AN INTERVIEW WITH EDUCATOR, ACTIVIST, AND AUTHOR JACKSON KATZ

Jackson Katz, Ph.D., is an educator, author and acclaimed lecturer who is a pioneer in the fields of gender violence prevention education and critical media literacy. He is cofounder of Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP), one of the original “bystander” programs and the most widely utilized sexual and domestic violence prevention initiative in college and professional athletics in North America. He is the creator of the film Tough Guise and author of The Macho Paradox and Leading Men: Presidential Campaigns and the Politics of Manhood. He lectures widely in the United States and around the world on violence, media, and masculinities.

“Amma, it’s about the narratives of manhood that are being promoted and reinforced. One of the chief reasons for so much of the violence in this society and the world is the deeply-rooted, ideological linkage of masculinity and violence. Boys are taught and thus learn from an early age that being a man means being powerful and in control. Violence is an instrumental means of gaining or maintaining that power and control. So in a media culture we need to look at narratives that help to construct manhood in a certain way, the stories that are constantly told to boys and men—and to girls and women—that reinforce this link between manhood and power and control. That to me is one of the most fundamental issues in the area of the effects of violent media. But this is rarely discussed. You’ll search the mainstream conversation in vain for anything approaching what I just said.”

“You can say that it’s prosthetic masculinity. When you purchase a gun it’s a form of purchasing body mass.”—from the AMSA interview with Dr. Jackson Katz.

Editor’s Note:

Shortly after the Sandy Hook school shootings in Newtown, CT, I participated in a wide-ranging interview with Dr. Jackson Katz. His assertion that these shootings were of a gendered nature—largely the work of men, and in most cases white men—seems largely ignored by most discourses on the posited causes of such violence. In the text that follows, Dr. Katz relates the “invisible” variable of gender, from areas as diverse as domestic and gun violence to the political system and structure in this country, also implicating our forms of media. While much of the interview is sobering, it is also encouraging to know that activists and theorists such as Dr. Katz are advocating for intentional change. The interview begins on Page 3.
CJ Pascoe, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Colorado College, will be the keynote speaker at the Twenty-first Annual Conference on Men and Masculinities of the American Men’s Studies Association in Ann Arbor, Michigan, April 4-7, 2013. Her book, Dude, You’re a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School, won the American Educational Research Association’s 2007 Book of the Year Award. In it Pascoe documents the relationship between homophobic harassment, heterosexism and masculinity in high school. In it she suggests ways we might begin to redefine gender norms that are damaging to both boys and girls. Pascoe teaches courses on sexuality, social psychology, deviance, gender and education. Her current research focuses on gender, youth, homophobia, sexuality and new media. Before coming to Colorado College, CJ spent two years working with the Digital Youth Project, part of the MacArthur Foundation’s initiative in learning and new media. Along with her co-researchers and under the guidance of Mimi Ito, Pascoe co-authored Hanging Out, Messing Around and Geeking Out: Living and Learning with New Media, the largest qualitative study of youth new media use to date. Pascoe’s research has been featured in the New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Toronto Globe and Mail, American Sexuality Magazine and Inside Higher Ed. She has appeared in the Frontline documentary Growing Up Online as well as on National Public Radio’s All Things Considered. You can listen to her micro-lecture “Bullying, Masculinity, and the Spectre of the Fag,” here.

With Professor Natalie Boero she is currently publishing a series of articles on online interaction in pro-anorexia discussion groups. The first of these, “Pro-Anorexia Communities and Online Interaction: Bringing the Pro-Ana Body Online,” was recently published in the journal Body and Society. She received her B.A. in Sociology from Brandeis University in 1996 and a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of California, Berkeley in 2006.

Gary Barker, PhD, International Director of Promundo, a Brazilian NGO in Rio de Janeiro with offices in Washington, DC, and Rwanda, that works nationally and globally to engage men and boys in gender equality and violence prevention will be the Scholar-in-Residence at the Twenty-First Annual Men and Masculinity Conference of the American Men’s Studies Association, April 4-7, 2013

Barker is co-author of the Program H violence prevention initiative that has been implemented in more than 20 countries and named a best practice by UNFPA, UNICEF, the World Bank and UNDP. He is co-chair and co-founder of MenEngage, a global alliance of more than 400 NGOs and UN agencies working to engage men and boys in gender equality and a member of the UN Secretary General’s Men’s Leaders Network, part of the UNite to End Violence Against Women Campaign. He has carried out research and program development on engaging men and boys in gender equality and violence prevention in the Balkans, Brazil, Brazil, South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, Central America, the Caribbean and the US, including in post-conflict settings. He holds a doctorate in child and adolescent development and a master’s in public policy.

