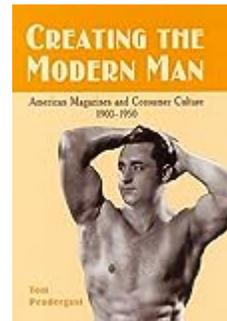




**Tom Pendergast.** *Creating the Modern Man: American Magazines and Consumer Culture, 1900-1950.* Columbia, Mo., and London: University of Missouri Press, 2002. xi + 289 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8262-1280-1.



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In 1986, Thomas Bender denounced the increasing fragmentation of historical enquiry and called for a new synthesis.[1] Bender condemned the rampant proliferation of sub-fields of historical research, arguing that little has been gained from this expansion, which provided no concomitant explanation of how location, ethnicity, gender, and social status relate to a unified concept of America's unique history.[2] The field of cultural history is one of the "new" sub-fields of historical research Bender discussed, subsuming every topic from fast food to masturbation. Among many subject areas, this umbrella topic has been subdivided into gender history, women's history, and later, men's history. Men's history has been narrowed even further into the study of masculinity, the area upon which Tom Pendergast, a cultural historian, focuses his attention for his work *Creating the Modern Man: American Magazines and Consumer Culture 1900-1950*. Pendergast's work supports Bender's argument regarding ever-more minutely fragmented history; the author has, unfortunately, accomplished little towards promoting a more comprehensive understanding of America's cultural history, despite his comprehensive study of selected magazines.

In *Creating the Modern Man*, Tom Pendergast discusses the rise of a consumer-oriented society and associated phenomena. He examines various factors that

he considers contributory to the transformation of masculinity over four decades: the change from proprietary capitalism to corporate capitalism, mass-marketing and the related growth of inexpensively produced and widely distributed media, the subsequent explosion in advertising, and the way in which magazines aided in the redefinition of masculinity. Pendergast focuses particularly on the relationship between selected magazines and changes in masculine identity, concluding that "masculine images were actively created by publishers, editors, and writers" associated with certain periodicals in print from the late 1800s through the 1940s (p. 14).[3] Since, as the author admits, however, most early periodicals failed, his study is limited to a small number of publications, and his examination focuses on how this select few affected a restricted segment of the male population: middle- (and upper-) class white males, since African-American males of the period had "more pressing concerns than publishing advice books and success manuals" (p. 15). Indeed, as James Norris notes, the average person of either sex did not read magazines on a regular basis, despite the early proliferation of such publications.[4]

Pendergast does, however, thoroughly and informatively discuss current research relative to men's history and masculinity studies, the works of William Leach, T. J. Jackson Lears, Christopher Lasch, E. Anthony Ro-

tundo, Michael Kimmel, and Peter Filene, for example, among many other notables in the field. He also provides an impressive bibliography; footnotes are extensive and enlightening; and photographs and illustrations provide convincing documentation of advertising methods and styles of the period. For instance, one advertisement (reproduced in the book) argues that a male employee's success in his job depends upon a "pleasing personality." The ad reflects the reality that many of the white-collar jobs open to males in the era were in sales, part of the ongoing mass-marketing effort occurring at the time.[5] This ad is indicative of the direction of advertising in the post-Victorian period of masculinity, one of the two periods of masculinity identified in Pendergast's work, although other authorities describe at least four developmental periods, all of which evolved in reaction to a variety of stimuli.[6] Pendergast, on the other hand, simplifies his task by dividing masculinity into only two types or periods: Victorian (based on property-ownership and family) and post-Victorian (based on a cult of personality, self-improvement, and narcissism), both forms assessed to a greater or lesser degree in their relationship to industrialization, consumerism, and advertising.

Anyone with a basic knowledge of American history will not be surprised to learn that the evolution in black masculinity trailed several decades behind that of white masculinity. Blacks of the period could not readily access the benefits of capitalism for a number of reasons, not the least of which was widespread and ingrained racial discrimination. Unfortunately, while Pendergast states that he "hope[s] to help ... fill [through his study of magazines] ... a glaring gap in ... the depiction of black masculinity," he is largely unsuccessful (p. 14). His lack of success is due in part to two factors, both of which he acknowledges: nearly every African-American periodical of the period failed, and (a closely related factor) African-Americans had very little in the way of income for discretionary spending, clearly a factor in the failure of most publications slanted towards black Americans during the period. A dearth of black spending meant that African-Americans bought few magazines and thus did not access advertising presented within the pages of these publications. The failure of ads in black-oriented magazines limited future revenues for the advertiser, reduced the magazine's advertising revenues, and contributed to the failure of those publications. These magazines could thus have had little or no effect on African-American masculine identities.

As Pendergast makes clear, African-Americans had more pressing problems than purchasing a magazine,

most importantly finding and keeping a job, the right to cast a vote without harassment, and other basic American civil rights traditionally denied them, despite the supposed guarantees of the 14th, 15th, and 19th amendments. Indeed, because blacks were (as were the greater number of people of the period) so effectively eliminated from the explosion of industrial prosperity of the late 1800s and early 1900s, it was not until *Ebony* magazine came into being (late 1940s) that blacks finally had access to a viable, national publication aimed strictly at their own community. It was also only then that African-Americans were finally recognized as a viable mass-consumer market, one with sufficiently reliable income to afford the magazine and buy into the advertiser's idea of the American dream.

