

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

**PAUL NATHANSON and KATHERINE K. YOUNG, *Spreading Misandry: The Teaching of Contempt for Men in Popular Culture*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. 2001, 250p (+100 p. appendix).**

*Spreading Misandry* is the first volume in a promised trilogy designed to identify pervasive sexism negatively stereotyping men in North American popular culture (The authors refer to contempt for men in popular culture as misandry). Nathanson and Young attempt to make two points: first, misandry is extremely pervasive; second, North American society is gynocentric (a world view that society revolves around women). These two points are related in that because society is gynocentric, society is at the same time misandric because it fails to respond to the needs of men.

*Spreading Misandry* contains a few interesting insights into the cultural construction and meaning of masculinity. However, this work is seriously flawed in three important areas: lack of theoretical connection, especially in its use and misuse of feminist theory, of weak methodology, and its inability to link culture with structure

*Spreading Misandry's* lack of theoretical connection does not allow for an exploration of key concepts and the relationship between variables of interest. For instance, the authors make brief, unconnected mention of the intersections of gender, race and social class. Their choice not to build on previous work is an unnecessary flaw as previous work on gender has provided important insights into gender and specifically masculinity. Contrary to the authors' comment that work on gender means work about women, there is an excellent literature examining the social construction of masculinity (see e.g. Hearn (1990); Kimmel (2000, 1996); Messerschmidt (2000, 1997, 1993); Messner (1990); and an educational video production Jackson Katz, "Toughguise."

Not only is *Spreading Misandry* a-theoretical, it is anti-theoretical. Instead of drawing on feminist theories that problematize gender, Nathanson and Young are very critical of feminist theory. However, they narrowly define their understanding of feminist theory by lumping various strands of feminist theories together and referring to them as ideological feminism. Their dislike of radical feminism heavily influences their ideological feminism. The authors fail to clarify that not all feminist analysis draws on

the principles of radical feminism, and not all feminists believe that every man is a potential rapist (138).

The authors' anti-feminism stand suggests a feminist backlash. Their work is inflammatory in its criticism of feminist theory and feminist research findings and in its disdain for academic feminists. Already in Chapter One, the authors pursue a course of analysis that does that which they criticize others for— polarize gender. In fact, the authors argue that misandry is the fallout of feminism; misandry is the result of feminism's success and popularity.

In addition to the lack of a theoretical connection, *Spreading Misandry* suffers from methodological weaknesses. Their analysis of popular culture is heavily reliant on descriptions of selective television and cinematic productions. However, the productions and episodes described represent their argument in only a limited way as the episodes are open to competing interpretations. For example, the sitcom "Home Improvements" (Chapter Two), according to the authors, presents Tim Allen as promoting a negative stereotype of men that has become very popular. However, Nathanson and Young fail to examine all male characters presented in the sitcom. Other male characters in "Home Improvements" represent more positive constructions of masculinity including compassion, wisdom and intelligence. Consequently, the author's analysis of male characterization in sitcoms is narrowly defined and methodologically suspect.

The "Home Improvements" episode demonstrates another important flaw in the work, namely the lack of connection between culture and structure. The benefit of feminist analysis is its ability to draw links between cultural constructions of women and negative structural outcomes. Had the authors made this important connection between culture and structure they would see that there is no negative outcome of misandric stereotypes of men in popular culture. In fact, stereotypes that link men to power, technology and dirt (as Tim Allen) continue to ensure gendered hierarchies in the work force that reward men.

*Spreading Misandry's* stated goal to make recognizable the extent of misandry in popular culture is lost in its failure to connect their assumptions to sociological theory. The methodology that selectively examines some examples of popular culture and not others and then asks us to accept their interpretation as relevant and not others severely limits the potential of the research findings. Nathanson and Young promote sexism and gender polarization in their oppositional approach to gender. Most importantly, the work is totally divorced from the important connection of culture with structure in that they did not demonstrate a link between misandry in popular culture and the broader societal structures that negatively impact men. Instead of criticizing feminist theories, the authors would be advised to apply many of the findings and concepts of feminist researchers examining gender to an analysis of masculinity. Such would be a more constructive approach to examining gender—both masculinity and femininity. I am not convinced that misandry is a pervasive cultural

pattern. Consequently I do not recommend this book for academic or popular consumption.

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