Among his publications is the book, Dying to be Men: Youth, Masculinity and Social Exclusion (Routledge, 2005). He is coordinator of the multi-country survey on men, IMAGES (the International Men and Gender Equality Survey), one of the largest ever surveys on men’s attitudes and behaviors related to violence, fatherhood and gender equality. He has been awarded an Ashoka Fellowship for his work on men and gender equality, and a fellowship from the Open Society Institute. His first novel, Luisa’s Last Words, about the civil war in Guatemala, was published by the prestigious Dutch publisher, De Geus, in 2010.
**AN INTERVIEW WITH JACKSON KATZ, Ph.D., ON THE GENDERED NATURE OF GUN VIOLENCE**

**JM:** Your film *Tough Guise* looks at the way media culture both represents and defines manhood. From what I’ve heard, the NRA and others have tried to blame Hollywood and the video game industry for the decline of our culture and the onset of violence, excluding our views of masculinity and what it means to be a man. What are your thoughts on that?

**JK:** It’s a big topic. The mainstream conversation about the effects of media on violent behavior is embarrassingly simplistic and superficial and devoid of any sophisticated understanding of gender and the idea that masculinity and femininity are socially constructed. For example, the *New York Times* recently published a front page article about the marketing of guns to children and adolescents, and how the NRA and other gun industry lobbyists and organizations are trying to insinuate themselves into youth culture in various ways. Whether it is through product placement in video games or movies, or having gun training for kids in camps as young people, they are building their market early. But in the entire article there was no mention of “boys” or “young men.” It was all “kids” and “children” as if guns are equally present in the lives of girls and the socialization of girls and adolescent girls and young women, which is ridiculous. It was yet another example of something I’ve been talking about for 20-plus years, yet another example of the complete degendering of the discourse and the conversation on a topic that is completely gendered. I would say that the discussion about the effects of video games is another example that phenomenon. Thoughtful critiques of the video game industry and its effects on violent behavior don’t narrowly focus on imitative effects, on whether kids see something in media or play violent video games and then, unaware of the difference between fact and fantasy, go out and commit acts that imitate what they’ve seen. For example, decades worth of studies that have examined repeated exposure to violent media demonstrate the desensitization that results, as well as the normalization of violence. In his book *On Killing*, former Army lieutenant David Grossman looks at the similarity between army training techniques designed to desensitize and thus enable 18-year olds to kill other human beings and the process of desensitization through compulsive playing of violent video games. Look at how many boys/men can observe, experience and in a virtual sense, participate in incredibly realistic depictions of violence and yet not react strongly, with repulsion, like having their stomach get so queasy that they need to avert their eyes. For a lot of boys and young men it is a badge of honor that they can sit in a movie theater or play a game with realistic decapitations, disembowelings and all manner of the infliction of pain and human suffering and not turn away from the screen, as if that is somehow a measure of their strength and not a measure of the damage to their psyches that has already taken place. For me, the issue is not whether young people who are playing an enormous amount of video games are becoming violent, and how you measure increased aggressiveness after watching a movie or playing a video game. It’s about the narratives of manhood that are being promoted and reinforced. One of the chief reasons for so much of the violence in this society and the world is the deeply-rooted, ideological linkage of masculinity and violence. Boys and taught and thus learn at an early age that being a man means being powerful and in control; violence is an instrumental means of gaining or maintaining that power and control. So in a media culture we need to look at narratives that help construct manhood in a certain way, the stories that are constantly told to boys and men—and to girls and women—that reinforce this link between manhood and power and control. That to me is one of the most fundamental issues in the area of the effects of violent media. But this is rarely discussed. You’ll search the mainstream media conversation in vain for anything approaching what I have just said.

**JM:** Don’t you think though in a sense the media is a almost a representation—it works both ways? You said that it affects our psyches but it is also a reflection of our psyches. It is a dialectical relationship.

