; Cold War; Gilded Age; *Iron John: A Book About Men*; Market Revolution; Masculine Domesticity; Men's Movements; Men's Studies; Middle-Class Manhood; Muscular Christianity; Passionate Manhood; Patriarchy; Postmodernism; Progressive Era; Promise Keepers; Sexual Revolution; Strenuous Life; World War II

—Thomas Winter

CROCKETT, DAVY

1786–1836

Frontiersman, Congressman, and Folk Hero

Although David Crockett was only a minor political and military figure, Davy Crockett became an important cultural icon. While the more refined Daniel Boone established western settlement for families, Crockett developed an appeal closer to that of the frontiersmen “Wild Bill” Hickok and Kit Carson and the outlaw Jesse James. By pursuing daring exploits beyond civilized borders, he represented a competing model of frontier masculinity that resisted the conforming forces of party politics and moral reformers.

Crockett left home at age twelve, working various jobs in rural Virginia before returning to his family in Tennessee. In 1813, he joined the Tennessee Volunteer Militia to fight in the Creek War; he was later elected to the rank of colonel. Failing as a farmer and entrepreneur, he supported his family through his hunting prowess. During his successful campaign for the state legislature in 1821, he derided his opponent as an unmanly “aristocrat” and highlighted his backwoods origin as a sign of his true manhood. After being defeated in a bid for U.S. Congress in 1825, he returned to hunting with amazing success, killing 105 bears in one year, including seventeen in just one week. In 1827, he was elected to the U.S. Congress, where he advocated for homesteaders and opposed Indian removal.

Politically, Crockett opposed President Andrew Jackson, a Democrat and fellow Tennessean who favored education, the rights of large land holders, and a strengthening of the federal

government's executive branch. The Whig Party recognized in Crockett a true “man of the people” whose masculine image could compete with Jackson's, and—anticipating a possible presidential run—the party sponsored a Crockett speaking tour that augmented his reputation for frank speech and his talent as a frontier storyteller. In 1834, Crockett published *A Narrative of the Life of David Crockett*—possibly the first campaign autobiography. Defeated for reelection to Congress later that year, Crockett abandoned his presidential ambitions and set out for Texas, where he joined the anti-Jackson faction of the Texas government. He died on March 6, 1836, at the battle of the Alamo.

Unauthorized autobiographies, popular plays, and the eastern-produced series *The Crockett Almanacks* (1835–56) transformed Crockett into a cultural icon and folk hero by offering humorously exaggerated versions of his exploits; one such tale claimed that he rode his pet alligator up Niagara Falls. The *Almanacks* promoted an untamed, almost boyish manliness, which stood as an alternative to the middle-class ideal of the disciplined and refined gentleman. Although the first series (1835–38) of the *Almanacks* included stories of noble Indians, later editions, reflecting nineteenth-century working-class constructions of manhood, identified manhood with whiteness by depicting violent behavior toward Indians, Negroes, and Mexicans. The popular stage melodramas based on Davy Crockett promoted a less fantastic, more heroic version of Crockett, while preserving his image as a man of plain speech.

The success of Disney's film series *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier*, with the accompanying “Ballad of Davy Crockett,” demonstrated Crockett's continuing resonance in the twentieth century, especially among boys. Crockett's exploits and rhetoric have made him an enduring symbol of the noble man of the wilderness, an image of a pure American masculinity that is grounded in nature and resists refinement.

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