



Measuring manhood: race and the science of masculinity, 1830–1934

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BOOK REVIEW

Measuring manhood: race and the science of masculinity, 1830–1934, by Melissa N. Stein, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2015, 354 pp., \$27 (paperback), ISBN 9780816673032

In this fascinating exposé of American scientific history, Melissa Stein explores the impact constructions of gender (particularly, notions of manhood) had on race-making. In the postbellum era, American scientists fixated on the perceived sexual deviance of newly freed black people: for instance, they measured sex organs and ascribed hypersexualized tropes to their bodies. However, Stein suggests scientists began *Measuring Manhood* well before this period. Through meticulous historical scholarship, her monograph demonstrates that racial science has always been gendered.

Beginning in the 1830s, scientists played important roles in mediating citizenship through constructions of normative masculinity. Chapter One includes a genealogy of ethnology, a field “premised on the belief that the physical body revealed the intellectual, moral, and political capacities of its owner and, by implication, those of his . . . race writ large” (30). Including public figures from all walks of life and both sides of the Mason-Dixon line, ethnologists had two things in common: first, they were all men; and second, they believed in a biologically determined racial hierarchy. Stein shows how racial differences were understood through the lens of “male lineages and patriarchal destinies” (29). Early studies focused on white and black men only, with the choice to exclude women and other races stemming from the ethnologists’ belief that racial difference was most prominent between whites and blacks and more pronounced between men than women. The goal was to construct a racial hierarchy of men; women were not deemed relevant.

Stein argues that scientific constructions of gender, sex, and race shifted in the nineteenth century in response to changing ideological needs of white heteropatriarchy. At a time when slavery seemed a permanent fixture in American life, the main question puzzling ethnologists was racial origin. Though their support of slavery was not unanimous, almost all used moral arguments predicated on racial superiority of white men. Later, when it seemed slavery as an institution was on shaky ground, the pertinent questions for racial science changed and

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“black capacities for both manhood and political agency became major issues” (96).

During the Civil War, scientific studies conducted by the Union army were the first to focus on sexual organs as a measure of capability. In chapter two, Stein demonstrates how measures of “fitness to serve” were extended to understandings of manhood and citizenship and a burgeoning fixation on miscegenation during Reconstruction. Concerns about reproduction intersected with American imperialism, nativism, and the birth of the eugenics movement through the turn of the century. In Chapter Three, Stein explores ethnological literature on homosexuality, which was racialized in critical ways.

While scholars attribute sexology in this period to Darwinism, Stein suggests that this was a continuation of earlier research. Scientific explanations of race and masculinity reflected the evolving ideological needs of society. As a result of the changing position of black people in the nation and an influx of new immigrant groups, white male dominance was threatened. Asserting black sexual deviance, rather than inferior aptitude, was a more powerful tool for maintaining social control. Relating to this was the ideological work of lynching, which Stein discusses in Chapter Four. Despite scientists’ disavowal of the practice (with the castration of black men called for as an alternative), Stein interprets this as not a moral rejection of heinous violence but an attempt to claim authority over the “race problem.”

One of Stein’s main contributions is her use of feminist and queer theories to reveal new layers of American race-making. However, this book is more than an intervention into how sex, gender, and race are intertwined. At the outset, Stein writes that she “seeks to unpack not just the genealogy of racial science, but also its reception and social function” (17). *Measuring Manhood* does just that. Importantly, Stein also provides us with an historical overview of counter-narratives: from responses to ethnology in the antebellum period to the work of Walter White, NAACP leader and anti-lynching activist, which is the subject of Chapter Five. Stein demonstrates that rebuttals to scientific racism were equally gendered; for instance, from the nineteenth century onward, black intellectuals framed their contestations in terms of “manhood rights.” Overall, *Measuring Manhood* is a sobering reflection on the fallacies of “objective” research and the role science has played in shaping social and political life. In this present era of advanced genetic research and considerable sociopolitical turmoil, this is a cautionary tale.

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