**JK:** It is. When it comes to violent media, people will say “It’s popular. People aren’t being forced to consume these images. They’re not being forced to watch Ultimate Fighting or attend mixed martial arts events. They’re not being forced to watch football games or whatever else they’re into. They’re doing it willingly.” There’s some truth in that, but it’s more complicated. For example, people want to be entertained, but if their imagination is so limited as to what is entertaining because the stories that are being told are so narrowly focused, it is not fair to say they are getting what they want. Look at what feminists have been saying for decades, that there aren’t enough roles for strong women, especially women who were not hyper-sexualized and over the age of 35. Is that because there aren’t stories that women (and men) would want to see and hear? No, it’s because every day in Hollywood, business decisions made by producers about what gets green-lighted and stories about white men—especially with guns—disproportionately find their way to the screen. Whether you want to argue that this flows from the fact that most producers are white men, or that the target audience is 14-year old boys, the end result is what it is. A similar dynamic has long been true about racial representation and the paucity of complex stories being told in Hollywood about the lives of people of color. This is an ongoing debate about trying to get media corporations to be more responsive about telling stories that are more faithful to the complexity of human experience, rather than just going back to the same old, same old, tried and true, shoot ‘em up, kill ‘em stories which centralize boys and men’s experience, white men and boys especially, to the exclusion of other stories. And they too often glamorize what in real life is tragic. By the way, another key point in the political economy of violent media is that part of the reason for so much violence in American-produced media is the international markets, because they know that violence translates across national borders and language barriers more than other forms of representation, including drama and comedy. Violence translates more easily so they can make more money in the overseas sales whether it’s video games, Hollywood movies, TV shows, etc. When the Hollywood producers are making decisions about what to green light, it’s this idea of violence as more universal. The U.S. has the dubious distinction of being the number one exporter of both violent arms and violent media to the world. In both cases, I think we are reinforcing caricatured and I think retrograde ideas of violent American manhood. Is this how 21st century American men want to be seen around the world?
JM: I would agree but I am also glad to hear you say that to blame it solely on the media is a gross oversimplification.

JK: Yes, but again the problem is the superficiality of the media effects conversation, and the degendered quality of it. I think the core issue is not “violence in media”, but “violent masculinity in media.” Media play a very powerful role in reinforcing the idea that violence is linked to manhood and manhood is linked to power and control. I wouldn’t want to let the media off the hook on that one.

JM: And we’re talking about entertainment media at this point, right?

JK: Absolutely. But also the media news, such as your article in the Huffington Post, Memo to Media: Manhood, Not Guns or Mental Illness, Should Be Central in Newtown Shooting, you talk about how degendered it is and how the reference is always to either people or adolescents, and it never points to the fact that it is mostly white men who create such acts.

JK: Right, which is the central fact. I think the most important factor in school shootings and rampage killings is the gender of the perpetrator. Other factors are important but secondary. A simple way of thinking about this is to do a thought exercise: If 61 out of 62 of the school shootings and rampage killings over the past 30 years had been done by women, would anybody not be talking about the fact that it was women in the overwhelming number of cases? Would they be talking about anything else, really? But when it’s boys and men, we talk about mental illness, we talk about gun availability, anything else other than the fact that it is men. Some people insist that’s because it’s obvious. Everybody knows it’s men, everybody knows, you don’t have to say it. But the problem is if you don’t say it, in the subsequent discussion about the causes you’ll reference everything else, and not talk about the central issue.

JM: And it becomes invisible.

JK: Yes. One of the roles that men’s studies scholars and activists, educators, and other men can play is to help to make the links between cultural constructs of masculinities and the perpetration of violence—both on a micro and macro level. Unfortunately, it’s very frustrating because we only have intermittent access to mainstream modes of mass communication. This is changing somewhat, as the digital revolution continues to produce democratizing forms of communication like the Internet, Web, and social media. It’s partially a question of scale. We can teach men’s studies classes or sociology/psychology classes on masculinity, we can write op-ed pieces, articles, and books. It is important that we do all of that. But one of our biggest challenges is how to get our ideas and analyses out to a much wider audience. I give lectures all over the U.S. and parts of the world and in response to some of the standard lines I deliver in my lectures about the gendered nature of violence people say “Wow that’s so interesting! I never thought about that like that.” Really? Some of us profeminist men have been saying this for 30 years, and in some cases feminist women were saying it for years before that.

JM: Yes, interesting.

