

Progressing Backwards

The political and social foreground

We're told that men and women are the same. Or, rather, some of the time we're told this. At other times we're told that men and women are essentially and irrevocably different. We're further told that although men and women are different, this is really just something to do with the way we are at the moment, albeit that we have been that way for a long time, living in the sort of society we do. In time, we keep being reminded, all will revert to how supposedly it should be and how it used to be in times of yore: i.e. men and women are the same after all. Even so, it's then insisted that actually, in the end, no matter what we do, men will never get to be *truly* the same as women: men and women are forever and totally different (except when it's more convenient to regard them as exactly the same).

We're also told that women are disadvantaged, and that they've got this way because of oppression by men. We're never told how or why this could be. We're not told why – especially if men and women are supposedly the same – there would be any point in one sex oppressing the other. We're not told how it can be – if indeed men are different to women and oppress them – that by most measures it is not women who are disadvantaged but men (or, at least, a large sub-group or even the majority of men). Nobody tells us why men are maligned as if they're at one with the very few at the top of the pile, whereas all women are championed irrespective of who they are, what they have done, or how they have lived their lives.

Confused? You certainly should be. The notion that males and females – or some essence of what is male or female – are the same or different, oppressed or actually advantaged, is like a juggler with two balls up in the air. He never gets hold of either of them but is constantly palming each upwards and across the path of the other. Eventually the whole spectacle has to come crashing to the ground. That's what is about to happen to what we currently think about men and women.

The contradictory madness about men and women in which we wallow is not shallow. As I will be explaining in depth, it arises from the most profound prejudices we have; prejudices that are currently denied, being invisible to us. We are too close to them, so we can't see the wood for the trees, even though they are the very basis of our politics. They are what the philosopher R.G. Collingwood called 'absolute' presuppositions. They come from the hidden heart of what we are, in the fundamental difference—and complementarity—between men and women. These hidden prejudices are *against men and in favour of women*. It is because of this that astonishing nonsense about men and women can hold sway, hanging unsupported from the political sky. The general consensus about human social behaviour—at least within the chattering classes—is the most plainly false in history. In no other culture—and at no other point in the history of our own culture—have people got things so spectacularly wrong.

The real story of men and women, that cuts through all of this, has only fully crystallised within the last few years with a deluge of new science. It will be a revelation to almost all, having been merely scratched on the surface in self-help pop titles like *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. It is not merely that men and women are different. We all knew that. And ordinary people, at least, admit it. It is that they are different in ways far beyond what anyone had thought. Men and women are also unequal, but it is not women at all, but men—not all men, but the majority—who make up the biggest disadvantaged sub-group in every society. Women by contrast are universally and perennially privileged: *over-privileged*. This unconditional favour has no counterpart for men, who have to meet certain criteria even to be afforded the most basic consideration.

Even so, you won't find me suggesting adding men to the ever-expanding list of 'victims'. As it stands there's but a minority of people who aren't already on this list. It really would be the case that 'we're all victims now'. Instead, the real story of men and women is the key to tearing up the entire list and throwing it away.

The revolution that we are supposedly undergoing towards an androgynous, unisexual world is all but dead. Revolution has always been a case of 'meet the new boss, same as the old boss' (as The Who's Roger Daltrey sang back in 1971), and the revolution regarding men and women is very much a case in point. We've merely been chasing our own shadows, perpetuating the same old attitudes in disguise. The benign consequences of wising up to see this can hardly be over-stated. We're set now for what *is* a revolution: a science-inspired revolution of understanding.

This is a book of popular science, intended to explain the psychology that underlies the prejudice that in turn reveals why politics manifests in the way that it does. Of necessity I tackle political issues, and I'm aware that this is an awkward mix, but such is the nature of the project. Thus the

rest of this chapter sets the scene before the science proper starts. This may appear to distract from the science, but it's essential to outline the seriousness of the political issues from the off. Some readers will disagree with me on the politics, but that need not affect the science. If you're not interested in my analysis of the political and cultural developments that have led to our current problems then by all means skip the rest of this chapter.

Politics naturally comes up at regular junctures in the rest of the book because this is how so often what I'm discussing manifests. The penultimate chapter, on the position of men in family law, deals primarily with political developments—there being little science in this context to present. The point, of course, is that the family is very much the domain of women and an expression of their separate world, with men in effect included on sufferance. I could hardly ignore this area, given the controversy over child contact and divorce settlements that can't be understood other than by the prejudice towards men that the science in turn explains.

Politics is in the end a matter of conjecture, but its manifestation and the social psychology that underlies it can be informed by science. Never before has there been a time when political debate was more in need of this than today.

The Great Disruption

Even if there hasn't been a revolution proper in the relationship between the sexes, certainly we have experienced a major social shift, beginning in the 1960s and continuing apace. Opinion differs as to quite what this is and what factors led to it. It's an interesting question as to whether our current ideas about men-women are (or are in part) a product of this, or whether it was this broad social change that gave rise to our altered ideas. Whatever the answer, the two have become subsequently entwined.

