

# H-Net Reviews

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**Benjamin René Jordan.** *Modern Manhood and the Boy Scouts of America: Citizenship, Race, and the Environment, 1910-1930.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. Illustrations. 306 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4696-2765-6.

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By sheer coincidence, I watched the *Boardwalk Empire* episode titled "Ging Gang Goolie" after reading Benjamin René Jordan's *Modern Manhood and the Boy Scouts of America*. In one scene, US Attorney General Harry Daugherty regales a group of Boy Scouts, troop leaders, and Boys Scouts of America (BSA) executives with a story about an "honest injun" with a forthright nature. As Daugherty sits after finishing, a BSA official thanks him and tells the assemblage that he can see they are "the moral fiber of America"; they are destined for leadership; and when they succeed as men there might be a future Babe Ruth or even a Warren G. Harding in the room—they will remember they won their laurels as Scouts because, "it's all there in the Scout Law, isn't it?" The official reads the Scout Oath out loud and Daugherty's colleague and partner-in-crime Jesse Smith, who is sitting next to him, breaks down. Seeing the scrubbed faces of the collective Scouting community and hearing what makes a man worthy of civil leadership and respect is unbearable. Smith cries and moans to Daugherty, regarding Teapot Dome, "We stole Harry, we stole!" At this point, Troop 14 from Laurel, Maryland, takes over, singing a "campfire favorite." Smith is quickly ushered out of the room as the refrain of "Ging gang goolie, goolie, goolie, goolie, watcha" overwhelms his stifled sobs.[1]

The scene struck me: adults fervently and authentically espousing organizational ideas every person in the room understood differently; boys singing a British marching song; and conflict overwhelmed (or overshadowed) by moving forward together. It underscores Jordan's argument in *Modern Manhood and the Boy Scouts of*

*America* that Scouting was popular during the 1910s and 1920s because it offered economic, civic, social, and cultural privileges afforded white men by methods both universal and local. Living as a Scout meant practicing and embodying a manliness representing the acme of American civilization.

*Modern Manhood and the Boy Scouts of America* is a splendid reinterpretation of the BSA's early years and growth. Jordan emphasizes the organization's place within the larger transatlantic Scouting movement, which reflected corporate society's emergence and normalization during the Progressive Era. Central to the BSA's success were the opportunities it created for early twentieth-century boys and men, who blended traditional and modern ideas about gender by creating a particular Scouting manliness. By balancing top-down and bottom-up perspectives, this book explains how the BSA defined what an American boy looked like and did outdoors for a surprisingly broad swath of Americans. The people Jordan describes and analyzes are not anxious about America's transition from industrial capitalism to corporate capitalism. They are engaged with sorting out their assumptions about what is right and true in a new way so that they could develop qualities their parents and grandparents respected while anticipating new virtues they needed to get ahead in modern corporate America. These are "doers." Given a set of tools they figure out what they will make of themselves while balancing the imperatives that come from membership in a nationally based organization and a desire for individualism and local authority. Scouting was, as Jordan aptly describes it, an apprenticeship in manliness at a time when Ameri-

can capitalism's transformation radically reordered what it meant to be a boy, a man, and an adult. It let men help boys demonstrate their civic fitness and potential for success.