JK: A lot of this has to do with the ideological gate-keeping function of the mainstream media. One of the things I’ve been working on is to try to understand why the mainstream media is so reluctant to have this conversation. It’s easy to see why in terms of hegemony: ideas that disrupt established systems of power are by definition threatening and are thus regularly excluded or marginalized. I am also interested in how this plays out in practical terms, among newspaper editors, working journalists and TV and radio producers. Why has there been such an exclusion of a discussion about gender in the area of school shootings and rampage killings? Is this resistance conscious or unconscious? When the New York Times writes countless editorials about gun violence and fails to mention that it is men who commit the vast majority of gun violence, whether men or women are the victims, is that the result of some conscious process on the part of the editorial writers? Are they consciously trying to be gender neutral because they think that is somehow more inclusive, or somehow gender specificity is going to be read as tired old analysis? “Because of course today we know women are also violent, so you can’t just say it’s men.” I wonder if they’re afraid they’ll be called “anti-male” and experience a backlash from men in terms of reduced readership/sales. Clearly, some men will say this is not fair to men because you are attacking them as a group, when it is really the behavior of (more than) a few bad apples. In some ways, men’s defensiveness in the face of honest discussion about men’s violence shuts down critical thinking. Feminist women experienced this for decades. They start to talk in gender specific ways about masculinity or whether it’s men’s violence against women or the gendered nature of most interpersonal violence which is perpetrated by men. And some men get really angry and defensive, and so a lot of women have decided it’s not worth it. “Let’s just use gender neutral language.” As a result men’s defensive posture again serves a very conservative function in maintaining the status quo. It is also important to acknowledge that some critiques of media coverage of gun violence maintain that mainstream media are much more interested in mass killings when the shooters and victims are white and middle class, in contrast to the more routine shootings in black and brown populations. I appreciate this concern but one characteristic that transcends race or socioeconomics is the gender of the perpetrators, and the way cultural experiences of and ideas about manhood—often intersecting with class and racial factors—so often underlies and encourage the use of deadly force.
JK: They are related insofar as they're both linked to cultural constructs of masculinity that often involve power and control. As I've said, for me the number one issue in gun violence is the gender of the perpetrator. This includes men's fear of other men, or self-defense. But also we need to be talking about how people/men use firearms to enact their will, to force others to bend to their will.

JM: Homophobia to a large degree too.

JK: Yes, in a larger sense than how people normally understand the term. Homophobia means irrational fear of other men, and it has also been used to describe both anti-gay attitudes and fears and anxieties about one's own sexual orientation. Speaking of fear, it's important to understand the "mean world syndrome" and its relation to violence. George Gerbner was one of the pioneers of media effects research and he studied media violence extensively. His concept of a "mean world syndrome" was meant to describe how viewers, mostly but not exclusively boys and young men who had been exposed to enormous amounts of media violence tended to develop an idea of the world as a scary place, which is to say that because they had been exposed to enormous numbers of acts of violence in media, they believed the world is actually more violent that it really is. His argument was that this media-generated misperception has real effects because if you have been conditioned through your consumption of violent media to believe the world is more violent than it really is, if you find yourself in a situation where you perceive that you might be hurt or killed, then you are more likely to use violence to defend yourself. Who knows if your perception is accurate? Gerbner's research provides evidence of the fact that viewers immersed in violent media frequently have faulty perceptions about the actual risks they face – often with tragic consequences. You are also more susceptible to policy prescriptions and political programs that seek to allay those fears. For example, you are ripe for right-wing law and order campaigns that promise to "get tough" on crime. Mean world syndrome can also be applied to recent gun debates. For millions of American men fear is a key catalyst and rationale for gun ownership. The more fearful you are the more likely you are going to feel you need a gun to protect yourself and your family...

JM: Absolutely, I think too of survivalists and militias. Most, if not all, are white men.

JK: A post-industrial capitalist economy where millions of men live on the economic margins provides a never-ending supply of white men who are susceptible to such right-wing movements. After all, if you live in a society where you're taught from the earliest age that "being a man" means having a good job or career and making enough money to support your family...

JM: The male as breadwinner.

JK: But if you don't have that for any number of reasons, then how do you prove that you're a man who's worthy of respect? One tried and true strategy is to join the resistance. Now many of us see joining the resistance as a way for young men in anti-colonial struggles or other left-wing movements to assert their manhood even as they seek to advance democracy and social justice. But the right has successfully co-opted this impulse for its own purposes in defense of the wealthy and powerful. You can see how this works in the conservative entertainment complex. Take Rush Limbaugh. Part of his appeal to his largely white male audience is the way he frames contemporary political struggle. He calls the moderately liberal Obama administration "the regime," and he calls the media "the state run media." It's all meant to invoke images of Stalinism in the Soviet Union or the East German police state. He's basically calling on patriotic Americans -- especially white men -- to help defend our free people against these statists who are trying to take away people's freedoms and trample on their constitution. Just a little further to the right are the armed militias and other paramilitary organizations, which increase in numbers and membership whenever a Democrat is elected president. If you're a guy who is out of work or underemployed and struggling, and don't have other ways to validate your manhood, joining a right-wing movement -- in extreme cases an armed militia -- is a way to compensate for your other deficits. You might not have a job or enough money to put food on the table but you have your semi-automatic weapons, and you can proudly assert that you're going to defend your family against the government if they try to come and infringe on your rights.