What, in general, determines social change? Do ideas matter or is it more, as Marx insisted, a case of the economic and technological infrastructure? Callum Brown (2000) attributes the decline of Christianity in the West to the hedonistic philosophy of the 1960s, whereas older clergy have been known to claim that it was all down to the *Radio Times*. (A.J.P. Taylor's famously quipped that the cause of the Great War was railway timetables.) According to this Taylorite view, the death of Christian Britain was an accidental consequence of the BBC scheduling *The Forsyte Saga* at a time that clashed with Evensong.

So what gave rise to this great cultural change, or, as Francis Fukuyama put it, *The Great Disruption*? Most of this chapter is devoted to *ideational* factors—the reaction of Left-leaning intellectuals to their banishment from the commanding heights of economic theory. But first of all we need to take a quick look at more concrete factors. Was the key cause change in the workplace, or new education policy?

Well, both were significant, but they now look more like second-order factors: those that arrived in the wake of change to then drive it further, rather than the initial cause. Probably top of most people's list of prime causes is the advent of universal, near-infallible (and unobtrusive) contraception with, from 1961, the availability on general prescription of the Pill. Reproduction was now no longer inevitable.

The obvious impact of this is the removal of the constraint on women's options caused by repeated childbirth, and women henceforth not necessarily being defined in terms of child-rearing. But family size had long been in decline. The truth is that this wasn't the critical impact that the Pill had. It has now been largely forgotten that the Pill produced a profound shift of identity in *both* sexes. Before the Pill, by unspoken collective agreement, everyone's lives were mapped out before them as an inevitable consequence of the overriding necessity to form and sustain a family. Since time immemorial, the focus has been not on the individual but the family – the basic economic unit of society. (Economists view the division of labour as the principal generator of surplus wealth, and the division within the traditional social unit was inevitably based on sex.) With the removal of the obligation on everyone to prepare for reproduction, there has been a disengagement on the part of both sexes – in their different ways – from the age-old duties to household, family and community; instead to embrace the social abandon of individual freedom and rights.

Coincident with the invention of the Pill, which in a way deprived woman of her archetypal role as mother, other technological change made woman's role as a home-maker increasingly redundant – and correspondingly made the world of work much more woman-friendly. Was it the case then that women were 'liberated' into education and the workplace, or was it because they had no other place to go? If it was the latter, then women were understandably peeved when they arrived at university in the '60s and '70s to find that they were still expected to make the tea while the boys plotted the downfall of capitalism – and then went on to find similar attitudes in the world of work.

At the same time great increases in personal wealth drove expectation to wider horizons. But what most of all opened everyone's eyes to new possibilities was the extension of life itself. With life expectancy as it was a century ago, a woman would have spent all or almost all of her life within a family: first her natal family, and then (without any transition) into the one she created herself. She may well not have survived long enough to see her eldest child follow suit. By the late twentieth century, huge increases in longevity meant that a woman could expect to live fully half her adult life free of any sort of child rearing. This one factor alone, it has been argued, explains the rise of feminism (Davis, 1982).

Fukuyama gives centre stage to all of these factors to explain what he dubs the 'great disruption'; his 1999 book is to date the most comprehen-



But do we really want to?

sive investigation of the phenomenon. He's looking at a cluster of related changes, not least the massive rises in crime and the falls in some forms of 'social capital'; but he sees the core change as concerning the family, men and women.

Whether you can call all this a liberation of women or a change in women's lifestyle because they had nowhere else to go, is another interesting question. (It strikes me that the relative collapse of the *raison d'être* of female life—motherhood and home-making—and the elevation of the male world of work to the be-all-and-end-all, can hardly be characterised as male redundancy, but so runs the standard line. It smacks of irrationally lashing out in frustration at what has been lost and the inadequacy of what was on offer by way of replacement.) Yet human beings are nothing if not adaptable, and we would expect that women would be quite able to adapt to the world of work, with or without somehow 'feminising' it. Sure enough, it's hard to think of any work that at least some women couldn't do. (As I will explain in chapter nine, that was never the issue.)

However, it is a different question altogether as to whether women would actually *want* to opt for what were not distinctively female roles unless they had little if any choice—wartime munitions factories may have demonstrated that women could do men's work, but many or even most women were glad to return home once the armistice was signed. The answer to this motivational question is complex and in the main what I'll be talking about when I come on to the science. But there were also ideological factors. The new set of contingencies through which women were obliged to see the story of their lives provided fertile ground for various strands of feminism. Neo-Marxism underwent a revival, and then morphed into a strange new way of thinking about disadvantage, and about men-women in particular. This, along with other varieties of feminism, had an impact on sustaining the 'great disruption'. This is the focus of the rest of this chapter.