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Article

A Manifesto for Gender Responsibility and Equality in Every-Day Life

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1) My proposal represents a functional aspect of ethical constructivism (an epistemological school of thought) and it serves the following purposes:

1.1 to postulate some pragmatic aspects of my intellectual/personal position toward feminisms,

1.2 to present my approach to men in scholarship and the academe,

1.3 to satisfy my commitment to oppose negative discrimination in all walks of life actively, thus responding to the implicit demands of ethical constructivism. The desired readership of my argument is, in the first instance, the heterosexual male majority in academia but many of the suggestions here proposed apply to all men (and women) in all walks of life. Although the term "negative discrimination" is cumbersome, I am using it here because discrimination *per se* is not necessarily negative. I am differentiating between discrimination as an "objective" point of view, in the present context void of value judgments, and "negative discrimination," which results in such as apartheid, the objectification and suppression of women, racial hatred, etc.

2) Elaine Showalter writes: "I believe that the fundamental changes have now begun that make the formation of a strong critical community around the issue of gender a genuine and exciting possibility. While this community ... will include critics who are male and female, black and white, gay, lesbian, and straight, its members can explore a range of gendered subjectivities and literatures besides their own. Like other aspects of literary analysis, talking about gender without a commitment to dismantling sexism, racism, and homophobia, can degenerate into nothing more than a talk show, with men trying to monopolize the (post)feminist conversation. But ... the genuine addition of gender as a 'central problem in every text' read and taught, 'whatever the era and whoever the author,' could also move us a step further towards post-patriarchy. That's a step worth trying to take together" (page 2 in "The Rise of Gender," *Speaking of Gender*. Ed. Elaine Showalter. New York: Routledge, 1989. 1-13).

3) The implementation of Showalter's perspective in the domain of higher learning is critical because male academics comprise the majority in our institutions of higher learning and because they constitute intellectual leadership. Their education is an indispensable step in the struggle against gender negative discrimination in our society. This education should occur in two related areas:

3.1 by the re-structuring of cultural codes, customs, habits, perceptions, laws, etc., and, most importantly,

3.2 male academics ought to "coordinate" aspects of their personal lives, their scholarship, and their academic activities. In other words, the domains of the personal, the intellectual, and the professional should interact in a harmonious display resulting in an environment of non-negative-discrimination between men and women. This is what I term "gender responsibility" as part of a general environment of social responsibility.

4) Patriarchy and its values are mainly social in origin and even if we take into account biological, physiological, or neurological differences, these should -- and must -- be restructured towards equity in all walks of life, based on the tenets of ethical Constructivism. The proposition that women are unable to perform certain tasks because they are female, is untenable. If they are now handicapped in certain endeavours, they are so because of entrenched oppression, may that be obvious or implicit in

designations of roles for women. This can and must be changed. Society must find avenues and must accommodate women so that gender will be no more a base for negative discrimination.

5) My postulate is that gender responsibility is one of the most important social (intellectual, psychological, institutional, legal, etc.) tasks of our time (this was said by some feminists already in the nineteenth century), involving almost all areas of interaction and communication. It is so, because it will become possible to eradicate negative discrimination -- racial, religious, ethnic, sexual, etc., -- only after gender responsibility has become an unquestioned and unquestionable universal human quality. What is closest to the body, has to be resolved first, so to speak. This does not mean that the advocacy and fight against racial discrimination, for example, is not as important as gender responsibility or that it should not be combated side by side with gender negative discrimination. Rather, I propose that because we all encounter gender codes and behaviour first (i.e., from birth in the family environment), gender negative discrimination is the most pervasive and unchallenged situation we grow up with. One cannot, it seems to me, hope to eliminate racism and other negative discriminations before we eliminate gender negative discrimination and its mechanisms. More, this is a necessary task in all cultures. Negative discrimination against women and the feminine, is, at present, a characteristic of almost all cultures, although so to various degrees and intensities. Therefore, gender responsibility -- because it transcends cultural, social, economic, etc., demarcations and because human interaction is most immediately marked by gender relationships -- attains ultimate importance. Further, if gender responsibility evolves into an universal human characteristic, other negative discriminations will either logically disappear (an admittedly idealistic view) or at least they will be easier to combat. Here, I offer a functional and operational framework of gender responsibility:

5.1 A point of departure is that as male academics, it is of crucial importance that we are aware of gender responsibility. This awareness means position-taking, i.e., the rethinking of our beliefs, attitudes, etc., and extends into discussions in academic circles and at home. Generally, it means the channeling of areas of our private life into gender responsibility and vice versa,

5.2 One of the elements of gender responsibility begins with and acts within language. Linguistic awareness at work and in our work, at home, in partnership, and with children, is a crucial part of gender responsibility,

5.3 The attraction to a woman: subsequent actions to translate this into a relationship is still largely placed onto the male by social conditioning. It is one's gender responsibility to reduce this socially conditioned demand and to accept or to solicit the "equalizing" involvement of your partner,

5.4 As a polite and courteous individuals we should behave accordingly towards women -- but not according to codes of "gentlemanlike" behaviour, i.e., we are polite and courteous towards women not because they are women but because we are polite and courteous individuals,

5.5 In situations of "men only" conversations or "out with the boys," we should attempt to take a position which will ultimately result in gender responsibility, at least in our presence,

5.6 In general terms, we should watch ourselves and our attitudes: Always realize when gender responsibility is absent, to whatever degree, from our thinking, emotions, and social interaction,

