



Review of Eric Magnuson, *Changing Men, Transforming Culture: Inside the Men's Movement* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2007) xiv + 167 pp.

Nathan Hitchcock

The mythopoetic men's movement went underground again after a difficult season of national publicity in the early 1990s. "New men" were presented as those who flee to the woods, take their shirts off, drum, tell fairy tales, weep, howl, hug other men, and come home kinder—but basically the same. Twenty years later only a fraction of mythopoetic groups survive, and, understandably, they make pains to stay out of the limelight. Why, then, does this men's movement continue to anger and inspire and amuse and haunt us? Eric Magnuson gives a modest but compelling answer: mythopoetic work changes men from the inside-out. For all their political shortcomings, these spiritual-therapeutic groups have constituted a kind of "seed movement" that challenges hegemony and reconstructs a new social order from the bottom up.

In chapter one Magnuson gives an overview of the mythopoetic men's movement and evaluations of it. The problem with earlier critiques from Michael Kimmel, Kenneth Clatterbaugh, Judith Newton and the like, he says, was their unwillingness to engage with the movement from within, preferring to dismantle the popular texts. For all their theoretical insight, their criticism tended to miss the liberating reconstruction of masculinity that was happening at the most basic levels. To rectify this, Magnuson presents a longitudinal ethnographic study of one particular men's group, the Open Plain Men's Circle. He presents findings from his eight-year analysis of this one independent organization. Through 230 meetings, 55 hours of interviews and hundreds of informal conversations, the author concludes that mythopoetic men are in the process of rejecting the old masculine way of "being unreliable, overly rational, disempowered, emotionally closed off, deceitful, unloving, competitive, and oppressive," erecting in its place a masculinity that is "reliable, spiritual, open-minded, empowered, emotionally open, truthful, loving, cooperative, and liberational" (p. 18).

As a sociologist, Magnuson is very conscious about knitting together the macro- and the micro-. He therefore devotes his second chapter to various modern gender theories and argues for the superiority of the semiotic view (which understands gender as symbolic social constructions rather than essential traits inherent in the sexes). This purview aligns him more closely with profeminist critics than with the men's movement's major exponents. Magnuson's methodology assures the reader that the conclusions of his fairly narrow study are not arbitrary. While he succeeds on this score, the most serious shortcoming of *Changing Men, Transforming Culture* is Magnuson's claim that the Open Plain Men's Circle is

representative of the mythopoetic men's movement. It seems to me that his study glosses over the variegated expressions in the work of Joseph Jastrab, Robert Bly, Michael Meade, the ManKind Project, and the hundreds of groups throughout New England, the Northwoods and California. These groups ranged widely with regard to type of organization, programs, essentialistic language and spiritual tenor. On this level, the superior historico-sociological study remains Michael Schwalbe's *Unlocking the Iron Cage* (1996). Magnuson compensates for this historical lacuna with a persistent appeal to the theoretical macro-level.

Perhaps the most important contribution of the book comes in chapter three, in which Magnuson describes the function of the mythopoetic leader as an "organic intellectual." The leader is the practitioner and interpreter of the big ideas of the movement. Moreover, in bringing material and activities to the group, he is at the forefront of evoking cognitive, practical and even political change within the men. Magnuson details seven functions of the organic intellectual as he guides the group. This leader exerts tremendous influence on the shape of the group through suggestion and manipulation—though his authority is not beyond question. I sense this presentation sheds light even on leaders within (the more typical) democratic men's group, since one or two men in any given setting tend to become the *de facto* disseminators of ideas and the gatekeepers of the circle. I also found of interest the wide array of religious practices imported into Magnuson's own group. There is a pluralistic reconfiguration going on among these men as the leader tries to introduce, filter and harmonize disparate religious customs.

The last two chapters describe how mythopoets critique hegemonic masculinity and pull together something significantly different in its place. By and large made up of financially successful whites, these men go through the long process of unraveling the traditional values that got them there in the first place. They feel oppressed by the closed, rational, shaming, stoic and workaholic tendencies of a so-called "masculine" lifestyle. Such patterns, which the men associate with capitalism, begin to be identified as vapid and "unspiritual." In place of this masculinity, mythopoetic men imagine and enact a counter-hegemonic culture in which "the new man is coded as faithful, personal, attentive, communicative, spiritual, open-minded, easy-going, creative, adventurous, direct, and empowered" (p. 145). Magnuson provides a helpful appendix of mythopoetic liberational language which clearly shows how these men articulate a new binary between the old masculine code and a new, freer way of being a man.

Magnuson establishes quite effectively the first part of his title: these are indeed changing men. He gives example after example of changes the men of the group have made in their emotional lives, their personal interaction and their vocational arrangements. He shows how New Age men come to re-imagine their own world. Less convincing is Magnuson's second premise: transforming culture. "It is reasonable to conclude that the movement's successes in terms of changing gender ideology and the larger culture have had significant effects far beyond the one hundred thousand men who have been directly involved" (p. 146), the author claims, though the only real evidence he adduces is the testimony of the men themselves. He has good reason to hypothesize that wives, family, friends and coworkers will benefit from male psycho-social reconstructive work, I think, though

other, more targeted studies will have to be conducted in order to contradict the profeminist claim that mythopoets fail to bridge the personal and public spheres.

The personal is political. Mythopoetic men approach this phrase in a rather different way than second-wave feminists. Women have had to understand that their private lives are shaped by political realities. Granted. But can men (that is, privileged men) understand this also to mean that their own internal changes will shape society? Magnuson uses ethnography and gender theory to suggest that this very thing is happening. One way of looking at his hopeful study is simply to extend the holism of Magnuson's methodology: if the micro- and the macro- can go together, why not the personal and the political?

Nathan Hitchcock
New College, University of Edinburgh/SCOTLAND
e: nathan.hitchcock@lycos.com