This book's first and more substantive part examines four core elements of the BSA as they developed together during the teens and twenties. First, by balancing democratic volunteerism and corporate professionalism, the BSA out-recruited and overwhelmed competing organizations between 1910 and the start of World War I before expanding its reach and control of Scouting during the twenties. With an array of powerful men behind the organization, lawyer and child welfare activist James West standardized what Scouting was and did for its participants. The middle-class men who staffed troop leadership and local councils decided how Scouting's principles played out locally. They were, after all, the ones who generated the dues income that funded the BSA's work. Scouting attracted boys who wanted a way of making themselves manly away from home, at a stage in life when they needed the help of a respected organization, living in parts of the United States where that opportunity was limited by the lack of economic and social opportunities one found in a major metropolitan area. Second, Scouting depended on Twelve Laws and the Scout Oath, which blended Victorian modesty and self-control with the modern faith in efficiency, management skills, and corporate hierarchy. A first group of laws demanded that members worked cheerfully, spent thriftily, and demonstrated their trustworthiness, obedience, and loyalty. Such qualities made Scouts into good company men and represented a shift from self-made manhood to self-supportive manhood. A second grouping of laws included being friendly, helpful, reverent, brave, clean, courteous, and kind and defined how Scouts interacted with people of color by positioning them in a dichotomy. In that way, a Scout became known as white, male, and capable of leading their inferiors. Members practiced all these tenets on outdoor adventures within a tightly knit troop of peers under the eye of their troopmaster. Third, Scouts assumed civic roles by practicing patriotism and citizenship. The BSA had Scouts encourage voting in their towns as a way of practicing democracy in a nonpartisan fashion. Their Good Turn initiative built relations with local politicians for whom Scouting was an asset and appealed to Scouts because it was seen as leadership training that came with the benefits and privileges of recognition from local, state, and national political and moral leaders. Fourth, the nature activities the BSA sponsored further indicated its successful

blending of traditional and modern values. Nature study, hiking, camping, and conservation all gave boys manly pursuits out of doors and appeased adults worried about the negative impacts of child labor laws and compulsory schooling on job preparation.

Part 1 makes a convincing argument for how the BSA's apprenticeship in manliness functioned. Jordan aptly targets an important transition in each of his first four chapters: American Scouting's shift from confederacy of like-minded people to well-functioning corporation; the metamorphosis of Lord Baden-Powell's blend of militaristic, classist, and primitive morals into a blend of Victorian and modern values; the assumption that the BSA could and should assume responsibility of civic education rather than families and schools; and the reimagining of nature as an environment that could no longer be romanticized, but now should be seen as a national resource. Taken together, these changes explain why boys and men put their faith in Scouting as a way of adapting to the modern socioeconomic environment it defined progress according to Scouting's classless standard (p. 43). Scouting's mechanism for creating opportunity looked fair. But it privileged whiteness and maleness by, first, letting leaders decide who could and could not join their particular troops on an individual basis and, second, expecting what was for people outside the middle class a cost-prohibitive commitment to uniforms, gear, and time. Jordan might have employed biographic elements at strategic points in this section. For instance, I found myself curious about people like West and other BSA leaders like William D. Boyce, Edgar Robinson, George DuPont Pratt, Lee Hamer, and John Alexander. Outside of the knowledge that these men were philanthropists and child-savers, I wondered what motivations drove their work. As is, they come across as passionless bureaucrats.

Additionally, the role of the Girl Scouts of America (GSA) in this history remains underexamined in this account. Jordan notes that the uneasy relationship between the two groups grew sharper and more distinct during the teens and twenties as the BSA attempted to run the GSA out of business. However, this attempt failed due to changing attitudes regarding what was appropriate for girls and the opposition of the GSA's powerful political allies, such as First Lady Lou Henry Hoover. Though persuasive, this explanation for the GSA's survival would have been bolstered with a more thorough exploration of the internal policies and culture of the GSA. Not only would this have offered a nice counterpoint to the development of modern manhood that Jordan explores, but

it also would have better explained how the BSA did not simply absorb the Girl Scouts, especially since some Boy Scout troops had been accepting girls as members as early as 1908.

In part 2 of *Modern Manhood and the Boy Scouts of America*, Jordan shows how Scouting principles let BSA officials model a society that included and sorted boys who were not WASPs (white Anglo-Saxon Protestants). Prior to World War I, the BSA focused on growing membership and overwhelming its competitors, including the Salvation Army Scouts, Polish National Alliance Scouts, Peace Scouts, and even Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) scouting programs. Furthermore, since troop formation followed local initiative, BSA policy allowed for troops that were exclusively Catholic or Jewish, or that identified with a particular ethnic identity. Sometimes, troops in urban areas included members from a cross section of these identities. Since troops could operate in accordance with their particular beliefs and sometimes languages, the BSA won the support of ethnic leaders and labor organizers.

