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A New Conversation: Gender Roles in the Modern Age

 There likely exists a very narrow chapter in mankind’s story in which humans have the luxury of questioning culture’s influence on gender roles without the safety of the entire species being put into jeopardy. It was not until modern technology allowed individuals to live as independent entities that a woman had the wherewithal to survive without the aid of her family or a husband. Likewise, there is no doubt that if a future global catastrophe destroys modern society then the remaining would, in order to survive, resume their “natural” gender roles without argument. In the last century, though, culture has made incremental progressions in its attitudes toward gender roles as technology advances. Sociology professor Aaron Devor disagrees, attempting in his essay, “Becoming Members of Society: Learning the Social Meanings of Gender,” to explain how, not evolution, but patriarchy has defined gender roles. As he lists the various ways in which men and women have been lured into becoming respectively aggressive and passive, contributing writer for *The New York Times* Peggy Orenstein illustrates the strain that young women experience online when trying to make sense of their gender roles in her essay “Just Between You, Me, and My 622 BFFs.” To bridge Devor’s theory of gender role origins with Orenstein’s contemporary observations, Gary Colombo, editor of *Rereading America: Cultural Contexts for Critical Thinking and Writing,* describes, in the introduction of his book, the nature of critical thinking and how it is used to rethink and reinterpret long-established societal conventions. One of women’s traditional gender roles, that of being primarily of maternal utility, is a convention still lingering from the old gender-role paradigm, or set of assumptions, ideas, and beliefs. Our culture’s view of gender roles evolves, and not always with ease, to a world in which two conditions always apply: technology advances at a rapid pace and young and old generations (and their respective belief systems) coexist in a single culture.

Culture plays a huge role in determining gender roles, but not in ways that some theories suggest. Accepting society’s conventional opinions may lead people to assume those opinions are truisms, but embracing alternative explanations can be just as misguided. Colombo stresses the importance of thinking critically in regard to “cultural myths,” or the sometimes imperfect ways in which we try to make sense of the world, so that we may “[learn] how to look beyond these cultural myths and the assumptions embedded in them” (3). Note that “looking beyond” these assumptions does not necessarily mean that they are all wrong or that any alternative explanations are correct. Thinking critically to determine the origins of gender roles, Devor nevertheless erroneously posits that “gender role characteristics reflect the *ideological* contentions [italics mine] underlying the dominant gender schema in North American society [which] leads us to believe that female and male behaviors are the result of socially directed hormonal directions” (394). In other words, his claim is that patriarchal, competitive society holds dearly its views and perpetuates its members’ belief that men are inherently competitive and aggressive while women are inherently nurturing and passive. The error in this reasoning should be glaring; his premise assumes that society, already loaded with ideologies, preceded mankind itself! It isn’t fair to say, as Devor does, that society shapes gender roles today unless one first acknowledges that early gender roles shaped society in its infancy. He doesn’t acknowledge that early man’s modes of survival shaped gender roles long before societies were first developed. When compared to one another, men and women could be called “aggressive” or “passive” because early humans’ survival depended upon them exhibiting those symbiotic qualities. Women stayed near their dwellings to nurture their young and gather nearby plants and materials as men ventured into the dangerous wilderness to hunt. Also worth mentioning is the procreative element, that of an ambitious reproducer and his passive recipient(s). Countless thousands of years passed with people playing these gender roles out of necessity until the last century or so, when technology quite suddenly allowed individuals – “groups” of one – to survive on their own without constant support from others. Because of this enormous contrast between the speeds at which humans and technology evolve, young generations cannot demand that society immediately dispenses of the maternal-woman myth without expecting to argue about ideology with older generations.

Securing that imperative understanding of culture allows us now to dissect its influence on gender roles as they are today. The attribute of femininity, for example, is through culture strongly tied to procreation, including “warm and continued relations with men and an interest in maternity requir[ing] that females be heterosexually oriented [which in turn] requires women to dress, move, speak, and act in ways that men will find attractive” (Devor 392). For women, being attractive to men means finding a balance between being just attractive enough to warrant interest, but not so much that other women feel threatened and become competitive or that men assume they have had a long sexual history. This is no easy task as it puts much pressure on the modern woman who no longer relies upon the old paradigms to survive. Young girls who post pictures to friends online learn this very quickly. Orenstein observes that they “engage in perpetual, public negotiation between appearing, ‘beautiful, sexy, yet innocent’ (which they reportedly want) and coming off as a ‘slut’ in front of hundreds of people (which they do not)” (449). The fine line between “innocent” and “slutty” indicates the societal expectations and, as a result, the social costs of the matter: women are to present themselves as primarily maternal beings. To attract a man and have a few kids is ideal, but to attract no man and have no children – or to attract many men and have many children – trivializes motherhood entirely.

That pressure that today’s independent women experience comes not from culture directly, but from their “generalized other,” a term coined by sociologist George Herbert Mead. Devor describes this mental mechanism as something that “functions as a sort of measuring or monitoring device with which individuals may judge their own actions against those of their generalized conceptions of how members of society are expected to act” (389). With the advent of social media, the generalized other plays a bigger role in women’s lives in regard to gender roles concerning maternity than it has in even the recent past. Facebook, for example, allows users (called “friends”) to browse each others’ profile pages, which usually feature their likes, written thoughts, and pictures. After speaking to Felicia, a teenage Facebook user, Orenstein found that the young girl was disgusted when her classmate posted promiscuous photos of herself on the site. Aware that users have at their fingertips an audience of at least hundreds, Felicia knew the importance of posting accordingly in order to maintain one’s good reputation. Her attitude is another example of the culture-in-motion as “young people’s real-life identities… becom[e] ever more externally driven, sculpted in response to feedback from network ‘friends’” (Orenstein 447). Here is the generalized other at work, constantly reacting to the always contentious battle between the outgoing and upcoming paradigms and eventually landing on some sweet spot in which both the status quo and social change are respected enough to avoid social consequences such as being ostracized or dismissed.

Those consequences are clear indicators that women’s traditional gender roles are not nearly as fixed as they used to be, which allows them to adapt to a changing environment. If population rates continue to decrease, then the high value that has always been placed on maternity will lose some importance as well in culture. If women continue seeking higher education and acquiring more jobs as they have in recent years, then the concept of the “passive” woman will change accordingly in culture, and social stigma against the assertive, ambitious female worker will decay. Although these are just a few of the possible outcomes of culture evolving as it is now, there is no way to predict what future environmental factors will change the world and, as a result, the culture. In any case, cultural evolution and its impact on society are only as adaptive as its physical environment allows and are subject to the same changes as everything else on the earth.

Works Cited

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