

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Anthony Synnott, *Re-Thinking Men: Heroes, Villains and Victims*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009, 306 pp. \$US 124.95 hardcover (978-0-7546-7709-3)

In *Re-Thinking Men*, Anthony Synnott sets out to counter the increasing negativity directed toward men in feminist and masculinist scholarship by highlighting the accomplishments of men, and pointing out that they are both villains and heroes, victims as well as victimizers. Synnott argues that misandry, the new form of sexism, has become entrenched in North America and the United Kingdom, heavily supported by the media and within popular culture. *Re-Thinking Men* aims to broaden the traditional conceptualization of gender and gender relations through a lens of binary opposites through a more comparative perspective which reconsiders how men and women are more alike than different. Synnott addresses what he rightly perceives as a glaring gap in both feminist and masculinist research and scholarship, offering a humanist perspective on gender and gender relations. He concludes that this more balanced perspective is good for both women and men, moving us closer toward achieving true gender equality and justice.

Synnott starts by discussing various theoretical perspectives on men, including those of leading Men's Studies scholars such as R.W. Connell and Michael Kimmel, arguing that these perspectives, in their pro-feminist approach, tend to be male-negative and misandrous. He discusses four idealist models of manhood, arguing that all are incomplete in explaining what makes a man in contemporary society. Synnott further outlines the way gender has traditionally been cast as dichotomous, in direct opposition, rather than as a fluid continuum, and asserts that this way of thinking prevents true gender equality, simply fuelling "the same old war games" rather than "levelling the playing field." Synnott challenges scholars to re-think gender as far more complex, asking for recognition of "the differences *within* each gender [that] are probably greater than the differences *between* each gender" (p. 96).

The book directs us to re-think men in more positive terms — as Heroes (Chapter 3), not just as Villains (Chapter 4) — and to acknowledge that men, like women, are often Victims (Chapter 5). In discussing men as heroes, villains, and victims, Synnott engages with the literature and scholarship of leading feminists, pointing out that the work of

some of the most lauded and influential feminist scholars of the century has been blatantly misandrous, contributing to the culture of misandry in contemporary society. Though his discussion of men as victims may touch a nerve for some, Synnott provides ample and telling evidence that men are at high risk for injury and death, citing compelling statistics for male suffering due to war, homicide, suicide, accidents and work hazards. He further contends that common conceptions of masculinity and manhood that stress competition, risk-taking, altruism, and self-sacrifice contribute to men's frequent victimization.

Synnott's argument is further advanced by his discussion of gender relations in the context of power. Here, he asserts that the focus has been particularly myopic, often pitting women against men in a struggle for power. This conception tends to overlook the various meanings of power, ignoring that power can be oppressive (having the power "over") but also liberating (having the power "to do"). Synnott offers a more complex and diagonal theory of power and gender relations that considers gender and power as more "fluid" concepts, with multiple lines of power (including gender, race, class, religion, culture, etc.) criss-crossing each other, contributing to the overall power dynamic. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, Synnott lays down a solid argument that empowering women to achieve gender justice need not entail toppling or bringing down men.

The spirit of *Re-Thinking Men* is refreshing. Synnott competently outlines the debates about gender, using a comparative rather than a competitive perspective, avoiding the tendency to offer simple backlash, instead arguing for a more balanced, humanist perspective in theorizing gender that has the potential to empower both women and men. In crafting his arguments, Synnott gives due acknowledgement to the social contexts and differential opportunities that often contribute to the imbalance between women and men, though at times he skips over obvious and important instances. For example, in describing the heroism of men during the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Synnott points out that 401 of the 403 police officers and firefighters who died at the World Trade Center were men, but neglects to mention that policing and fire-fighting are two occupations from which women have traditionally been excluded. This, of course, does not negate the heroism of these brave men, but simply suggests that women, in comparison to men, may have differential access to roles that provide opportunities for acts of heroism. The omission here is unusual, as Synnott takes great pains throughout the book to call attention to the differential opportunities allowed women and men, with participation in the military and wars being one example.

Re-Thinking Men takes a bold risk that may ruffle a few feathers by taking issue with and pointing out flaws in some of the most influential scholarship of feminist writers (such as Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and Andrea Dworkin), and leading Men's Studies scholars (such as R.W. Connell and Michael Kimmel). Nevertheless, the risk pays off by directing Gender Studies scholars to reassess leading feminist and masculinist perspectives, and to reconsider the aims of both the Women's and Men's Movements and how their goals may best be accomplished. Moreover, Synnott's concern about the entrenched culture of misandry (like misogyny) is presented within a convincing argument that is punctuated with vivid examples from history, popular culture, media, research and scholarship. To be sure, this is a concern that need be attended to and addressed.

Overall, Synnott presents a much needed addition to the literature and scholarship on men and masculinity that offers those interested in Gender Studies a fresh, balanced, humanist perspective. The casualness of Synnott's writing offsets a purely academic tone (though, at times, the liberal use of "etc." is distracting), and makes his central arguments compelling, accessible and well-understood. *Re-Thinking Men* is a book that must be given consideration by anyone aiming to achieve gender equality and justice.

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