5.7 It should be kept in mind that our sexual behaviour with a partner or spouse manifests our awareness and understanding of gender responsibility,

5.8 If in a long-term relationship: Whether your partner/spouse is at home or whether she is working, housework must be shared. If you have the misfortune of having grown up without acquiring skills such as cooking, doing laundry, etc., you should learn them. Also, it is important that we do the less "fun-type" housework, too. We should not chose gardening, because we like gardening, and dislike cooking and then claim that we share housework. In a situation where by consensus it has been agreed upon that your spouse stays at home, for example, to raise children, the principles here postulated should still apply. The principles of gender responsibility become even more important when your spouse has a career on her own. Her career and its demands should be integral to your gender responsibility. The demands of both careers and the sharing of household tasks should be frequently discussed and mediated,

5.9 If there are children: Gender responsibility requires our involvement beyond that of a *paterfamilias*. It begins with participation in pregnancy classes, continues with participation in the birth (unless there is a medical reason why you cannot attend), continues still during night time feedings, diaper changing, etc., and both parents participate in the years of schooling, etc.,

5.10 In the academic/bureaucratic sphere it is inappropriate, for example that we address, for example, the departmental secretary (usually a woman) by her first name while she addresses you by "Professor X" or "Dr Y." We must either address each other by first names, or you her by Ms, Mrs, or Miss X and she then you by Professor X or Dr Y (this latter point is a US or Canada cultural and linguistic issue while in other cultures -- continental Europe, Asia, etc. -- it is more often than not not

an issue),

5.11 We should read feminist and antisexist literature. The extent of this will, of course, depend on our field, interest, and available time. However, whatever our field, some knowledge of recent feminist texts will help us to understand and clarify gender responsibility. More importantly, we should read literature (primary texts) in general critically, i.e., with awareness of gender responsibility. And scholars working in the humanities should attempt to work promoting feminist criticism (regardless of some feminists' objections to "appropriation,"

5.12 If we subscribe to gender responsibility, our opponent, in a context of dialogue, in society (and within ourselves) is the male proponent of patriarchy and, as well, the female proponent of patriarchy. In both cases, we should attempt to educate and to convince, by word and deed,

5.13 Militant feminists, we must realize, as irritating or even unfair they and their activities and concepts appear to be to us, are (necessary) transgressions and aggressions. If we encounter suspicion in our attempts to propagate gender responsibility, this must be disregarded -- we should proceed with our task, but without forgetting to silence one's inner male response, often a negative one,

5.14 Gender responsibility also means sensitivity to (socially conditioned) codes of behaviour of women. For example, it appears to me that when passing an obstruction in a building or on the street at the same time when a woman does, the woman utters "excuse me" more readily than the man, usually she is the first to apologize. This is an example of women's behaviour towards obstruction (as a concept), toward resistance. As male academics are the majority at institutions of higher learning, it is important to recognize the difference in male/female approaches in dealing with problems and problem solving, large and small,

5.15 An important and controversial issue is the question of "reverse discrimination." We must have faith in academic integrity and assume that qualified male academics are not negative-discriminated against because of their gender. However, there are areas where reverse discrimination, in a specific sense, is justified. The reality of the matter is that the status quo of the majority of men is unacceptable because it originates in the fact of the general negative discrimination against women. If, in certain cases affirmative action means a preference for qualified women candidates and leads to the elimination of men candidates, this is a price to pay, that is, this is something we men ought to accept. It is appropriate and justified to change from domination of male academics into a gender parity by means of a preference for qualified women academics.

6) The addition here of an "autobiographical detail" is consistent with the concept of gender responsibility and it also confirms my postulate of the importance of an ethical constructivism. I must admit -- hoping that this will not detract from the seriousness of my above stated points of consideration -- that my own awareness of gender responsibility has developed more easily than if I had had a more ordinary and traditional life. At the same time, the contents of this Manifesto are based on realities of my life, my own beliefs and actions and (re)actions. Married since 1976, we have two children. My sensitivity to negative discrimination developed early: I experienced negative discrimination (social, cultural, bureaucratic, etc.) in my country of birth and as a refugee/foreigner in several other countries. In addition, I have seen this negative discrimination in continuous action in the life of my mother, single since I was fourteen years old. Thus, I have come to regard social responsibility and within that, gender responsibility an integral part of my individuality. The continuous integration of gender responsibility into my individual make-up has been aided by my spouse, who earned a doctorate in a medical science and who is able to combine the pleasures and responsibilities of marriage, her career, and our children. She and I share and enact the principles here proposed.

7) I am aware and admit readily that a "manifesto" for gender responsibility/equality in every-day life may be a curious approach and it may even appear ridiculous to some. At the same time, I believe that the specific form of the "manifesto" represents an advantageous way of trying to transmit my approach to the questions about and problematics of gender today. I should also like to point out that my approach is to be understood in the context of Western culture and society.

Note: The text of the Manifesto has appeared in previous versions as Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, "In 1991: A Manifesto of Gender Responsibility," *Men's Studies Review: A Quarterly Publication of the Men's Studies Association* 8.3 (1991): 16-18. & Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998. 173-77.

Author's profile: Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek's <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/totosycv>> areas of scholarship and publications are in comparative cultural studies incl. comparative media and communication studies, comparative literature, postcolonial and ethnic minority studies, film and literature, audience studies, English, French, German, Central European, US-American and Canadian cultures and literatures, history, pedagogy, interculturality, bibliographies, new media and knowledge management, and editing.