

Book Reviews



Michael Kimmel, *Angry White Men, American Masculinity at the End of an Era* (New York: Nation Books, 2013).

Aggrieved, Armed, and Dangerous?

In *Angry White Men*, Michael Kimmel, a professor of sociology and gender studies, reports that there's a male minority out in the country (he meets them at gun shows, rural diners, or on right-wing extremist web sites where they inevitably remain anonymous) suffering a sense of "aggrieved entitlement." They tell Kimmel they feel that their country has gone wrong, that the power of the white male establishment is now held by immigrants, Blacks, Jews, women, homosexuals, and corporate interests. Ranging, in Kimmel's unnuanced perspective, from Tea Party Republicans to the leadership of the NRA to neo-Nazis, these men feel they've lost their primogeniture, their birthright as white Christian males. And angered by their loss they feel the need to assert their manhood.

They do this on web sites, blogs, and on talk radio. Some arm themselves, form militias, bond over gun or fight clubs. Their heroes range from Timothy McVeigh to Rush Limbaugh. Their political views can be paranoid. Many believe they will have to take up arms either against the government or to protect themselves from the government. Although not completely delusional—after all, the demographics of the country are changing, women and minorities are finally beginning to gain their place in the corporate and political power structure, and LGBT persons have come out of the closet. Still, every once in awhile one of these aggrieved Esaus becomes not only armed, but dangerous, threatens overt action, or actually fires.

None of this is news or new. Just ask the folks at the Southern Poverty Law Center. Even Kimmel admits that angry white men who feel that their rights are being trampled have existed since the beginning of the republic. And they have been just as angry and perhaps even more violent, from the Whiskey Rebellion that George Washington's government had to put down to the Know-Nothings and nativists of the 1850s, from the white mobs that lynched Blacks during reconstruction to Henry Ford's crazed rantings against immigrants, Blacks, and Jews in his Dearborn Independent. Rush Limbaugh? Mike Savage? Poor relations to Father Coughlin or Orval Faubus. So what is Kimmel's point?

Think of Columbine, he asks. Think of any of the school or campus rampage killing. What do they have in common? They were all, or nearly all, committed by young white men. Young white men who, as Kimmel sees it, feeling powerless armed themselves and, to assert their manhood, took action against their perceived oppressors.

Now think of divorced men looking for justice against the system that they feel favored their wives. Or men who feel the world now demands more of them as fathers. More aggrieved men. They, too, have to assert their manhood and sometimes act violently against, most particularly, against the women in their lives.

Kimmel believes that if we connect the dots we'll learn that the parlous state of masculinity among these angry white males represents a phenomenon we ought to recognize and deal with in order to prevent its growth and more violent expression. All in all it's perhaps a magazine-length hypothesis or a talk show talking point since the threads with which Kimmel ties together all these men and events begin to fray under any close scrutiny. In the end it's neither a very cogent nor very meaningful argument—even as an exercise in pop social psychology where anecdotes stand in for data and data can be mixed and mismatched.

To begin with, one has to accept Kimmel's assertion that because one can find correlations in the experience and expressions of an aggrieved white supremacist, an aggrieved white male student killer, and an aggrieved white divorced man, then the causes of their aggrievements are somehow related. One also has to conclude that because young white males commit most school rampage shootings that these shootings, if studied, will tell us something more general about young white males. And because the shooters were, at least as Kimmel tortures the data, for the most part more or less bullied or more or less outsiders or more or less loners, we can know more or less something about their individual psyches, their acts of violence, and the nature of masculinity in society that spawned them.

While it's human nature to want to make sense out of seemingly random senseless events, the fact is that sometimes you have to conclude that some events, no matter how awful, are, in fact, senseless. They're rare. In Kimmel's own words, they're "extremely rare. More than 99 percent of public high school have never had a homicide." They're outliers. And as such they may have no larger context or meaning. Kimmel himself, at one point in the book, rails against "alarmists" who "revel in a veritable orgy of correlations." Here's just a tasting from his own: A troubled young man in Colorado buys an automatic weapon and kills people in a movie theater. Troubled young men at Columbine High School in Colorado go on a rampage. A troubled young man kills 32 at Virginia Tech. In Kimmel's view all related. Not by actual facts, because Kimmel is fast, loose, and sometimes disconcertingly facile with his facts. But by what comedian Stephen Colbert liked to call "truthiness," a sense that things are true if they seem as if they ought to be true.

For instance, to make his point that somehow these angry white men, young and old, are related Kimmel maps out on a US map thirty-two “rampage shootings” from 1982 to 2008. He doesn’t actually define what a rampage shooting is: Is it 2 people? 4? 20? No matter. All are equally x’s on his map. And then he offers his x’s placed on another map, this one of the red and blue states from the election of 2006. Lo and behold the majority of his x’s are clustered in the red states which, Kimmel suggests, tells us something about the political culture and by extension the nature of the way the people in these states see the world. Their politics, therefore, might give us some insight into the frequency of rampage shootings in their states. This might be interesting if it were true. But Kimmel chooses to ignore the fact that there were a few national elections during this time period and a look at the election map from say 1996 shows those red state x’s clustered in blue states. Even if we accept the premise that these states have a greater number of aggrieved angry white men (although how angry is angry, how aggrieved is aggrieved Kimmel doesn’t say or attempt to define)—but if they do, then the percentage of those who actually act violently is statistically infinitesimal. And yet Kimmel draws conclusions from this and other cherry-picked data.

In fact, the things that we can say for certain about all these events seem to tell us some different but perhaps more provable and interesting things. One could, using the principle of Occam’s razor, hypothesize that the thing these states with clusters of x’s indicating rampage shootings have in common is that it’s far too easy in all these places for unstable aggrieved white men to acquire high powered weapons. Second, we can say for certain that the victims of these school rampage killings are almost all white. And though each of these incidents involves more than one person, the annual total of young non-white youth killed by non-white youth is greater than all the white victims of rampage shootings by Kimmel’s angry young white men put together.

Kimmel’s aggrieved white men are just louder and, whether they think so or not, more readily heard by the mass media (and Kimmel’s as well) than the angry men and young men of color with far more reasons to be angry about everything from poor schools to lower job prospects. Kimmel also neglects the young boys, white and non-white alike, who are frustrated by an education system that seems to ignore their needs and that may create a generation of young men who feel out of place in or resentful of higher education.

Yes, some of Kimmel’s angry white men may have some reasons to be aggrieved and some, like any other troubled souls, may be in need of help. But few go out and shoot people. Those few who do have their own reasons—lots of kids are bullied but not many commit mayhem. And to assert that all these troubled young killers are somehow related one to another is just sheer speculation. In fact, nothing that Kimmel posits here can be proved or disproved. Science, as Stephen Jay Gould wrote, “is not a list of enticing conclusions.” But this is pretty much all that Angry White Men gives us.

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