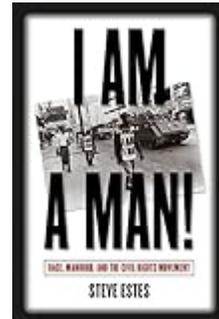




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The Language of American Manhood

“Language does not act as a mirror able to reflect an independent object world, but is better understood as a tool that we use to achieve our purpose. Language makes rather than finds.”[1]

In 1940, just after the publication of *Native Son*, Richard Wright wrote the short story, “The Man Who Was Almost a Man.”[2] Wright’s protagonist in this narrative was Dave Saunders, a seventeen-year-old southern black youth frustrated in his attempts to gain recognition as a man. Physically slight of frame, living with his parents, and working as a farm hand for a local white farmer, Dave felt none of the independence, responsibility, autonomy, and freedom traditionally associated with American manhood. In an attempt to address his unmanly circumstances, Dave purchased a revolver for two dollars. Aside from the obvious phallic significance, the pistol in the American imagination has always been seen as an emblem of male power, mobility, and respect. Like Wright’s character Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, Dave

accidentally kills, and, like Bigger, he is undone by the experience. At the conclusion of the short story, wanting to avoid facing community-wide ridicule and derision, which would only confirm his status as a non-man, a boy, Dave with his two-dollar gun tucked away in his pants, hops a train to go “Up South,” where he foolishly imagines he can be a complete man. His foolishness notwithstanding, Dave had—like Bigger before him—absorbed the primary myth of American manhood: if a man is to have the ability to protect and provide for one’s family, control his own life, and if he is to have the respect of the community, he must have the power and ability to negotiate violence—to deal it out and to survive it.

This language of domination and control, which rest on a foundation of potential violence, is at the heart of Steve Estes’s *I Am a Man! Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement*. Estes demonstrates that when Malcolm X, the Nation of Islam, or the Black Panthers urged their fellow African Americans to defend them-

selves through the exercise of violence, they were articulating and invoking the same discourse of masculinity used by white citizens' council members, who vowed to defend their rights, their women, and their way of life from "vicious agitator(s) for integration" (p. 54). Early on in *I Am a Man!* Estes reminds us of the traditional historical interpretation of the civil rights movement, that it was first and foremost a struggle for racial equality, yet he also associates himself with two more recent developments in the field. Following in the footsteps of Tim Tyson and others, Estes shows that black protest against Jim Crow was not always nonviolent, nor was the philosophy of passive resistance, advocated by senior members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), practiced by the vast majority of those challenging white supremacy. But the most important contribution of Estes's work, and which is reflective of one of the more important developments in the scholarship on the civil rights movement, is his examination of the discourse used to articulate manly expectations for those struggling for racial equality and those fighting to uphold white supremacy. *I Am a Man!* proves that the language of American manhood was, and continues to be, dominated by the idea that men have a right to exercise violence in protection of their homes, families, and communities. This is a language that every American—especially men—have always understood. H. Rap Brown, one-time chairman of the SNCC, even went so far as to bluntly state, "Violence is necessary. It is as American as cherry pie." [3]

In its chronological layout, *I Am a Man!* is a standard presentation of the civil rights movement. Estes begins with the racial politics surrounding America's involvement in the Second World War, the popularity of the "Double V campaign," and the hypocrisy of fighting racism abroad while living under it at home. He concludes this book with a brief outline of America's racial and gender politics from 1980 to the present. Between these bookends, we are treated to examinations of southern white resistance to the civil rights movement, the growth and popularity of the Nation of Islam in the urban North, the controversy surrounding the publication of the Moynihan Report, the Black Panther Party, and the Memphis sanitation workers' strike, whose protest slogan "I am a man" provides the source for this book's title. All of these subjects have been major foci within the historiographies of civil rights studies and American racial history. What makes this work unique is Estes's use of gender discourse analysis in general and masculinity in

particular. He has written an important contribution to the growing literature that seeks to link race, gender, and at times class into a coherent and interesting analysis of America's struggle for racial and gender equality. As civil rights historian Peter Ling points out, *I Am a Man!* is a reminder that "the language of citizenship, rights, and power is historically stained masculine." [4]

Estes calls this masculine-stained language *masculinism*, "the notion that men are more powerful than women, that they should have control over their own lives and authority over others" (p. 7). American World War II propaganda used the language of masculinism to fill the ranks of the military. Posters with sayings such as, "Man the guns," or "What did you do during the war, daddy?" were used to play upon the ideal of man as protector of hearth and home. Yet, the war also brought about manpower shortages on the home front that opened up new avenues of advancement for minorities and women, challenging white male economic dominance. In fact, Estes ties this challenge to white male supremacy, begun during the Second World War, to massive white resistance in the 1950s and 1960s. He convincingly argues that white citizens' councils' use of the language of masculinism to rally opposition to racial equality was not just a reaction to growing African American discontent with second-class citizenship, but reflective of larger societal changes that were eroding the public power and influence of white male privilege.

