

# Book Reviews



**Paul Nathanson and Katherine K. Young, *Legalizing Misandry: From Public Shame to Systemic Discrimination Against Men*. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2006. 650 pages**

This book is, in a word, courageous, in one sense in particular: it exposes how ideologies, “isms” based on an assumed superiority in which one group feels entitled to power over another, have no place in the quest for social justice, equality among human beings, because a state of inequality is inherently undermining of human well being. The example presented by Paul Nathanson and Katherine K. Young of McGill University, in their book *Legalizing Misandry*, is that of ideological feminism. This is the second book in their trilogy, *Spreading Misandry* being the first and *Transcending Misandry* the forthcoming concluding volume.

*Legalizing Misandry: From Public Shame to Systemic Discrimination Against Men*, despite its breadth, may have only skimmed the surface of the topic of institutionalized hatred against men in North American society, a “top-down” phenomenon with ideological third wave feminism as its source. Yet the book brings the full range of the current anti-male discourse in US and Canadian academic and legal circles into the spotlight, examining, among other issues, sexual abuse, violence against women, workplace harassment, child custody, prostitution and pornography, and human rights as entitlements.

Each of these topics is dealt with in an remarkably detailed and thoroughly-referenced man-

ner. The book presents a bleak outlook. In the years since its publication, however, there is mounting evidence of a recognition of the flaws of ideological feminism, of the inherent misandry and undermining of gender equality that Nathanson and Young expose, and policy shifts away from an ideological feminist position: examples include the rise of equal shared parenting legislation in numerous US states and abroad; the recognition of the centrality of both parents in children's lives in discussions about the need for universal child care benefits; and beginning attempts at inclusion of men's studies in university curricula, all hopeful signs of the decline of "superiority feminism" in favor of a more egalitarian orientation in the realm of gender relations.

Despite the significant contribution made by this volume in the field of gender relations, the work of Nathanson and Young has largely been discounted by and excluded from the curricula of departments of women's studies and gender relations in North American universities. Yet in regard to challenging dominant assumptions in these fields, their book is without parallel. In the chapter on child custody, for example, the authors expose the false assumption that fathers' legal claims are unwarranted because most have been largely uninvolved in the routine daily care of their children; the book details fathers' valiant efforts to share parental responsibility despite the many constraints to their active involvement. The outcome is bleak for many responsible fathers, however, as they are relieved from their parenting duties by misguided sole custody decisions made by judges, in the absence of abuse, based on the belief that children are better off with only one "primary" parent when parents disagree on post-separation parenting arrangements. The authors are clear about the injustice of removing loving parents from their children's lives in such cases, and as in other chapters, present a viable social policy alternative, in this case in the form of a legal presumption of joint custody or equal shared parenting after parentalseparation.

The equally contentious issue of family violence is dealt with squarely as a phenomenon that implicates both women and men, as both are capable of abuse, which is manifested in different ways. The separation of violence against women from other forms of violence is ill-advised, according to the authors; as Don Dutton and others have shown, men are represented as primary perpetrators of physical abuse in intimate relationships although data from meta-analytic studies show otherwise, and indirect aggression is scarcely mentioned in the literature, although prevalent in research on aggression. Physical violence directed towards children is actually more likely to be mother-perpetrated. The authors discuss the issue of legal abuse as a particularly injurious yet common example of abuse of men in our society.

In regard to the many instances of gynocentrism, the "self-centred counterpart of androcentrism," discussed in the book, and institutionalized misandry in the form of discrimination in favor of women in a variety of social and legal institutional contexts, one suspects that *Legalizing Misandry* is only partially exposing the "emperor with no clothes." Although the authors note that misandry co-exists with misogyny, in fact the two feed off and reinforce each other, resulting in a hostile climate between women and men in North American society. The alternative of formal, not substantive, equality between men and women, is explicitly ruled out by ideological feminism, with its emphasis on "unequal treatment of (assumed) unequals," expressed by groups such as the (Canadian) National Association of Women and the Law. The lack of recognition that only the equal treatment (of "unequals") can lead to equality, which is equal respect for the basic needs of all, reinforces the existing polarization between the genders and the current "gender wars."

Ideological feminism, as distinguished from egalitarian feminism, the book argues, continues to dominate US and Canadian academic circles, resulting in a conformist and censorious atmosphere intolerant of diverse perspectives, and making a sham of “academic freedom.” *Legalizing Misandry* scrutinizes the research cited by academic proponents of ideological third wave feminism and finds much of it seriously flawed and lacking in credibility. The authors identify biological determinism as the “received wisdom” underpinning such a world view, nested within a rights-based discourse that pits women and men against each other. Most alarming, however, are the ways in which judges and legislators are basing their decisions and policies on such misguided ideological principles, supported by groups such as the Legal Education Action Fund, National Action Committee on the Status of Women, and the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, political advocacy groups within government itself, on the assumption that women constitute a “victim” class (and thereby devalued as inherently weak), and therefore need and deserve special protection, including infringing on the rights of other citizens. In fact, although “officially” a victim class, as men are the “oppressor” class, few segments of North American society currently have more political clout than women.

The book’s most important contribution is its discussion of the price we have paid for our passivity in the spread of ideological third wave feminism, an ideology that has become firmly entrenched and institutionalized, undermining the quest for equal and respectful gender relations and resulting, the authors argue, in moral damage to society as a whole. We live in a society characterized by an increasing gulf and conflict between women and men. There are many whose interests are furthered by perpetuating and exacerbating the conflict, including those whose academic and professional careers are dependent on continuing polarization. Most men and women, however, including those subscribing to the ideals of equality feminism, are seeking egalitarian relations and mutual respect between the genders. Misandry has not replaced misogyny, as the authors claim. The two feed off and exacerbate each other. To the degree that men and women are mindful, respectful and responsible vis-à-vis the essential needs of each other, the gender-based wars may be brought under control. A responsibility-to-needs, as opposed to a rights-based, framework is fundamental in this regard.

In sum, the book is clear in its ethical bottom line: the good end *never* justifies the evil means; that is, sacrificing the needs, interests and rights of some people to serve the interests of other people. All of the worst human catastrophes have been done in the name of some greater good, in the cause of one or another ideology which we believe to be good and right. What is rarely discussed is the interrelationship of means and ends, and the fact that unequal treatment can never lead to equality, but only to disregard of the needs of certain groups and individuals, a “power-over” mentality, and an ideology based on a sense of entitlement—and ultimately hatred of the other.

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