

Nicholas L. Syrett  
*The Company He Keeps:  
 A History of White College Fraternities.*

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At first glance fraternities do not fit easily into the image we might have of what college life is supposed to represent. Fraternities appear to be elitist organizations that tend to encourage excessive drinking while promoting misogynistic attitudes and thus do not seem to belong in the democratic and intellectual world of the college community. But as Nicholas Syrett reveals in this history of college fraternities in the United States since the early-nineteenth century, fraternities have not always been what they appear to be today. It is only in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, when colleges became much more accessible to the general population and began to admit women as well as racial and ethnic minorities that fraternities would become defenders of the privileges of their white, male membership. The primary means by which fraternities managed to defend this privilege, it turned out, was by promoting certain assumptions about manhood. The fraternity definition of what constituted proper manhood has evolved over the past two centuries, according to Syrett, to confront and ultimately overcome the challenges to white, male privilege.

The earliest fraternities grew out of literary associations in part to fulfil the desire of their members for greater independence from the supposedly authoritarian and inflexible leadership structure within colleges that left little freedom for students' social lives or intellectual pursuits. As the century progressed, and colleges opened their doors to more students and welcomed a more diverse student body, fraternities became more interested in preserving the privileges of their members within a college culture that was seemingly becoming too egalitarian. In addition to preserving a privileged space within college life for their members, these fraternities also served to prepare students for the challenges they would face after college. As the American economy industrialized it became much less certain that a college education could

secure a young man the position he expected following graduation. Moreover, as the country embraced the new business values of the era, a man's contacts and networking skills became much more important in securing his status and position than any intellectual ability he might possess. A man's fraternity brothers came to serve as the basis of a social network that would help him gain access to that world.

In addition to providing a space of exclusivity within an increasingly egalitarian educational system and offering a means of defending white men's economic and social privilege in the face of changing economic and demographic realities, college fraternities are also used by their members to more sharply define their identities as men. The underlying assumption of fraternities, according to Syrett, has been that a man is defined in large part by the company that he keeps. The earliest fraternities, which emerged to challenge the authority of the faculty, made intellectual pursuit and individual autonomy central to masculine identity. By the twentieth century, and especially since the 1920s, fraternity men had become preoccupied with sex, sport, and excessive drinking, reflecting a shift in the culture spurred primarily by the growing resentment of women and fear of homosexuality.

Modern fraternities serve to channel white college men's anxieties about female empowerment, immigration, and homosexuality. They offer anxious white men a refuge from a world that no longer seems to offer them any guarantees of success. The bonds created at the fraternity house will turn into social networks after college that will ensure that white men continue to wield economic and political power in society. Syrett notes that fraternities have always served as a refuge for men who have felt displaced in some manner. But he also points out that earlier fraternities were more willing to challenge authority figures. Today's fraternities, on the other hand, are much more eager to defend an establishment that appears to be disintegrating in the face of challenges from women and racial minorities.

It is this shift in particular that perhaps makes fraternities less benign than in the past. According to Syrett, fraternities appear to thrive today because they are selling privilege and the promise of access to a political and business world that was, and continues to be, dominated by white men. Fraternities are thus perpetuating a particular type of manhood that serves to offset any of the gains being made by those individuals seeking to democratize the college system. And if former fraternity members continue to play important roles in the worlds of business and politics then it might also be said that fraternities are standing in the way of larger efforts to democratize society as a whole.