JM: Right, but I have to say from a psychological point of view two things—one is that much of this is fairly delusional. If they think they can overthrow the U.S. government or even effectively foment some kind of revolution they really are delusional. The other point, and I'm not a Freudian, from a psychoanalytic view, the whole phallic connection to guns does seem to be relevant here.

JK: Absolutely. Beyond Freud, you can say that guns are what my friend the documentary film producer Jeremy Earp refers to as "prosthetic masculinity." When you purchase a gun in a sense you are purchasing a kind of enhanced body mass. You might not be big and strong, you might be slight of stature and not a particularly physically aggressive kind of guy; you'd be in trouble if you had to engage in hand to hand combat with another guy. But if you are able to technically master that weapon, that machine, you've leveled the playing field and you no longer have to think like a vulnerable victim. Like the old saying goes: the gun is the great equalizer. You no longer need to feel intimidated by men who are bigger and stronger than you because in your hands you have the great equalizer.

JM: But it is compensatory.

JK: Without a doubt. Just knowing that you have it is a comfort. I see this in my 11-year-old son who has a Nerf gun and he walks around proudly displaying it. He says it makes him feel strong. I appreciate that. He's 11.

JM: It's a phase and just may be something that boys do. I think there might be a sexual developmental aspect to it. But I don't think it's related necessarily to growing up and being violent.

JK: No, it doesn't have to be, not at all. I'm simply saying that the idea that guns provide a sense of security and a fortification of a man's sense of himself as powerful is a big part of their appeal -- for kids and adults.
JM: Most killers aren’t. Do you know James Gilligan’s work? He wrote a couple of important books. One is called Violence and the other is called Preventing Violence. He was the chief of psychiatric services at the Bridgewater State Hospital in Massachusetts which they used to say was for the “criminally insane.” I’m not sure what they call it now. Over the years he worked with many profoundly disturbed men who had committed heinous acts of violence. One of the things Gilligan pointed out is that in the public we hear about these killings and people think: “what a senseless murder.” His argument is that it is not at all senseless from the perspective of the perpetrator. It is often a very rational response that flows out of their life experience and emotional states. Gilligan focuses on men’s experience of shame. A large percentage of violence committed by men is in response to shame – injury done to them that is internalized, their sense of self through violence, or humiliation. The dominant narrative in our society for boys and men who have been violated, the script we give them, especially if they have been emotionally humiliated or physically or sexually violated, is to take back what has been taken from them. The externalization of men’s experience of violation is one of the dominant gendered facts of violence. So boys who have been abused are something like 10 times more likely to become abusive of others than boys who have not been abused. On the other hand girls who have been abused are much more likely to turn inward and become self-abusive.

JM: Including conditions like Borderline Personality Disorder.

JK: Girls are not school shooters. Plenty of girls get bullied and socially marginalized and everything else, but vanishingly few of them come to school with guns and start shooting people. Why aren’t girls reacting the same way boys are if it’s all about guns, mental illness and other factors? Why aren’t girls doing it?

JM: Well, this is where you see girls doing things like self-injurious behaviors like cutting themselves and burning themselves with cigarettes.

JK: Girls are not school shooters. Plenty of girls get bullied and socially marginalized and everything else, but vanishingly few of them come to school with guns and start shooting people. Why aren’t girls reacting the same way boys are if it’s all about guns, mental illness and other factors? Why aren’t girls doing it?

JM: Yes, that’s the internalization of the pain rather than the externalization.

JK: Girls internalize and boys/men externalize. That’s one of the basic tenets of gender psychology.

JM: You know men are supposedly 50% less likely to experience depression. It really seems they are less likely to express it and less likely to seek help.

JK: Or even to identify it as depression. This has nothing to do with the actual condition—it has to do with the social acceptance of acknowledging vulnerability, which is gender-transgressive for a man.

JM: It’s “feminine.”

JK: If you acknowledge vulnerability, and the prevailing social norm says that a real man is invulnerable, you are admitting to failure as a man. Whereas for women, because vulnerability is constructed as a feminine characteristic, women can come forward and say “I have a problem” without fearing that they have failed as a woman.

JM: Right. The one socially acceptable emotion for men is anger.

JK: And violence is one expression or operationalization of that acceptable emotion.

“**The dominant narrative in our society for boys and men who have been violated, the script we give them, especially if they have been emotionally humiliated or physically or sexually violated, is to take back what has been taken from them. The externalization of men’s experience of violation is one of the dominant gendered facts of violence.”**
JK: And violence is one expression or operationalization of that acceptable emotion.

JM: It’s the utmost, yes.

JK: The other thing about mental illness is that the vast majority of people who have received diagnoses of “mental illness” are not violent, but linking violence and mental illness in the popular imagination functions to stigmatize people with mental illness. Nonetheless, even mental illness is gendered.

