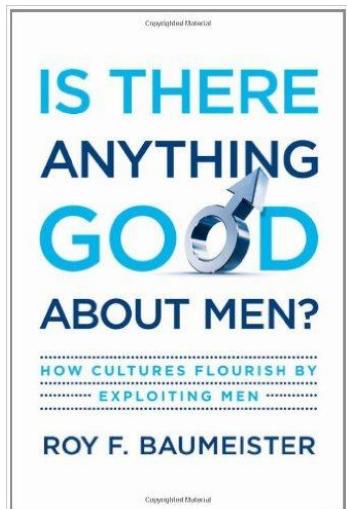


Book Review

Is there Anything Good About Men?: How Cultures Flourish by Exploiting Men

By Roy F. Baumeister



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Scholarship on gender or masculinity in the academy is largely dominated by theorists on the left of the politico-ideological spectrum and sociology remains a key discipline where knowledge on gender and sexuality is produced. Typically, this scholarship draws its approaches and inclination from Marxist tropes of power, oppression, and discourse, and applies them to conclude the historical oppression of women in a patriarchal setup. In this narrative, society and culture have been 'constructed' under the rule of men which explains complex issues of pervasive lower status of women, segregation of sex-roles in which women are routinely assigned the private sphere, gendered violence (domestic and otherwise), wage-gap, rape culture, etc. Over the years, this 'constructedness' of the culture has been challenged from many academic quarters in which the evolutionary approach has sustained an oppositional stance to many of the principle tenets of feminism.

As one of the most eminent social and evolutionary psychologists, Roy F. Baumeister's book titled, *Is there Anything Good About Men?: How Cultures Flourish by Exploiting Men* (2010) employs the Darwinian evolutionary theory to propose the thesis that cultures have 'evolved' in response to their survival needs and that the gender dynamics of the past and the present have been shaped by reproduction at being the topmost priority of humankind. Baumeister also makes use of the researches in the natural sciences or what can loosely be called the biological approach to contest and discredit the social constructivism of feminist philosophy. Quoting brain mappings by Cambridge psychopathologist Simon Baron-Cohen (2003), the author affirms the hardwired

differences in the cognitive make-up of the two sexes in which the male brain is ‘systemizing’ and is driven to investigate or construct giant systems such as the market economy, public/political institutions and so forth, while the female brain is ‘empathetic’ meaning that it is more attuned to understanding intuitively other people’s emotional states and helps them to react accordingly to form meaningful intimate one-to-one relationships.

The motive of Baumeister’s book is essentially to address what he perceives to be the fallacy in the feminist ideology in which the existing social system is perceived as a ‘grand conspiracy against women’ and a fight against ‘patriarchy’ often leads to the implicit and sometimes explicit denunciation of men that is not seen as politically incorrect. While he does not deny that women have been historically and even today routinely oppressed in many ways; his focus here lies in revealing how the same cultures also exploit men in numerous ways in the process of assigning the protector/ provider role for them. The author is of the view that the division of labour in which men belong to the public sphere in contemporary societies has roots in the ancient past; a time before the advent of agriculture. In our attempt to produce more progenies so as to continue our survival in extremely hostile conditions, the tribal cultures used or exploited men’s natural disposition toward creating large systems using casual and loose connection among themselves and pushed men to take up dangerous roles such as hunting for food production, while the women were assigned the secure private sphere of food gathering, caring for the babies, and so on. The cultures saw men as disposable since few men could impregnate numerous women and keep the production of babies going. As humanity made progress, cultures evolved in men’s relation to other men in the public sphere. In other words, the event of evolution led to men’s overwhelming contribution to the development of culture. Culture, therefore, was built upon nature and its progress has been dependent upon pragmatism rather than social equality.

Following Warren Farrell (1993), Christina Hoff Summers (1994, 2000) and other social scientists, Baumeister also questions the premise of patriarchy and claims that men’s exploitation which is indicated by their large-scale killing in wars and homicides, their overwhelming presence in what Farrell describes as ‘death-jobs’, their high suicide rates, their early demise in general as compared to women are glossed over in feminist studies which see men as collective oppressors. He writes that “culture originated as a system to get the most out of men with other systems, so as to enable them to outperform and defeat other groups of men with other systems, and so culture originated as a way of exploiting men” (125). And then he adds that “culture took a look at women and began to find ways of exploiting them too. But the origins of culture lie in the emergence of systems that could make the most out of men in it” (125).

In this way the book can be seen as a polemic against what many on the Right, especially Men’s Rights Activists in the US and other European nations who consider “today’s conventional wisdom in the academia depicts culture and history as revolving around conspiracies among men to oppress women” (P. 84). Baumeister’s writing is lucid and concise, but he repeats the important arguments and findings multiple times which may cause some discomfort to the average reader. But what is really missing in his analysis of contemporary gender relations is that it fails to engage with feminist theories (which are many and disparate) more seriously, as it likes to keep the arguments of radical feminists, the likes of Angela Dworkin and Mary Daly, at the front to produce his counter-narrative. Also, it would have helped if he had provided us with greater amount of scholarly inputs to support his seemingly speculative and hypothetical evolutionary claims. Yet all in all, the book remains an accessible and authoritative (coming from Roy Baumeister) account of natural selection led theory of gender which would interest scholars both

from the Left and Right alike. It will also amuse and interest anyone who is interested in solving the ever complex riddle of gender.

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