Despite this ethnic and religious diversity, fitting into the BSA's ideas about manliness meant accepting that membership was only for those who could financially afford to abide by Scout Law. This is especially evident in the relationship between the BSA and both rural and African American boys. Part of the BSA's blending of traditional and modern values meant positing that rural boys were not fit for inclusion into the BSA because country living and traditional farm work could no longer lead a boy to respectable manhood. The BSA overestimated its appeal, assuming rural boys would either accept a more modern version of manhood or not participate in any like activities. The strange career of the Lone Scouts of America (LSA), which privileged boyish autonomy and fit rural boys's values, cost the BSA hundreds of thousands of members. Even though the BSA often portrayed African American boys as lacking the qualities possessed by a good white Scout, it embraced the Rockefeller-funded Louisville Plan by the early twenties, creating segregated troops in the Southeast. Although as many as five thousand black youths participated by that point in other parts of the United States, segregated troops increased black membership and created some space for their advancement, even though the practicalities of scouting in the segregated South prevented many of the boys from progressing literally past second-class status.

The second part of this work is what will likely draw the most interest as it is where Jordan details how new

immigrants and African Americans found ways to fit in within BSA schemata and claim varying degrees of respect from other Scouts. The BSA allowed black and ethnic participation because it showed that the organization could encourage some of these boys's adoption of the life that many people thought made a boy manly and proved that Scout Law had broad appeal and rewarded the right sorts. What made the BSA more inclusive had less to do with the organization's humanitarianism than its trust that the mechanism of Scouting allowed only the right sort of minority boys and men into the fold. Consequently, the BSA felt no sense of hypocrisy regarding the natural limits that its methods imposed on its inclusive membership policies. Still, minorities liked Scouting because its apprenticeship was so widely respected that to live up to its tenets meant one could at least establish a way of asking for respect from mainstream Americans. Yet becoming a Scout also meant accepting the qualifications membership demanded—accepting second-class status within the Scouts. The BSA instructed area councils to create advisory councils staffed with trained black troop leaders, but decisions about how black troops related to white troops was left up to white council members. In this way, the racial homogeneity and privilege that came with Scouting's version of manliness became normal.

Jordan deftly weaves together a variety of sources. He employs classic and recent secondary sources on gender, youth, education, citizenship, whiteness, and institutional histories of Scouting. As for primary sources, readers will find a range of period publications at work along with BSA archival materials, official publications, memoirs, and deep readings of BSA-approved skits, camp lore, and teaching materials. There is some intriguing cultural heavy lifting done here that is well rooted in social, economic, and political history. If you were a Scout, you will probably spend some time plumbing the depths of your own Scouting or summer camp skit memories afterward.

Importantly, Jordan illustrates how the rise of institutional power did not necessarily subsume individual power. Because he follows boys away from schools and homes, this is not a history of how young people's autonomy declined because of the period's growing acceptance of adult expertise (a perspective often generated by histories that explore intersections of labor, political behavior, schooling, and young people). Rather, he shows how youthful freedoms were expressed in ways that dovetailed with what adults wanted from young people. In particular, his examples of how civic-minded Scouts demonstrated the exercise of political rights during a period of party reconfiguration and new voter be-