Pendergast devoted most of his effort to a discussion of magazines, their publishers, their content, and his argument for their supposed role in transforming masculinity; however, he fails to provide a definition of what, exactly, masculinity is. While he does mention masculinity's plethora of components, Pendergast can describe his own sense of masculinity only as "guyness," an unscientific term men may easily understand and identify with, but one that leaves the female reader longing for a more comprehensive definition (p. 21). What, then, is masculinity? It appears that, as with the term "femininity," no one, all-inclusive definition can be formed, the reason being, according to R. W. Connell, "the character of gender [itself, which is] historically changing and politically fraught." [7] Moreover, masculinity (and inferentially, femininity) cannot arise "except in a system of gender relations," an influencing factor that Pendergast acknowledges, but insufficiently addresses.[8] Indeed, there is no single, static masculinity, but rather many, all of which change and evolve as a matter of course, with "any one form of masculinity rather than others culturally exalted at any given time." [9] Undermining his own conclusion, Pendergast agrees with this viewpoint, arguing that changing representations of masculinity moved along a spectrum running from the Victorian image to the post-Victorian representation, with no easily defined point of transformation (p. 14). Not until the eighteenth century did the modern conception of masculinity even exist, evolving over the course of several centuries and shaped by the effects of large-scale and universally transformational elements, important not only in defining masculinity, but in shaping national and global culture in general. It was thus only in the latter eighteenth century that one finds the roots of Victorian masculinity referenced by Pendergast, one based on property and

kinship ties, closely allied to political institutions, and labeled by Connell as “gentry” masculinity.[10]

The gentry prototype later fragmented into a series of masculinities, all shaped by three factors that transformed not only ideas of masculine identity, but American society as a whole: the women’s rights movement (a middle-class movement), restricted economic benefits accruing from industrial capitalism (limited to certain middle- and upper-income sections of society), and “the power relations of empire” (also class-based).[11] It would thus seem impossible to concisely define masculinity, in part because masculinities are always in flux and are always relative to time, place, race, and class or social status. More importantly, however, an ongoing “interplay between gender, race, and class” promotes the development of “multiple masculinities,” black, white, native American, working- and middle-class, and immigrant, encompassing a great variety of men.[12] With so many contributory factors, it seems virtually impossible to conclusively identify any one element as having had a clearly definable impact in the transformation of something (masculinity) that the author cannot more concisely define than by using the term “guy-ness.” Failing to clearly define “masculinity,” Pendergast also failed to prove that magazines changed or otherwise shaped masculinity for any class of American male: the middle-class, working-class, unemployed, and especially not African-Americans. Magazines and advertising undeniably played a role in the creation of mass marketing and the creation of an increasingly consumption-oriented society, but other factors were equally important in this transformation, among them new technology that allowed for mechanized assembly lines and mass production.

Another problem with Pendergast’s conclusion is his inability to sufficiently recognize that national and global events such as the Great Depression and World Wars I and II were over-riding factors that had a much more socially-defining impact on the identity of both sexes than did magazines. Both the content and circulation of all periodicals that Pendergast studied demonstrated obvious and easily documented reactions to these events, and he even acknowledges this, for example, when he states that “*Collier’s* had a far easier time adjusting its portrayal of masculinity to the exigencies of the Great Depression,” and when he notes the reaction of the editor of the *Athletic Journal* to Roosevelt’s New Deal programs (pp. 159-60). Pendergast’s own research proves that magazines, far from shaping and defining masculinity, basically served to mirror prevalent national and

international attitudes and trends; they did not shape events, but were, rather, shaped by outside influences themselves. Magazine content and editorial reaction to outside forces are clearly reflected in the pages of various publications that Pendergast examined. Indeed, according to James Norris, “advertisements did and still do reflect or mirror the society that produces them.”[13] Magazines (and their advertisements) were thus only one among many elements arising from the industrializing process, and as such editors and publishers naturally reacted to outside forces in an effort to sustain or gain profitability while maintaining operations in an era of economic metamorphosis, one fueled by rampant industrialization, subject to fallout from uncontrollable forces such as war and economic downturn. One could easily argue (with probably greater justification) that automobiles played a more significant role in redefining both masculinity and femininity than did magazines of the period; however, both were merely individual elements in an explosion of by-products of urbanization and industrialization. Movies, radio, advertising, and societal acceptance of consumerism as a way of life all contributed to social and cultural evolution, including individual and/or mass definitions of masculinity and/or femininity.

