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DIALOGUES IN ARTS AND SCIENCE

THE INCOMPLETE GENDER REVOLUTION

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The Incomplete Gender Revolution¹

The sweeping changes in the gender system since the 1960s are sometimes called a “revolution.” Women’s employment increased dramatically (Cotter, Hermsen, and England 2008); birth control became widely available (Bailey 2006); women caught up with and surpassed men in rates of college graduation (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2004, 23); undergraduate college majors desegregated substantially (England and Li 2006); more women than ever got doctorates as well as professional degrees in law, medicine, and business (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2004, 22-23; England et al. 2007); many kinds of gender discrimination in employment and education became illegal (Burstein 1989; Hirsh 2009); women entered many previously male-dominated occupations (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2004, 10-14); and more women were elected to political office (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2004, 25). As sweeping as these changes have been, change in the gender system has been uneven — affecting some groups more than others and some arenas of life more than others, and recently change has stalled.

In this essay I discuss the ways that gender change has been uneven — changing women’s roles more than men’s, and doing this more in education and jobs than in personal relationships, and more in the middle class than the working class. I also point out types of change that have stalled since about 1990.

1. Women Changed More Than Men

Most of the big changes in the gender system involve women moving into positions and activities previously limited to men, with few changes in the opposite direction. The source of this asymmetry is an aspect of society's valuation and reward system that has not changed much — the tendency to devalue and badly reward activities and jobs traditionally done by women.

One form the devaluation of traditionally female activities takes is the failure to treat child rearing as a public good and support those who do it with state payments. In the United States, welfare reform took away much of what little such support had been present. Without this, women doing child rearing are reliant on the employment of male partners, if they are present, and/or their own employment. Thus, women have a strong incentive to seek paid employment, and more so as wage levels rose across the decades (Bergmann 2005). Whereas in the early 1960s only approximately 40% of women were employed, today it is over 70% (England 2010). But change has not been continuous, as the trend in women's employment flattened after 1990 and turned down slightly after 2000 before turning up slightly again. This turndown was hardly an "opt-out revolution," to use the popular-press term, as the decline was tiny relative to the dramatic increase across 40 years (Kuperberg and Stone 2008; Percheski 2008). But the plateau since 1990 is clear, if unexplained.

A major asymmetry in change is that women's employment has increased

much more than men's has declined. There was nowhere near one man leaving the labor force to become a full-time homemaker for every woman who entered, nor did men pick up household work to the extent women added hours of employment (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2006). Men had no economic incentive to leave employment.

Among women, incentives for employment vary. At first glance, we might expect less educated women to have higher employment rates than their better educated peers because they are less likely to be married to a high-earning man. Most marriages are between two people at a similar education level (Mare 1991), so the less educated woman, if she is married, typically has a husband earning less than the husband of the college graduate. Her family often needs the money from her employment more than the family headed by two college graduates. Let us call this the "need for income" effect. But the countervailing "opportunity cost" factor is that well-educated women have more economic incentive for employment because they can earn more (England, Garcia-Beaulieu, and Ross 2004). Put another way, the opportunity cost of staying at home is greater for the woman who can earn more. Indeed, the woman who did not graduate from high school may have potential earnings so low that she could not even cover child care costs with what she could earn. It is an empirical question whether the "need for income" or "opportunity cost" effect predominates.

Recent research shows that the opportunity-cost effect predominates in the United States and other affluent nations. England, Gornick, and Shafer

(2008) use data from 16 affluent countries circa 2000 and show that, in all of them, among women married to or cohabiting with men, those with more education are more likely to be employed. Moreover, there is no one-way relationship between partner's earnings and a woman's employment; at top levels of his income, her employment is deterred. But women whose male partners are at middle income levels are more likely to be employed than women whose partners have very low or no earnings, the opposite of what the "need for income" principle suggests.

