

Vive la Difference!

Taking Sex Differences Seriously, by Steven E. Rhoads (Encounter, 374 pp., \$27.95)

Review by Allan Carlson

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Shortly after the Lewinsky scandal broke, *Time* White House reporter Nina Burleigh confessed in *Mirabella* magazine that she, too, had once caught the president admiring her legs. The episode was “seductive” and “flattering,” Burleigh later said, and she admitted that she would gladly have performed for him as Monica had done, if only asked. A chorus of other prominent female writers quickly volunteered their services, as well. This led *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd to fume about “feminist erotic journalism,” a field in which presumably independent women “pant for power. They crave *droit du seigneur*. *Take me! Take me!*”

It's the way to attract beautiful women, Henry Kissinger is said to have replied when asked why he sought high public office. Indeed, “power [in men] is an aphrodisiac” for the female sex, reports Steven Rhoads in this new book. He points to other cases of feminist icons surrendering to powerful men: Jane Fonda submitting to the “strong, domineering” Ted Turner; Simone de Beauvoir, author of *The Second Sex*, serving as mistress, cook, manager, nurse, and--eventually--pimp for the insufferable Jean-Paul Sartre. So does human nature trump ideology. However, the phenomenon does not work the other way. As the author notes, “power does not increase the sex appeal of former attorney general Janet Reno or of Senator Dianne Feinstein.”

Rhoads explores thousands of comparable examples of sex differences in this provocative, compelling, entertaining book. A professor of public policy at the University of Virginia, Rhoads weaves together the findings of hundreds of new research studies with personal anecdotes in a lively refutation of 40 years of feminist cant. While polite, even generous, toward his intellectual opponents, Rhoads still reveals “the androgynous project” to be nothing less than “misogynist.” Relying heavily on the insights of social biology and evolutionary psychology, he shows the differences between men and women to be natural, “hard wired,” and fundamental to the survival and progress of the human race.

“The culture wars,” Rhoads notes with some justice, “are really about the role of women.” He shows that while men are all about the same when it comes to the masculine traits of competitiveness, aggression, and dominance (even “computer nerds” enjoy the frenzied clashes of “BattleBots”), women are divided into two camps: a majority who are traditionally feminine with a yearning for nest-building and children; and a minority, exposed to higher levels of testosterone, who show more male attributes. The tension between these two kinds of women becomes a recurring theme in the book.

All the same, the profound differences between the two sexes are the author's primary story. For example, the human hormone, oxytocin, is “the kindest of natural opiates,” but it operates differently on the sexes. Men experience it at the moment of sexual release. Women, though, feel the same euphoric exhilaration while breastfeeding. Indeed, some of the oxytocin reaches the child through the breast milk. This creates a special bond between mother and child in which they become “one continually interacting, merged organism” with “a pleasant fog descend[ing] upon the brain.”

No “Mr. Mom” can replicate this experience. Indeed, Rhoads shows that despite the media hype, there are actually few such men around. In candid surveys, even the best-earning, highest-status women reject role reversal in favor of a partner who is superior in

power, earnings, and status. So too among female academics. Homemaking men are simply not sexually attractive to women.

A return to traditional “breadwinner”/“homemaker” homes, the author implies, would be of benefit to children. Fewer work hours by mothers increase student achievement; fewer work hours by fathers decrease it. Similarly, high maternal job satisfaction is linked to lower psychological well-being of daughters, while a higher level of job satisfaction among fathers is tied to the psychological health of daughters.

Psychological differences between the sexes, Rhoads argues, reach back to the origin of the species, in the “environment of evolutionary adaptation.” During the “hunter/gatherer” period, women did the foraging and became better at spatial memory and the expression of emotion. Women's brains have more neurons connecting the left and right hemispheres; positron emission topography shows women to use more neurons for every activity undertaken. Men's brains, meanwhile, are more compartmentalized, designed for single-minded tasks such as “the hunt,” or the hostile corporate takeover. Even eyesight shows important differences: Women have better night vision, to feed and care for “teary infants in the moonless grass,” it appears. For their part, men have superior day vision, essential to success in battle and the acquisition of game.

Still, some feminists would acknowledge all this and respond: “So what? Such differences no longer have relevance in the modern world and pale alongside the imperative for democratic equality.” Rhoads disagrees. He points to numerous areas where wise public policy would recognize and build on sex differences. Regarding day care, for example, Rhoads reports that “two-career families who put children in subsidized day care apparently produce a near tripling of the odds that these children will be disobedient and aggressive--- hardly a trend the government should support financially.” Instead, he urges a generous tax benefit for the parents of young children if one parent (predictably the mother) stays home.

Regarding Title IX and athletics, the author skewers those bureaucrats who deny “sport” status to cheerleading (which involved 64,000 willing high-school girls in 1994) while pushing girls into NCAA “emerging sports” such as ice hockey (only 200 high-school girls nationwide). More broadly, Title IX has become “a pernicious form of social engineering,” assaulting the nature of young women and subverting male sports programs such as wrestling. New research shows that it is through sports that men, much more than women, gain friends and channel potentially destructive energy toward positive ends. Rhoads concludes: “Only when we begin to take sex differences seriously enough to see that men are intrinsically more attracted to sports--and need sports competition more than women do--will we be able to design public policies that are just, functional, and sensible.”

The feminist cause is floundering. Recent polls show that most women believe that feminism has made it harder, not easier, to combine jobs and families. A 1998 survey reports that five times as many men *and* women believe that “changing gender roles” have made it more difficult for marriages to succeed as believe these changes have made it easier. Says Rhoads: Today, just as 40 years ago, truly “happy women usually rule indirectly”--allowing their husbands to believe they are the “head of household.” After all the commotion, not much has really changed.

Rhoads shows that men bound to homes as husbands and fathers are vital to the healthy development of children. Female power is of another, subtler order, the force that crafts relationships, forges family bonds, and creates societies. Grounded in these truths, *Taking Sex Differences Seriously* should help to restore social sanity to a nation still disoriented by extended exposure to feminist ideology. **NR**

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