havior do this quite well. The BSA's adaption of Scouting to the American scene reflects the progressives' protection of certain American traditions like meritocracy and individualism that they hoped would afford as many Americans as possible the chance at success. The relationship between the individual and group identity put to work in *Modern Manhood and the Boy Scouts of America* speaks to the work done by another historian of American manliness, Nicholas L. Syrett, whose work on fraternities (*The Company He Keeps: A History of White College Fraternities* [2011]) takes on a much wider chronological span. The Boy Scouts, like Greek organizations in Syrett's book, show how definitions of manliness could seem inclusive and yet, in practice, function as an exclusive identity. It would be interesting to read Jordan alongside my own book on Frank Merriwell set in the 1890s and 1900s (*Frank Merriwell and the Fiction of All-American Boyhood: The Progressive Era Creation of All-American Boyhood* [2015]) and Melissa Bingmann's book about ranch schools for the sons of the elite set in the 1920s and 1930s (*Prep School Cowboys: Ranch Schools in the American West* [2015]). That trio of works covers a period wherein one can see the negotiation of manliness and how it came to seem so democratic, yet function as a way of cordoning off the deserving from underserving. Jordan's effort, then, contributes to a much larger conversation regarding how nationally based relationships in Progressive Era America changed how everyday people defined cultural ideas like boyhood and manliness. His contribution provides a clearer understanding of how Americans did not replace, so much as refine, already accepted ideas and identities.

On a topical level, *Modern Manhood and the Boy Scouts of America* is in conversation with David Macleod's classic work, *Building Character in the American Boy: The Boy Scouts, YMCA, and Their Forerunners, 1870-1920* (1983). Both authors look at the early years of Scouting, though Macleod's focus is a touch broader. But where Macleod portrays the BSA as nostalgic and escapist in its use of Indian lore, Jordan's reach into the twenties lets him show how Scouting's rejection or at least de-emphasis of Indian lore signposted its progressive qualities by highlighting how it became uniquely American and modern. Also, Macleod famously emphasized Scouting as a form of social control, whereas Jordan demonstrates the ways in which scouting forwarded a negotiated autonomy. The major difference between these two histories of the BSA is in each author's depiction of the people involved. That is, Macleod's Scouts are

conflicted about their place in society while Jordan's are not. Jordan helps historians understand the BSA's popularity in light of more recent scholarship that nuances the complex relationships between everyday people and the period's institutions.

Even so, Jordan's depiction of the BSA as an organization and the power it commanded is so tightly knit that at times the BSA looks like a veritable leviathan of manliness. As a result, readers see Scouts embrace and use Scouting, but do not see the bad seeds, rejects, and dropouts. There is a glimpse of this in his section on the LSA as a rural alternative to the BSA and its members' rejection of the latter's consolidation of the former. But where is the street tough or even the middle-class mollycoddle who cannot hack a summer at Scout Camp and still gets to vote, run for office, or manage other men as an adult? I wondered if Scouting was as all-consuming as Jordan depicts this was, after all, a period of great growth in youth sports and extracurricular activities. Did the BSA really achieve what it set out to achieve by becoming the standard for making men, or does Jordan create an echo chamber of sorts on the matter? Highlighting people who did not adjust to new types of manliness or adjusted in another way might have provided context that made the BSA's success all the more impressive. Returning to the *Boardwalk Empire* scene I opened with, where are the Jesse Smiths so moved by their own differences from Scouting's values that they cannot hold the company line?

Still, I must acknowledge the plucky members of Troop 18 singing "Ging Gang Goolie" as Smith exited. That grit is what fascinates Jordan, who aptly captures the quality in this work. His conclusion makes the powerful argument that the BSA's recent acceptance of gay men and boys should not be understood as an anomaly. Underscoring this is the organization's recent decision to allow transgender members because doing so was in line with what many troop leaders, Scouts, and parents believed was right. Powerful bureaucracies do not have the power to make people behave as they wish. Moreover, Jordan reminds us that people who participate in such organizations negotiate what membership means and make organizations adapt as needed.

Note

[1]. "Ging Gang Goolie," Season 3, Episode 6, *Boardwalk Empire*, dir. Edward Bianchi, written by Steve Kormacki, HBO, October 21, 2012.

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