In the United States, it has been true for decades that well-educated women are more likely to be employed, and the effect of a woman's own education has increased, while the deterring effect of her husband's income has declined (Cohen and Bianchi 1999). For example, in 1970, 59% of college graduate women, but only 43% of those with less than a high school education, were employed sometime during the year. In 2007, the figures were 80% for college graduates and 47% for less than high school (the relationship of education and employment was monotonic such that those with some college and only high school were in between college graduates and high school dropouts) (figures are author's calculation from data in Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2009).

The devaluation of and underpayment of predominantly female occupations is an important reality that provides incentives for both men and women to choose "male" over "female" occupations and the fields of study that lead to them. Research has shown that predominantly female occupations pay less,

on average, than jobs with a higher proportion of men. At least some of the gap is attributable to sex composition because it persists in statistical models controlling for occupations' educational requirements, amount of skill required, unionization, and so forth. I have argued that this is a form of gender discrimination — employers see the worth of predominantly female jobs through biased lenses and, as a result, set pay levels for both men and women in predominantly female jobs lower than they would be if the jobs had a more heavily male sex composition (England 1992; Kilbourne et al. 1994; England and Folbre 2005). Indeed, as U.S. courts have interpreted the law, this type of between-job discrimination is not even illegal (England 1992, 225-51; Steinberg 2001), whereas it is illegal to pay women less than men in the same job, unless based on factors such as seniority, qualifications, or performance. (By contrast, this discrimination by devaluation of female jobs is illegal in Canada and the E.U.)

While the overall sex gap in pay has diminished because women's employment is more continuous, and because more women have moved into "male" fields (England and Folbre 2005), there is no evidence that the devaluation of occupations because they are filled with women has diminished (Levanon, England, and Allison 2009). Given this, both men and women continue to have a pecuniary incentive to choose male-dominated occupations. Thus, we should not be surprised that desegregation of occupations has largely taken the form of women moving into male-dominated fields, rather than men moving into female-dominated fields.

Consistent with the incentives embedded in the ongoing devaluation of female fields, desegregation of fields of college study came from more women going into fields that were predominantly male, not from more men entering “female” fields. Since 1970, women increasingly majored in previously male-dominated, business-related fields, such as business, marketing, and accounting; while fewer chose traditionally female majors like English, education, and sociology; and there was little increase of men’s choice of these latter majors (England and Li 2006, 667-69). Segregation of majors dropped significantly in the 1970s and early 1980s, but has been quite flat since the mid-1980s. Women’s increased integration of business fields stopped then as well (England and Li 2006).

Women have also recently increased their representation in formerly male-dominated professional degrees, getting MDs, MBAs, and law degrees in large numbers. Women were 6 percent of those getting MDs in 1960, 23% in 1980, 43% in 2000, and 49% in 2007; the analogous numbers for law degrees (JDs) were 3, 30, 46, and 47 percent, and for MBAs (and other management first-professional degrees), 4, 22, 39, and 44 percent (National Center for Education Statistics 2004-2008). There was no marked increase in the proportion of men in female-dominated graduate professional programs such as library science, social work, or nursing (National Center for Education Statistics 2009).

As women have increasingly trained for previously male-dominated fields, they have also integrated previously male-dominated occupations in management and the professions in large numbers (Cotter, Hermsen, and

Vanneman 2004, 10-13). Women may face discrimination and coworker resistance when they attempt to integrate these fields, but they have a strong economic incentive to do so. Men lose money and suffer cultural disapproval when they choose traditionally female-dominated fields; they have little incentive to transgress gender boundaries. While some men have entered female-intensive retail service jobs after losing manufacturing jobs, there is little incentive for voluntary movement in this direction, making desegregation a largely one-way street.

What about employers' incentives? There is some debate about whether, absent equal employment legislation, employers have an incentive to engage in hiring and placement discrimination or are better off simply hiring gender-blind (for debate, see Jackson 1998; England 1992, 54-68). Whichever is true, legal enforcement of antidiscrimination laws has imposed some costs for hiring discrimination (Hirsh 2009), and this has probably reduced discrimination in hiring, contributing to desegregation of jobs.