JM: Of course it is.

JK: For example, the forms that a person’s mental illness takes is often extremely gendered. Boys and men who have grown up in this culture who develop mental illness are still products of this culture and its gender system, so the ways that mental illness will manifest itself will often reflect that gender socialization. You can’t just say that “mental illness” is sometimes a factor (in violent rampages) as if there are no gendered aspects to the underlying condition or its symptoms.

JM: Agreed. So, tell me about your book.

JK: It’s entitled Leading Men: Presidential Campaigns and the Politics of Manhood. It had a “soft launch” just before the 2012 election. Basically I argue in the book that presidential campaigns function as quadrennial referenda on the state of national manhood. Every four years American voters choose not just between political ideologies, but between ideologies (and representations) of manhood. Presidential campaigns are the center stage of an ongoing debate about American manhood, especially in the contemporary period, when so many transformative social movements have issued direct challenges to the centrality of white male authority: the Civil Rights Movement, the women’s movement, the gay and lesbian movements, the movement against the Vietnam War, the environmental movement. The president occupies an incredibly important symbolic role in our culture. He is not just the chief executive of the government. (He) is also the head of the First Family that lives in the White House. He is the mourner-in-chief when national tragedies occur. He is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. More than any single person he embodies the national identity, which is to say the national manhood. Americans have been conditioned from birth to see the U.S. as the most masculine country in the world, if not in human history. The president is the person who embodies that more than any single person. So in this time of incredible transformation around gender, sexuality, race and everything else, it is inevitable on some level that the presidency becomes the center stage for the playing out of all these tensions around the changing nature of American manhood and American womanhood. One of the reasons it is so difficult for a woman to be elected president is not just the concrete obstacles like the need to raise money, the need to gain support within the political parties. Those are real obstacles for women, but my focus is the symbolic one. Electing a woman as president would disrupt the symbolic architecture on which so much of men’s cultural dominance is based. Notably, there has been a significant and persistent gender gap in presidential politics for 40 years. Women vote for the Democratic candidate in much greater numbers than men do. I look more at why (white) men support the Republicans than at why women support the Democrats. In the book I look at a series of presidential elections starting in 1972 and then building up to the present, right up through the 2012 election. I try to show how the historical shifts that are happening in the culture at the time of elections, the debates between pro-war and anti-war, “tough on crime,” vs. “soft on crime,” gay rights, gay marriage, the Republican “war on women,” and so forth, have a deeply gendered subtext, and how all of this has influenced and shaped presidential politics over the last several decades. I am excited about this analysis; it’s really a paradigm-shifting way of thinking about the presidency. I have read a great deal of presidential scholarship that has been generated over the past 40 or 50 years, and aside from the work of some insurgent feminist scholars, there is relatively little explicit discussion about presidential masculinity. The vast majority of discussion about gender in presidential political scholarship is about women, and women’s attempts to break that ultimate glass ceiling. Feminist political theorists and political science scholars have been writing about this with great insight, but in the mainstream there has been very little attention—just as with the gun debate—to the way that gender shapes presidential campaigns, even when the contest is between two men. Once again, many people think it’s obvious, we all know it’s always been men, let’s talk about all the other factors in presidential leadership. My point is that one of the central roles a president plays is that he’s the hegemonic or dominant man; up until 2008 it was all white men and with one exception Protestant men.

JM: Yes, except for JFK. Didn’t you also bring up one of the most glaring examples as being the Carter/Reagan election?

JK: I have a long chapter on the 1980 election of the former Hollywood actor Ronald Reagan.

JM: And the John Wayne-ishness of Reagan.

JK: You’re absolutely right. There was a critically acclaimed biography of Reagan written by the historian Sean Wilentz called The Age of Reagan. In the entire book there was no mention of John Wayne. How can you possibly write about Ronald Reagan’s political ascendency and election to the presidency, and not talk about the cultural significance of John Wayne? They draw from the same exact cultural energy and moment, and this in a political/media culture that long ago was transformed by the conventions of entertainment. I compare and contrast John Wayne’s and Ronald Reagan’s manhood, and their respective cultural impact and identities.
JM: And Carter as being weak. Or being perceived as being weak.

JK: And thoroughly feminized in the popular discourse. Like in the Iranian Hostage Crisis and the role it played in helping to further the right-wing narrative that the reason why the American hostages were taken, and why the Iranian students were able to humiliate the United States, was because we had a weak leader. The argument was that the country’s manhood was deficient—we were an “impotent giant”—because at the helm of the country we had a small town farmer from Georgia who talked nice, but was not a strong enough man.