In the end, Pendergast himself negates his own argument that magazines defined masculinity. For example, on page 17, he notes that magazines acted as a “window into the changing nature of masculinity during the first half of the century,” obviously meaning that magazines mirrored or reflected what was already taking place in society. Men faced significant social adjustment during this period. The advent of women into the workplace and political life had a tremendous impact on the ways in which men (particularly white men) defined themselves and their roles in society. Agitation for woman suffrage and Progressive-era social legislation put many women in the political limelight, and of equal, if not greater impact, our government, during both world wars, overtly promoted women’s participation in the war effort. In WWII especially, women joined the workforce in unprecedented numbers to take up the slack left while American males fought a war on the other side of the world. The Great Depression was another factor that clearly played a major part in redefining men’s identities. Uncounted tens of thousands of daughters, wives, and mothers left their homes for the first time in this period to find low-paying jobs to feed their families and hold families together. It was during this time that the photograph of Jack Dempsey, reproduced in Pendergast’s book, appeared under a caption that read “He-men wear aprons”

(p. 158).[14] One would be hard-pressed to deny that the ongoing devastation of the Great Depression influenced the motivation for Dempsey's photo. However, Dempsey was not advocating that men do women's work; he simply advised men to make the best of a bad situation—long-term unemployment during what became an unprecedented international economic downturn that only an international conflagration would remedy. The Dempsey photograph reflected the times: men were in the home because they were unemployed; women were in the workplace because they found work when men could not. Obviously, women's lives changed to a lesser degree, since their normal household responsibilities continued despite the outside job. Again, magazine content simply mirrored uncontrollable forces unfolding outside the pages of the publication. Ultimately, the advent of industrialization and major social and/or cultural transformations are largely traceable to the industrialization process and the material benefits issuing therefrom. But, as with any widespread social change, those who were better situated to share in the progress engendered by industrialization enjoyed the benefits sooner and to a greater extent than those less fortunate. Benefits eventually trickled down to the lower tiers of society, but at a reduced rate of consumption: resources became increasingly restrictive relative to one's position on the status ladder. This factor largely obliterated or drastically reduced discretionary spending for many. While, by 1910, more than one-fourth of all American workers (and consumers) held white-collar jobs (most at the lower echelons of corporate employment), twenty years later most of this group were out of work, standing in bread and soup lines, with the national unemployment rate averaging 25 percent, but reaching 50-80 percent in some urban industrial centers, such as Cleveland, Akron, and Toledo, Ohio.[15] Many of those unemployed, particularly in urban areas, were foreigners recently arrived or immigrants one generation removed from their native countries. This very large group suffered disproportionately, and one can only wonder at how the situation affected their concept of masculinity.

Certainly, depression-era families of all ethnicities experienced greatly transformed spending habits. Limited discretionary spending bought escapist entertainment: radios purchased on the installment plan, movies, and surprisingly, automobiles (mainly used, not new), again because of the widespread availability of the installment plan.[16] As noted philosopher and economist Jeremy Bentham suggested in the late eighteenth century, humans unconsciously seek pleasure and avoid pain

(the theory of psychological hedonism also expressed by John Stuart Mill as normal self-interest or "psychological egoism"). While magazines certainly reflected societal transformation, the primary or root factor in defining masculinity is the naturally hedonistic nature of humans, combined with the cheap, available, and highly advertised fruits of a prosperous, industrialized society.

Having closely read *Creating the Modern Man*, this reviewer is left with the sense of a diligently and extensively researched work, evidenced by an impressive bibliography and informative supplemental material. The material is well-organized, and its depth and breadth are impressive. Unfortunately, Pendergast's conclusions are largely unsupported by his research as presented in this book. The period examined experienced many dramatic (and frequently traumatic) cultural and social metamorphoses, all attributable in some measure to the by-products of industrialization, reflected in the struggles of a nation and a people dealing with unprecedented economic tribulations, two world wars, and the natural evolution of a society in flux. The topic of masculinity merits study as an integral part of gender history that without question helped in the shaping of our society; however, Pendergast has not produced a cogent argument, and one remains unconvinced that the magazines discussed in this work played a definitive role in the shaping of masculinity in the period 1900-1950. On the other hand, one remains equally certain that Thomas Bender's position on over-fragmentation of historical research is as true today as it was in 1986. Our understanding of national and cultural history has increased far too little from the increasingly narrowed perspectives of modern historians, and the need for a cohesive synthesis still exists.

#### Notes

[1]. Thomas Bender, "Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History," *Journal of American History* 73 (June 1986): 120-36.

[2]. *Ibid.*, 129.

[3]. A list of periodicals examined is provided on p. 269.

[4]. James D. Norris, *Advertising and the Transformation of American Society, 1865-1920* (New York, 1990), 34.

[5]. *Ibid.*, 146.

[6]. R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley, 1995), 186-90.

[7]. Connell, 3.

[8]. Ibid., 71.

[9]. Ibid., 76.

[10]. Connell, 190

[11]. Ibid., 191

[12]. Ibid., 76.

[13]. Norris, xv.

[14]. The photo appeared in the July 1935 issue of *American Magazine*.

[15]. James A. Henretta, David Brody, and Lynn Du-  
menil, eds. *America: A Concise History*. Vol. 2, *Since 1865*  
(Boston: Bedford/St. Martin, 2002), 697.

[16]. Ibid., 698.

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