2. Less Change in the Family and Personal Relations Than in Education and Jobs

“The personal is political” was a rallying cry of 1960s feminists, urging women to demand equality in private as well as public life. Yet conventions embodying male dominance have changed much less in “the personal” than in the job world. Where they have changed, the asymmetry described above for the job world prevails. For example, parents are more likely to give girls “boy”

toys such as Legos than they are to give dolls to their sons. Girls have increased their participation in sports more than boys have taken up cheerleading or ballet. Women now commonly wear pants, while men wearing skirts remains rare. A few women started keeping their birth-given surname upon marriage (Goldin and Shim 2004), with little adoption by men of women's last names. Here, as with jobs, the asymmetry follows incentives, albeit nonmaterial ones. These social incentives themselves flow from a largely unchanged devaluation of things culturally defined as feminine. When boys and men take on "female" activities, they often suffer disrespect, but under some circumstances, girls and women gain respect for taking on "male" activities.

What is more striking than the asymmetry of gender change in the personal realm is how little gendering has changed at all in this realm, especially in heterosexual relationships. It is still men who usually ask women on dates, and sexual behavior is generally initiated by men (England, Shafer, and Fogarty 2008). Sexual permissiveness has increased, making it more acceptable for both heterosexual men and women to have sex outside committed relationships. But the gendered part of this — the double standard — persists stubbornly; women are judged much more harshly than men for casual sex (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; England, Shafer, and Fogarty 2008). The ubiquity of asking about height in Internet dating Web sites suggests that the convention that men should be taller than their female partner has not budged. The double standard of aging prevails, making women's chances of marriage decrease with age much more than men's

(England and McClintock 2009). Men are still expected to propose marriage (Sassler and Miller 2007). Upon marriage, the vast majority of women still take their husband's surname (Goldin and Shim 2004). Children are usually given their father's surname, even when the parents are not married to each other.

The limited change seen in the heterosexual personal realm may be because women's incentive to change these things is less clear than their incentive to move into paid work and into higher-paying "male" jobs. The incentives that do exist are largely noneconomic. For example, women may find it meaningful to keep their birth-given surnames and give them to their children, and they probably enjoy sexual freedom and initiation, especially if they are not judged adversely for it. But these noneconomic benefits may be neutralized by the noneconomic penalties from transgressing gender norms and by the fact that some have internalized the norms. When women transgress gender barriers to enter "male" jobs, they too may be socially penalized for violating norms, but for many this is offset by the economic gain.

3. Less Change in the Working Class Than Middle and Upper-Middle Class

I have stressed that important change in the gender system has taken the form of women integrating traditionally male occupations and fields of study, but that even here change is uneven, with more gender integration in the middle than working class (England 2010). Middle-class jobs have showed dramatic

desegregation, although the trend lessened its pace after 1990. By contrast, working-class jobs are almost as segregated as they were in 1950! Women have integrated the previously male strongholds of management, law, medicine, and academia in large numbers. But women have hardly gained a foothold in blue-collar, male-dominated jobs such as plumbing, construction, truck driving, welding, and assembly in durable manufacturing industries such as auto and steel (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2004, 12-14). This is roughly the situation in other affluent nations as well (Charles and Grusky 2004). Related to this, sex segregation declined much more dramatically since 1970 for college graduates than any other group (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2009, 2004, 13-14).

Why has desegregation been limited to high-level jobs? The question has two parts: why women did not integrate blue-collar male jobs in significant numbers, and why women did integrate professional and managerial jobs in droves. In the United States and many Western societies today, a certain kind of gender egalitarianism has taken hold. The logic is that individuals should have equal rights to education and jobs of their choice. Moreover, achievement and upward mobility are generally valued. There is also a “postmaterialist” aspect to the culture which orients one to find her or his “true self.” The common ethos is a combination of “the American dream” and liberal individualism. Many women, like men, want to “move up” in earnings and/or status, or at least avoid moving down. But up or down relative to what reference group? I suggest that the implicit reference group is typically those in the previous generation

