

GUEST ESSAY

Josh Hawley and the Republican Obsession With Manliness

Dec. 4, 2021

By Liza Featherstone

Ms. Featherstone is a journalist who writes frequently about the politics of gender. She has a 15-year-old son.

Senator Josh Hawley is worried about men. In a recent speech at the National Conservatism Conference, he blamed the left for their mental health problems, joblessness, obsession with video games and hours spent watching pornography. “The crisis of American men,” he said, “is a crisis for the American republic.”

The liberal reaction was flippant. A CNN analysis mocked the speech, contrasting the “decline of masculinity” with real issues like the pandemic and inflation. The ReidOut Blog on MSNBC’s website declared, “Josh Hawley’s crusade against video games and porn is hilariously empty.” But the contempt and mockery his speech received was, at least in part, misplaced.

Mr. Hawley is not alone in sensing that masculinity is a popular cause; around the world, male politicians are tapping into social anxieties about its apparent decline, for their own ideological ends. The Chinese government, for instance, has declared a “masculinity crisis,” and it is responding by cracking down on gaming during school days and by investing in gym teachers and school sports.

There can be a homophobic and fascistic component to such calls: China has also barred “sissy” men from appearing on TV; in Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro has said that masks are “for fairies”; and Mr. Hawley, in his speech, fueled anti-transgender prejudice by alluding to a bogus “war on women’s sports.” Nothing justifies this hateful nonsense. But Mr. Hawley, for all his winking bigotry, is tapping into something real — a widespread, politically potent anxiety about young men that is already helping the right.

American politicians have long fanned popular flames of masculine panic to advance their own agendas, and Mr. Hawley is a scholar of this tradition. In 2008, two years after graduating from Yale Law School, he wrote a smart, compelling book about a historical figure who also worried

about masculinity. In “Theodore Roosevelt: Preacher of Righteousness,” published by Yale University Press, Mr. Hawley described how Roosevelt sought to imbue men with the fortitude the country needed to drive big national projects like war and territorial expansion.

Foregrounding the iconic virility of the cowboy and the soldier, he set out to inspire civic virtue in a citizenry that, he believed, had lost traditional manly virtues when people moved from farms to cities. Conquest would allow American men to shed the temptations of the “slothful life” and become a “more manful race.” Mr. Hawley seeks to carry on this tradition.

He is right about some things. Deindustrialization has stripped many men of their ability to earn a decent wage, as well as of the pride they once took in contributing to prosperous communities. Boys are sometimes overdisciplined and overmedicated for not conforming to behavioral expectations in school. And while more women than men are diagnosed with anxiety or depression, men are more likely to commit suicide or die of drug overdoses.

None of these problems are caused by liberals. But liberalism hasn’t offered a positive message for men lately. In the media, universities and other liberal institutions, it sometimes seems that every man is potentially guilty of something. As Mr. Hawley puts it, men are being told by liberals that “they’re the problem.” Our side — the progressive side — has struggled to articulate what a “nontoxic” masculinity might look like, or where boys might look for models of how to become men.

This has set up an existential crisis for the left, threatening its ability to win elections. For years, young men have been flocking to the far right, finding its messages and disgruntled virtual communities on YouTube and Reddit. In 2016, Donald Trump won the male vote by 11 percentage points. And with his attacks on pornography and video games, Mr. Hawley could appeal to mothers, too, who know that, in excess, these aren’t signs of healthy social adjustment.

Like Roosevelt, Mr. Hawley knows how to exploit the cultural anxieties of ordinary people to advance his brand of politics. But he hasn’t offered solutions to this “masculinity crisis” because neither he nor his party has any.

Men and boys need good jobs, affordable access to team sports, an education system sensitive to their social and emotional development, public parks, mental health support, access to substance abuse treatment and paternity leave. All of this requires public funding, which is far more likely to come from the left than the right. To thrive, many men also need the freedom not to be “men” at all, but rather to become sissies, scrawny historians or even women, a cultural evolution Mr. Hawley and his conservative ilk adamantly oppose.

In his book, Mr. Hawley rightly condemned Roosevelt’s racism and commitment to violent conquest, but he also wanted to salvage from Roosevelt’s legacy a vision of the common good, an insistence that we can live nobler and more meaningful lives. In his speech, Mr. Hawley tapped into this legacy: “To each man, I say: You can be a tremendous force for good. Your nation needs you. The world needs you.”

I don't hate this message, taken alone, for our sons. Who would? But that vision of shared purpose and civic virtue won't come from Mr. Hawley any more than funding for more public baseball fields will. He, after all, has opposed just about every common public project recently proposed, from the bipartisan infrastructure bill to the Build Back Better Act to the Green New Deal.

Meanwhile, the left will need to find a better way to talk to men; half of the population is far too many people to abandon to the would-be strongmen of the far right.

Liza Featherstone (@lfeatherz) is the author, most recently, of "Divining Desire: Focus Groups and the Culture of Consultation."

The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Twitter (@NYTopinion) and Instagram.