

Book Review: “Guyland: The perilous world where boys become men” by Michael Kimmel

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Using a combination of interviews, anecdotes, and socio-historical insight, Michael Kimmel’s *Guyland* offers a detailed analysis of the prevailing social construction and performance of hegemonic masculinity in mainstream North American youth culture. A large preponderance of young men, Kimmel argues, currently exist within the combined developmental stage and social space of “Guyland”: a world characterized by its celebration of camaraderie, promiscuity, conformity, consumption, and irresponsibility. Kimmel traces these values through the various dimensions of young men’s social environments and discusses the impact that Guyland has on their lives and the lives of those around them. Specifically, Kimmel argues that Guyland’s conformist, misogynist, and escapist ethos constitutes an ineffectual process for developing boys into mature men. With a style and analysis directed to both academic and general readerships (and, in particular, the very “guys” it describes) *Guyland* offers an original and incisive critique of the gendered lives of predominantly white college-aged and college-bound males in North America, as well as a convincing articulation of potential avenues for instigating positive social change.

As his point of departure, Kimmel confronts the current prolongation of youth faced by today’s young men. Since the 1960s, he explains, there has been a steady decline in the kinds of normative standards and traditions that had once defined an individual’s transition from childhood to adulthood, and meaningfully distinguished between boys and men. With no clear definition of how one achieves and practices manhood or masculinity, young males resort to Guyland, “a kind of suspended animation between boyhood and manhood” that “lies between the dependency and lack of autonomy of boyhood and the sacrifice and responsibility of manhood” (p. 6). Thus, Kimmel uses the Guyland motif to denote both an *indefinite transitional stage* of life, and a *social space* in which “guys” are able to exist free of obligation and responsibility to those around them (girlfriends, parents, children, jobs, etc.).

For most guys, Guyland represents the last refuge in which they can shamelessly celebrate the privilege and entitlement enjoyed by their forebears—a social space free of expectations of political correctness or civility, where “boys can be boys” and play video games, shoot pool, hook up, watch porn, and drink alcohol to their hearts’ (if not their livers’) content. Part of the appeal of Guyland,

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according to many of Kimmel's interviewees, is simply the dearth of desirable alternatives. Since regular relationships, jobs, and responsibilities are seen as unfulfilling, boring, and simply "not fun," guys are pushed toward the much more exciting world of "hook-ups," "serial jobogamy," and the fraternity or party lifestyle. Behaviours within these default lifestyles are self-regulated, and follow a "Code" of machismo and contrived confidence that thinly conceals Guyland's underlying norms of resignation, conformity, and superficiality. Kimmel argues that while the number of institutional spaces dominated by guys may be diminishing, the age spectrum of Guyland itself continues to expand: kids of increasingly younger ages (generally in their mid-teens) are coming to conform to the "Guy Code," while fully-grown adults are increasingly delaying their transition to traditional responsibilities of manhood.

Throughout the book, Kimmel examines the rites of passage through which guys achieve validation from their peer group. From sports teams, to fraternities, to high school and college initiations, he finds that, although these rights of passage are varied and sometimes extremely complicated, the common theme among all of them is that they are conducted and supervised by other "guys." Whereas traditional rights of passage were run by fully mature men or elders and represented a permanent transition from boyhood to manhood, the hazings and initiations administered in Guyland are run by guys just as immature as their initiates, and instill no lasting transition to maturity. What these initiations do achieve, however, is the promotion of a sense of gendered camaraderie in all-male peer groups, and, oftentimes, a derogatory attitude toward women. Kimmel documents several cases of gang-rapes and sexual assaults which, he argues, extend directly from the cultural dynamics of "entitlement," "silence," and "protection" within Guyland. These "cultures," combined with the pressure placed on females to conform to social expectations contrived by a sex-saturated mass media, create a "toxic brew of entitlement and despair" for guys (p. 172), and a "twin demand of entitlement and inequality" for women (p. 254).

If Kimmel could be said to have one primary concern, it would be to challenge the current complacency and resignation with which contemporary society dismisses Guyland as simply "boys being boys." He argues instead for the importance of better understanding young men's lives so that pragmatic, effective, and compassionate steps may be taken to help "guys" successfully transition from boyhood to true masculine maturity, and thereby enrich their own lives and the lives of those around them. His summary of the history of the scientific understanding of both masculinity and youthhood proves valuable in locating Guyland within a broader historical tradition of patriarchy, male homosociality, and the life-course. Whereas common-sense explanations of the problems attributable to Guyland tend to derive from biologically determinist explanations (e.g., gender essentialist arguments, or youth "storm and stress"), Kimmel provides anecdotal and historical evidence demonstrating the wide variety of different interpretations and responses that male youth have in relation to masculinity and Guyland. He also explains how history has shaped the social meaning attached to notions of the "adolescent" and the "guy"; and while Kimmel does not expand this discussion into an explicit social constructionist critique, his arguments and evidence in *Guyland* are certainly compatible with such a perspective.

Kimmel's analysis is not without weakness, however. His decision to focus so heavily on the cultural construction and reinforcement of male gender intensification (e.g., heteronormativity, androcentrism, and adherence to default gender-role identities and behaviours) occurs at the expense of a more substantive critique of the social forces that produce this gender intensification in the first place. Specifically, his limited attention to the political and economic interests that are served by the

proliferation of *Guyland* may lead some readers to overlook the capitalist complementarity that serves to maintain many of the problems Kimmel identifies. Moreover, Kimmel's solutions to the problems of *Guyland* rely heavily on individualized acts, such as understanding guys' worlds or providing them with positive cultural and parental guidance. Such solutions, although somewhat helpful, do not sufficiently account for the broader structural need to confront, or at least explore, the role of corporate and political entities in actively manufacturing and subsequently profiting off of *Guyland*.

Although *Guyland* does not offer much in terms of theoretical innovation, Kimmel's pointed use of the term "guy" introduces an analytically useful term for discussing contemporary masculinity. Just as Ritzer's "McDonaldization" has provided sociologists and lay readers alike with a succinct and recognizable way of thinking about the development of modern rationality, Kimmel's transformation of the colloquialism "guy" into a sociologically relevant ideal-type provides a similarly succinct means by which to discuss this unique manifestation of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, "guy" denotes a specific male category that defies and transcends the existing categorical distinctions "man," "boy," and "youth."

Guyland succeeds in providing an accessible and creative sociological examination of the problem of hegemonic masculinity in the lives of a certain category of male youth. Integrating statistical and interview research, media analysis, and gender theory, Kimmel's detailing of the lives, experiences, and perspectives of the "almost-men" that inhabit "Guyland" serves to elucidate many of the social causes of their current immaturity and thereby indicate a need for important societal changes. His knack for historical and qualitative sociological research is reflected in the sophistication with which he ties hegemonic masculinity to education, youthhood, psychology, and popular culture. In drawing attention to our society's complicity in facilitating the "cultures" of *Guyland*, he provides a compassionate, humanizing analysis of a generation of male youth that is desperately in need of guidance. His proposed solutions to the problem, although lacking a sufficient critique of political and economic structures, provide a valuable point of analytic departure for how society as a whole might seek to ameliorate the current plight of masculine immaturity faced by "our guys," and ultimately usher them into a stage of mature, responsible manhood.

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By Michael Kimmel. New York: HarperCollins, 2008, 332 pp., \$25.95 (cloth). Article in *Gender & Society* 23(4):573-575 · July 2009 with 7 Reads. Book reviewed: Gerald Horne. *Race War! White Supremacy and the Japanese Attack on the British Empire*. Download books for free. Find books. Michael Kimmel.