

The Woman-Man Conflict – and Consensus XYZZ

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In the late 60s came a social force called “the women’s movement.” Where did it come from, what was it, and where did it go? Sociologists have two basic perspectives from which to see social actions: conflict, which comes from Marx, and consensus or functionalism, which flows from Durkheim. This brief paper looks at the women’s movement from both of these perspectives.

When the movement took place, there were two ways to look at the family. Marx’s partner, Engels, had written a book entitled “The Origin of the Family”. In it, Engels saw the family as the basic unit of power and oppression. Without the family, he said, the exploitive economic system called capitalism could not ever have taken place. The building block on which society exists, he indicated, is the social fact that people are paired for propagation, man-to-woman, and then separated into households and kept away from one another. Householding is the fundamental divide-and-conquer method that nature provides to keep women and men separate from one another and powerless. Inside the household, man dominates over the woman in a mirror of the class structure outside the household: many little mirrors, house to house to house. Men populate the labor force and come home to dominate women. Then, if men become too “class interested” and demand more wages in the work force, the ruling class can reach down into the “lumpen proletariat” which are the underclass, beneath even the proletariat, and hire them—and women are the great example in his time of the lumpen proles. The lumpen proles are the unemployed, and women certainly were in those early industrial times, the unemployed.

The other view current in Sociology when the women’s movement was born, was women as the major stakeholder, nurturer, and provider in the family-as-socialization agent. The sub-field called “The Family” was reserved for women. The few women in the field seemed to “specialize” in it. The family was seen by Sociologists—left over from the bucolic 50s—as the center of love, nurturing, socialization,

ritual, and other nice functioning forces. This part of society was seen as a respite or relief from the wicked marketplace where competition raged and men ruled. Sociologists interested in socialization and the family studied how rules, norms, mores, rituals all came filtering down from parents like gently falling snow: a completely different look at the family from that of Engels. They had not begun looking full force at dysfunctional families – or realized that most families *are* dysfunctional – so families held together by drugs, abuse, poverty, neurosis, and aimlessness were not a central part of the picture.

Not only was this the way Sociology saw the family, this was the way social organization was: both part of the functioning and part of the conflict. Women behind their white picket fences held internally that conflict between conflict and consensus—and men, on the “other side” of that sexual divide held their own hidden conflict. A movie that well portrays the outside and the inside of this dichotomy is modeled on the Virginia Woolf story is called “The Hours.”

Along came the 60s. Women became educated but remained at home; men stayed in the marketplaces and bought bigger and bigger homes for their wives. One car in the garage became two cars, and women began to drive to one another’s homes and talk with one another across those walls that divided them. Women began naturally to do what C. Wright Mills, the sociologist, was urging Sociologists to do: they began to see their personal problems as structural. If one woman’s inability to talk with her husband, or, more likely, her experience of her husband not being able to talk with her, was mirrored in the woman next door and the woman next door to her, and so on, then maybe the problem was not so personal after all. Maybe, these women decided in their big living rooms as they began to talk with one another in what they called “consciousness raising” sessions, they had better get out and get some work. So they did.

At first, women *imitated* men at work. The marketplace seemed to be the place of conflict, whereas the home was the place of peace and functioning, so women put on broad shoulder pads and got tough, like they imagined men were. They fought and clawed their way up to the top and got called

all kinds of names for it, because the myth was that women were to be the sweet ones. Some men were naturally the sweet ones and “came out” to show their feminine sides. They were called names as well: queer, fags, and perverts. The marketplace radically changed, and the gender norms did not fit a lot of people, man and woman. Women took many of the jobs men once had and you could even say that wages adjusted in such a way that it now takes two people working in the market place to maintain most family units, causing change and a strain on socialization of children. As a result, many Sociologists tend to look at the family—or at least many of them—as dysfunctional rather than functional.

Conflict? Consensus? Both men and women have two “sides”, as does society: women and men have a “fight” side and a need to “get along” side, a tough side and a willingness to comply side. Gender roles changed drastically in the last half century, even in societies where oppression of women was mandated by sacred and secular law. In Egypt, when women were allowed to study to become religious leaders, not only did they rush to study, they achieved the highest honors. This radical shift has caused many conflicts, private and public, as women became men, and men, sometimes grudgingly, had at least to recognize women-as-men. Some men began to recognize the feminine that also lives inside of them. It is important for Sociologists and all society members to realize that the gender wars are not only making it easier for women to function as full members of society, they allow men to function as full human beings, with emotions, love, and nurturing to complement their phenomenal aggression and indomitable assertiveness that has shaped and formed most of humanity’s amazing achievements.

Through this social conflict called the women’s movement but which should be called the human’s movement, each individual squeezes through to become more fully functioning as she or he comes to see both outside, in social forces, and inside in psychological or spiritual forces, that it takes both types of being and that both conflict and consensus reside everywhere. The process of life is to allow their interplay. As we unite within and across the sexes and genders, we can discover more power to get things done as we drop the need to have power over one another.