JM: And basically had “no balls.”

JK: Unlike John Wayne. A big part of George W. Bush’s political appeal was his performance of a kind of Reaganesque theatrics of masculinity.

JM: Absolutely.

JK: Do you know what year George and Laura Bush bought their ranch in Crawford, Texas? 1999. They bought the ranch just before GWB announced for president. There might have been other reasons for buying it, but one of the effects of buying that ranch was that it provided a steady stream of visuals and photo ops that showed GWB riding in the back of a pick-up truck, clearing brush like Ronald Reagan, wearing Texas cowboy hats and really presenting himself as a rural, working-class man of the people. George W. Bush is an aristocrat from a family with deep roots in the Northeast Republican aristocracy. He was able to successfully market himself as kind of a tough-talking Texan who could appeal to working-class white guys for whom East coast aristocrats are effete and feminized. It’s amazing how this all plays out. In Leading Men I also write about the 1988 election of George H.W. Bush over Michael Dukakis. The big contribution of Lee Atwater, Bush’s chief campaign strategist, to political consulting was the idea that politics is about attacking the manhood of your opponent. He didn’t use that particular verbiage but that’s essentially what he advocated and practiced. What Bush’s campaign did was basically to relentlessly attack Michael Dukakis’s manhood. In the summer of 1988 Dukakis was beating Bush in the polls by 17 percentage points; by November he lost 40 states.

JM: I remember.

JK: I provide some context for all of this with the 1972 election in which Richard Nixon beat George McGovern by a 49-state landslide. The Republicans were able to feminize McGovern, a former World War II decorated fighter pilot. They made him into a wimp and a feminized man because he believed in amnesty for Vietnam draft evaders, and believed we needed to reduce the military budget significantly if we wanted to have a healthy economy in the post-Vietnam period. They completely un-manned this war hero (sound familiar?) and from ’72 onward the message to Democratic Party aspirants was that if you want to make it in presidential politics you have to move to the right, especially with regard to supporting an aggressive foreign policy and ever-increasing military budgets. This isn’t just an analysis of presidential image-making as an interesting but superficial factor in politics. The image of the president makes a big difference in terms of the range of his political operating space in office. It has real material consequences.

JM: What is the role of the Blue Dogs?

JK: Blue Dog Democrats are conservative Democrats largely from the South and parts of the Midwest who tend to be culturally conservative and vote with the Republicans on many issues. I discuss them in terms of the masculinity politics of the gun debate. Until Newtown, and even to some extent since, the Democratic Party was scared off of talking about guns and “gun control” because of the fear that they would alienate a certain part of the Blue Dog constituency, or Democratic or independent voters in culturally conservative parts of the county for whom the questions of gun ownership are important electoral considerations. So the Democrats were thinking “If we are seen as a party that will threaten gun ownership then we are going to lose elections, and we won’t be able to enact our larger political vision and program.” As a result for decades the Democratic Party has been timid about gun policy, fearing the wrath of the NRA. The NRA has an enormous amount of money, and it can bring a lot of electoral energy to defeat Congresspeople who support sensible gun legislation. But in addition I would argue that a key part of the NRA’s power is their ability to define male candidates who oppose them as feminized, weak men, because for many conservatives, a real man supports “gun rights.” So if a male politician supports various gun control measures, he will be feminized and ridiculed on conservative talk radio, Fox News and elsewhere to the point where very few men will want to identify with him or vote for him. For the record, in 2012, white men voted for Mitt Romney by 27 percentage points over Barack Obama.

JM: If it wasn’t for women and minorities—it’s staggering.

JK: At the risk of oversimplification, since the late 1960s the Republican Party has been able to market itself—especially to white male voters—not only as the party that represents white people in the ongoing civil rights struggle, but as the party of “real men.” By that logic, white men who are in the Democratic Party are either feminized men, cuckolded men, or gay men, and as such not representatives of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. I have several quotes in Leading Men from right-wing opinion leaders like Rush Limbaugh that ridicule the manhood and question the heterosexuality of progressive and Democratic male political figures. They do it routinely. If you pay attention to the way politics is constructed in the conservative entertainment complex, it’s very simplistic and cruelly oppositional—men vs. women, right vs. wrong, strong vs. weak, etc. and in each case when you deconstruct the binary, what ends up happening is that Republicans represent the side of manhood, morality, and strength, and Democrats the side of womanhood, immorality and weakness. This is one of the reasons why there is such a persistent gender gap, and why people of color overwhelmingly reject the Republican Party. It is also why coming out of the 2012 elections the Republicans are facing not only an identity crisis but an existential one: with the white male percentage of the electorate shrinking every year, they will not be able to win national elections unless they reconfigure their gender and racial politics.