What strikes the reader throughout Estes's text is the similarity of language used by white citizens' council members, the SCLC, the Nation of Islam, and the Black Panthers as each group fought to lay claim to the privileges of American patriarchy. Each group had its own unique strategy. White citizens' councils channeled white working-class and middle-class anxieties over black sexuality and the erosion of white privilege into acts of violence directed against civil rights workers and their supporters. Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam used a puritanical code of behavior, an evangelical religious zeal, and an anti-white message of spiritual renewal to convert street hustlers, pimps, criminals, and other urban blacks left out of America's postwar prosperity into a disciplined body of believers. The Panthers followed a similar strategy, but rather than cloak their traditional patriarchy in religious garb, the brothers and sisters in their hip and cool black leather jackets and berets claimed that only through revolutionary violence and international socialism could black people ever be truly free.

Political philosopher Antonio Gramsci would call this shared ideological understanding of manhood an example of cultural hegemony. Gramsci believed that dominant groups in a society help construct a political and ideological consensus that ensures their continued dominance. The power of any form of cultural hegemony lies in its acceptance as common sense. In *I Am a Man!* we see civil rights advocates making “common sense” claims for black male participation in the privileges and power of American manhood.[5]

The only exceptions to this “common sense” understanding of manly behavior was the philosophy of passive resistance and nonviolence, which was a radical challenge to the language of masculinity used to articulate traditional American masculine expectations. Both the SCLC and early SNCC had passive resistance and nonviolence as their official policies, but it was SNCC that represented the greatest challenge to the discourse of masculinity. Estes’s chapter on Freedom Summer and the work of the young people in SNCC is, in many ways, his most important. Estes tells the tale of a group of idealistic men and women who sought to re-make America not only racially, but also in terms of gender equality. In a moment of profound self-reflection SNCC produced a position paper on women that compared the oppression of women within SNCC to the larger oppression of women and blacks in America. “Feminism [within SNCC] according to historian Belinda Robenett ‘did not evolve from the sexist treatment of women in SNCC’ but from the organization’s liberating philosophy and open structure that fostered challenges to authority” (p. 83). Unfortunately, this spirit of racial and gender egalitarianism did not survive the violence of white southerners, nor the political compromising and painfully slow processes of American democracy.

I Am a Man! is a welcome addition to the scholarship on the civil rights era. It is another reminder of the sacrifices made, lives lost, and challenges overcome in America’s struggle to be a true nation of equality. But, this book also reminds us that the greatest failure of the civil

rights years is also the great failure of America. Many are blind to the fact that oppression in our nation is part of an interlocking system of domination and subordination that we take for granted. While Jim Crow had to go, America’s racial politics are still tied into the Gordian knot of American cultural hegemony, namely the language and practice of white supremacy, patriarchy, and violence.

Notes

[1]. From Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, as quoted in *Cultural Studies and Discourse Analysis: a Dialogue on Language and Identity*, Chris Barker and Dariusz Gaansinski (London: Sage Publication, 2001), 29.

[2]. Richard Wright, “The Man Who Was Almost a Man,” in *Eight Men* (New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1987), 11-26. [3]. See Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999). This assertion does not deny the alternative images of manhood articulated in the ideal of the “Beloved Community,” whose primary advocates were senior leaders in the SCLC, the early organizers of SNCC, and the many women involved in the early years of protest. Yet, these alternative images of manly expectations would wither in the face of mounting white resistance, both in the South and North. For Brown’s statement see Hugh Pearson, *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America* (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1994), 139-140.

[4]. Peter Ling, “Be a Man, My Son,” *Reviews in American History* 33 (2005): 601-606.

[5]. For a concise review of Gramsci’s idea of hegemony see Geoff Eley, “Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Culture, Power and History: A Reader In Contemporary Social Theory*, ed. Nicholas Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry Ortner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 297-335.

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