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Brenton J. Malin: American Masculinity under Clinton. Popular Media and the Nineties "Crisis of Masculinity"

2006

<https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2006.4.1071>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Bassett, Drew: Brenton J. Malin: American Masculinity under Clinton. Popular Media and the Nineties "Crisis of Masculinity". In: *MEDIENwissenschaft: Rezensionen | Reviews*, Jg. 23 (2006), Nr. 4, S. 456–458. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2006.4.1071>.

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Brenton J. Malin: American Masculinity under Clinton. Popular Media and the Nineties “Crisis of Masculinity”

New York, Washington, D.C./Baltimore, Bern, Frankfurt/Main, Berlin, Brüssel, Wien, Oxford: Peter Lang 2005 (Popular Culture and Everyday Live, Vol. 7), 208 S., ISBN 0-8204-6806-1, € 27,20

As the title suggests, Malin's book explores the depictions of masculinity during the Clinton years and investigates the relationship between popular ideas of masculinity and politics, i.e. “not only masculinity and politics but the politics of masculinity” (p.1). He states that masculinity is culturally and historically determined but is often an invisible social construct. Gender is associated with femininity whereas masculinity is granted a universal, abstract quality proving men are simply citizens, empowering them but disempowering others with more obvious identities such as women or African Americans. He makes his points successfully but he doesn't really bring anything new to the subject. However, what is interesting about his approach is that he uses Bill Clinton, who seemed to be a lightning rod for issues regarding masculinity, as a 90's archetype of a man who is conflicted in his masculinity. Over the years Clinton has been portrayed as broken yet strong, tough (on crime) but sensitive (to our pain), a powerful politician but impotent draft-dodger, embracing a sensitive non-traditional masculinity coupled with a sense of real American manhood. Through Clinton, anxieties about masculinity, a masculinity in crisis, were played out very publicly.

“Sensitivity and softness, the supposed celebrated qualities of the new male are often seen as dangerous distortions of a man's tough warrior character” (p.26). Whereas many producers tried to find a way of balancing sensitivity and toughness, for example, using the ultimate Reagan-era hero, Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Jingle all the Way* (1996), the Starr report casts Clinton as both insensitive and too sensitive. In many Hollywood films those hard men of the 80's metamorphised into more balanced, sensitive characters. Steven Seagal became environmentally friendly in *On Deadly Ground* (1994), Patrick Swayze embraced the zen of surfing in *Point Break* (1991) and even put on drag with Wesley Snipes in *To Wong Foo* (1995). Malin notes that these new male heroes display their increased sensitivity with caution and constantly reference a more traditional masculinity. Seagal's sensitivity “is won via the colonisation of native and working class cultures as well as the assertion of homophobic heterosexual toughness” (p.37). As these are action films, problems are often, ultimately solved through violence. In *To Wong Foo*, Malin asserts that by keeping Swayze's and Snipes' hypermasculine traditions close at hand they “offer a parody of drag's parodic potential” (p.44). Characters in other films are often given hypersexual lifestyles to balance accusations of being unmasculine: hypersexualised in order to highlight heterosexuality. Malin states that these “new deployments of masculinity worked to reproduce

conventionalised masculine values and anxieties, but in the subtly different form of the new, sensitive male” (p.59).

Malin argues that conflicted sensitivity was not the only tension to be negotiated among these new 90's men. Clinton also exhibited a conflicted class status. He was simultaneously 'a good ol' Arkansas boy' but a graduate of Yale and Oxford. Sylvester Stallone as Rocky played a romantised vision of working class masculinity where determination, hard work and distance from middle-class comfort eventually pay off. Working class heroes from the 90's, for example, Jack Dawson, Leonardo Di Caprio's character in *Titanic* (1997), is not only useful with his fists but is also an artist. Middle-class cultural capital balances out his lower-class experience. Jack is thus depicted as both, and neither, working and middle-class.

Another area of conflicted masculinity is that of fatherhood. Depictions of fatherhood culminated in Bill Cosby in *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992). The Cosbys were an affluent African American family, the successful product of the consumerist 80's. Whereas, Al Bundy in *Married with Children* (1987-1997) and Homer Simpson in *The Simpsons* (1989-) excessively desire a host of stereotypically masculine goods, from sex to chili to beer. "Far from the 80's dutiful dad, they struggle to negotiate their priorities, feeling a powerful discord between their hyperconsumptive desires and the needs of their families" (p.75).

The observation has been made that Clinton is an honorary black. He displays typical tropes for blackness: he comes from a single parent household, born poor and working class, saxophone playing and junk food loving. Clinton's campaigns deliberately tried to identify him with the African American community. However, if Clinton can be construed as black, this calls attention to the cultural constructedness of "blackness" which suggests the unstable contours of "whiteness". "Just as class has a troubled relationship to dominant notions of masculinity so does race" (p.100). Malin's chapter 'The Exotic White Other' explores the way the 90's male conflicted status of race vis-à-vis race problematises and rehabilitates their whiteness. By looking at 90's icons like Jean-Luc Picard in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-94), Martin Riggs in the *Lethal Weapon* (1987-98) series, Fox Mulder from in *X-Files* (1993-) and John Dunbar in *Dances with Wolves* (1990), the author concludes that they offer up a whiteness that "subsumes the nonwhite others through which they unwhiten their own masculinity, reiterating the ability of whiteness to be everything (and thus nothing)" (p.101).

The most interesting chapter compares the replacement of the "Old Paradigm" of the pro-sensitive Clinton-era with the post-9/11 "New Paradigm" of the nationalistic, hypermasculine Bush age. Malin makes some very pertinent observations about how depictions of masculinity became even more conflicted after 9/11. Much media attention was paid to the fire fighters and policemen trying to cope with the emergency at the Twin Towers. These public servants mainly came across

as eminently heroic but also profoundly vulnerable. In America “the notions of the self-made man provided a masculine identity, allowing American men to define themselves through hard work and ingenuity rather than through some aristocratic notion of birthright” (p.144). These heroes’ helplessness and defeat in the face of such a catastrophe depicted a masculinity that was both strong, and sensitive and vulnerable, but a masculinity that was able to bounce back which also resonated with the country as a whole.

In addition, issues around sensitivity and courage were used to promote a specific form of ideology. Fire fighters running into burning buildings were considered to be courageous, terrorists flying suicide missions were not, and to say they are, would be considered as insensitive. In this way, much debate was closed down. This allows people to put forth arguments without having to justify them. In a culture obsessed with masculinity, it’s too easy to accuse someone of being a coward or being insensitive. It is at this point when Malin’s whole thesis is summed up. He believes that if we fail to think critically about these terms, we acquiesce to masculine ideas by “advertisers, propagandists and ideologues who hope to capitalise on this cultural blindness” (p.171).

The book is well-written and thought provoking. Clinton is an excellent choice for a detailed examination. As conflicted as the mainstream vision of 90’s masculinity seems to be, it still resurrects the vision of manhood it presumes to leave behind. After reading Malin’s observations and analyses you begin to notice how politicians and political commentators use ambiguous concepts around masculinity to promote their own agenda. After all, what could be more “Orwellian” than Bush’s description of his own ideology as “compassionate conservatism”?

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