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Book Note

THE MAN QUESTION: MALE SUBORDINATION AND PRIVILEGE, by Nancy E. Dowd¹

UMAIR ABDUL

FEMINIST LEGAL THEORISTS and feminist jurisprudence have brought a critical eye to the inner workings of the law by asking “the woman question.” That is, what role has the law played in the subordination of women, and how can legal policies be reworked to address this concern?

However, in answering this question, men have often been viewed through a somewhat essentialist lens. Men may be seen as the explicit standard or characterized as a singular group with presumed privilege. The emergent field of masculinities theory has sought to debunk the myth of men as a universal and undifferentiated group. Rather, this school of thought has sought to demonstrate that “masculinity, in any form, is not a biological given, not a thing that one has; rather, it is socially constructed, a set of practices that one constantly engages in or performs.”²

American law professor Nancy E. Dowd positions herself at this juncture between feminist legal theory and the study of masculinities. In *The Man Question: Male Subordination and Privilege*, Dowd seeks to examine how the study of masculinities can be used to better understand gender and privilege in feminist theory.

In the preface to her book, Dowd notes that *The Man Question* originated from a Gender and the Law class, and her decision to add readings about men’s issues and masculinities to the syllabus. According to Dowd, “the class was both threatened and energized by the readings, resistant and yet open to rethinking

1. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009) 308 pages.

2. *Ibid.* at 26.

their assumptions about gender equality and gender issues.”³ This experience led Dowd to consider the implications for feminist theory when theorists ask the man question.

In part I, Dowd looks at the question from a theoretical standpoint. Chapter two traces the origins and development of masculinities theory and also considers the traditional role men have played in feminist theory. In chapter three, Dowd delves into an all-encompassing and multidisciplinary discussion of masculinities scholarship. Chapter four builds on the preceding chapters to offer a way forward. This chapter examines the insights from theoretical work by masculinities scholars and then sets out seven implications for feminist theorists. Dowd concludes that, with the aforementioned insights in mind, “the implications for feminist theory are a further refinement in analysis and methodology.”⁴

Parts II and III are a marked departure from the theoretical considerations in the first part of the book. With a theoretical framework in mind, Dowd turns her focus to applications of masculinities analysis. In order to demonstrate the importance of a masculinities analysis to an understanding of dominance and privilege, Dowd takes “the insights of feminist analysis infused with masculinities and appl[ies] that enriched feminist approach to areas where boys and men are negatively affected by gender.”⁵

Part II offers a discussion of boys in the context of education and the juvenile justice system, and uses the two case studies to demonstrate how a more well-rounded and holistic feminist analysis could more effectively help theorists understand the gendered structures at work. Part III similarly applies the masculinities analysis to men’s issues, with chapters on fatherhood and male victims of sexual abuse.

Although *The Man Question* is only 150 pages long, this volume offers a well-researched and comprehensive summary of masculinities theory. Dowd, who is a professor of feminist legal theory, brings an anti-essentialist perspective to the study of masculinities and provides insight into how feminist theorists can use masculinities theory to better understand issues of subordination and privilege.

3. *Ibid.* at ix.

4. *Ibid.* at 65.

5. *Ibid.* at 73.

Most significantly, Dowd relies on her background in family law to provide real-life examples of how a masculinities analysis can be applied to issues of socio-legal policy, ranging from education to sexual abuse. Her work demonstrates how a masculinities analysis can enrich feminist theory and adds a new dimension to discussions of policy reforms that address gender inequities.

