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Fatherhood Politics in the United States: Masculinity, Sexuality, Race and Marriage. Anna Gavanas.

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Book Notes

Anna Gavanas, *Fatherhood Politics in the United States: Masculinity, Sexuality, Race and Marriage*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004. \$32.50 hardcover.

Although science research has challenged the notion of a “natural” order of family structures and relationships, showing that these institutions are socially constructed and culturally specific, the idea that traditional family patterns are either biologically or supernaturally determined continues to have much appeal. Many people today believe that traditional family patterns, with their culturally defined gender roles, marriage customs and child rearing practices, are “natural” and universal, and that deviations from these norms are “unnatural” and harmful. Proponents of gay marriage, single parenting, gay and lesbian adoption and reproductive choice are all accused of challenging this “natural” order and undermining the very fabric of society. These views have now been championed at the political level and have inspired numerous policy initiatives designed to preserve the traditional family.

As Anna Gavanas shows in this very thoroughly researched book, recent developments in family and gender politics in the United States have been closely linked to popular masculinity or fatherhood movements as exemplified by the Promise Keepers organization and the Million Man March of October 1995, during which more than 800,000 African American men gathered in Washington DC to affirm their commitment to responsible fatherhood. Founded in 1990, Promise Keepers has organized numerous gatherings in churches, community centers and football stadiums as well as a major rally in Washington in 1997 which was attended by at least half a million, predominantly white men. Both organizations have actively promoted the idea of responsible fatherhood, encouraging men to commit themselves to stable relationships, sexual fidelity, marriage and the fulfillment of what is believed to be their natural, traditional roles as family heads, role models and mentors particularly to male children.

Gavanas studied these and other organizations concerned with fatherhood politics in considerable depth. In addition to

reviewing their reports and other documents, as well as the burgeoning scholarly literature on the subject, she engaged in in-depth interviews with the leaders and members of various fatherhood organizations. These included Promise Keepers, the Center on Fathers, Families and Public Policy; the National Fatherhood Initiative; the Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization; and the Institute for American Values to name but a few. The author classifies these organizations into two categories, namely pro-marriage groups and fragile families groups. The former are comprised primarily of white, middle class men who have a strong moral commitment and believe that the problems facing families today can be solved through the promotion of Christian marriage ideals. On the other hand, fragile-families groups are primarily concerned with low-income African-American and other minority men who have fathered children but who are not in stable, marital relationships. These organizations believe that the problems facing fragile, low income families must be understood in the context of poverty, unemployment, inadequate educational opportunities and social deprivation.

Contrasting these two types of organizations, Gavanas provides an incisive account of how they deal with family issues and particularly with questions of masculinity, gender and sexuality. She reveals the very divergent perspectives and preferences these groups bring to an analysis of family politics in the United States today. Her account of the way pro-marriage groups have campaigned effectively to influence the national political agenda is of particular interest and relevance when seeking to comprehend recent national policy shifts in the field of social welfare. Indeed, her book is essential reading for anyone interested in welfare policy in the United States today and for understanding the way earlier commitments to eradicate poverty through income transfers have been replaced with programs that emphasize the inculcation of traditional middle-class American values.

Maria Guadalupe Moog Rodrigues, *Global Environmentalism and Local Politics: Transnational Advocacy Networks in Brazil, Ecuador, and India*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003. \$57.50 hardcover, \$18.95 papercover.