LEARN MORE ABOUT JACKSON KATZ AND HIS WRITINGS AND RESEARCH AT:
The Military Industrial Complex – How it Perpetuates Male Gun Violence

Grant M. Waldman, West Coast Men’s Support Society

Gun violence seems to be perpetually in the news. Whether it is the devastation at an elementary school, specific domestic violence, or random gang violence, guns continue to be making the headlines. What tends to stand out in the story for me is that the users of the guns are usually men.

I would like to ask the question: why is that? Why are men constantly acting out with gun violence? What is it about today’s society that tells these men that the use of guns is OK? That it is normal to murder your girlfriend, or a neighbour, another gang member, or innocent children?

Today I would like to assert that the men who are perpetrating these crimes are doing so because the men at the top of society – those who are running our government and the military industrial complex that includes: Boeing, Lockheed, Northrup, etc., are saying that it is OK to kill with guns. If the USA can continue to spend tens of billions of dollars on the military, stating that it is OK to invade other countries, then why isn’t it OK for men in the USA to be aggressive with guns too? It is the leaders of our nations and organizations who provide the roadmap to our citizens. The question is: what road have we been taught to use: the high or the low?

According to Jackson Katz in his article: “Memo to Media: Manhood, Not Guns or Mental Illness, Should be Central in Newtown Shooting”, “…individual men are products of social systems...” Mr. Katz goes on to confirm that this is not about randomness but rather a systemic issue that needs to be stopped.

I am not in agreement with Mr. Katz regarding his statement that guns play “an emotional role” in men’s lives – that it connects men with their fathers and increases men’s sense of power and security. I can think of much healthier ways for men to connect that does not have to involve guns. Again, if this is what society considers as a “norm” then we need to change this because it is not sustainable as the Newtown shooting confirms.

So again, we need to start at the top. We need to communicate with our local politicians that we need to stop the Military Industrial Complex and we need to retool these industries to develop products that support our society rather than tearing it down. I do not agree with Jackson Katz that this is about men stepping up and taking responsibility. This is about the leaders of our society stepping up and taking responsibility. To me this is the only way that gun violence is ever going to stop: when the messages that we hear on an ongoing basis are about peace, compassion, and mutual respect for all. That the message is about solving our problems with words. The message is about all genders taking responsibility to end all violence. That the message is about peace missions to Syria, Iran, Turkey, Mali, Kenya, etc. to create societies based on compassion and empathy rather than going in to these countries as GI Joe bullies to utilize our Military Industrial Complex inventory since it is continuing to be manufactured and needing to be utilized.

Just imagine where the trillions that the USA spends on its military machine could go? Imagine all the free health care and free education. Imagine all the improved roadways. Imagine all the investment in technology that supports our society: alternative energy, electric cars, healthier food production, etc.

All that it will take is for the men at the top of the food chain to be held accountable for their actions. For men like George W Bush and his father, Henry Kissinger, Rudy Giuliani, Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, etc., to have lie detector tests and asked about what really happened on September 11th, 2001; Asked about the pressure that they had on them from the Military Industrial Complex to create a war because they needed to move their inventory. Asked about the thousands of people whose lives have been lost in the name of supporting the military machine.

The house of cards must fall in order for our society to heal from the wounds of the military machine. There are thousands of men walking the streets of the USA who have been programmed to be on the alert; Men who have been programmed to be killing machines. These men have not been deprogrammed. These men are armed and very dangerous. What is our society doing to support these men?

I would assert that until the men at the top say that men do not have to go to war to be good men; that men do not have to kill other men to be seen as worthy valuable men; that men can be good men by being compassionate and empathic. This is when gun violence will no longer be on the front pages of our papers.
Men, Masculinity and the Common Good in an Era of Economic Uncertainty has been published by Men’s Studies Press. Chapters in this third collection—essays, opinion, research—were born from presentations at AMSA’s 19th Annual Conference of the same title, held in Kansas City, Missouri in March/April of 2011.

Both blind- and peer-reviewed, the book contains nine chapters, divided into three areas—Men, Employment and Socio-Economic Status; Race, Ethnicity, Identity, and Social Justice; and, Men, Counseling, and Mental Health. It builds upon previous work by AMSA contributors, and furthers the discourse in light of current economic and social conditions, including the psychological, emotional, relational, and physical effects such situations have on men, their children, their partners, and those who care about them.

For more information, or to purchase the publication, contact: amsa.editors@gmail.com

Copies are still available!

See our website, mensstudies.org for the complete list of chapters.

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