(or previous birth cohorts) of one's own social class background and one's own sex. For example, women might see their mothers or aunts as a reference, or women who graduated with their level of education ten years ago. Persons of the same-sex category are the implicit reference group because of strong beliefs in gender essentialism, that notion that men and women are innately and fundamentally different (Charles 2011; Ridgeway 2009). While liberal individualism encourages a commitment to "free choice" gender egalitarianism (such as legal equality of opportunity), ironically, orienting toward gender-typical paths has probably been encouraged by the emerging form of individualism that stresses finding and expressing one's "true self." Notions of self will in fact be largely socially constructed, pulling from socially salient identities. Because of the omnipresent nature of gender in the culture (Ridgeway 2009; West and Zimmerman 1987), gender often becomes the most available material from which to construct aspirations and may be used even more when a job choice is seen as a deep statement about self (Charles and Bradley 2009).

Given all this, if women can move "up" in status or income relative to their reference group while still staying in a job typically filled by women, then because of gender beliefs and gendered identities, they are likely to do so. If they cannot move up without integrating a male field, and demand is present and discrimination not too strong, they are more likely to cross the gender boundary. This helps explain why more women didn't enter male blue-collar fields. To be sure, many women without college degrees would earn much more

in the skilled blue-collar crafts or unionized manufacturing jobs than in the service jobs typically filled by women at their education levels—jobs such as maid, child care worker, retail sales clerk, or assembler in the textile industry. But such women could also move “up” to clerical work or teaching, higher status and better paying but still traditionally female jobs. Many take this path, often getting more education.

In contrast, consider women who assumed they would go to college and whose mothers were in female-dominated jobs requiring a college degree like teacher, nurse, librarian, or social worker. For these women, to move up in status or earnings from their reference group options requires them to enter traditionally male jobs; there are virtually no heavily female jobs with higher status than these female professions. These are just the women, usually of middle-class origins, who have been integrating management, law, medicine, and academia in recent decades. For them, upward mobility was not possible within traditional boundaries, so they were more likely to integrate male fields.

In sum, one reason that women integrated male professions and management much more than blue-collar jobs is that the women for whom the blue-collar male jobs would have constituted “progress” also had the option to move up by entering higher-ranking female jobs via more education. They had options for upward mobility without transgressing gender boundaries not present for their middle-class sisters.

As evidence of my claim that those with middle class origins are more likely to aspire to male dominated occupations, I used the 1979 wave of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, which asked young women age 14-21 what occupation they aspired to. I used the education of the woman's mother as an indicator of her class background. Using government data to assess the sex composition in 1980 of each of the occupations, I called occupations "male-dominated" if they were at least 67% male. My calculations show that, among white women, approximately one third of women whose mothers had finished less than high school aspired to male-dominated occupations, compared to over 40% of those whose mothers were college graduates (with those whose mothers had only a high school education intermediate). A similar pattern obtained for black women.

Even women entering male-typical occupations, however, sometimes choose the more female-intensive subfields in them. In some cases, ending up in female-intensive subfields results from discrimination, but in others it may result from the gender essentialism discussed above. An example is the movement of women into doctoral study and into academic positions. Women entered this new arena, but within academia, there was virtually no desegregation of fields of doctoral study from 1970 on (England et al. 2007, 32). Women have gone from being only 14% of those who get doctorates in 1971 to nearly half. But, conditional on getting a doctoral degree, neither women nor men have changed the fields of study they choose much (England et al. 2007). The percentage female in every field went up dramatically, reflecting the overall increase in women getting

doctorates. But the rank order of fields in their percentage female changed little. The fields with the highest percentage of women today are those that already had a high percentage of women decades ago relative to other fields.

What explains the failure of fields of doctoral study to desegregate? I suggest that the extreme differentiation of fields of academic study allowed many women moving “up” to doctoral study and an academic career to do so in fields that seemed consistent with their (tacitly gendered) notions of their interests and “true selves.” Women academics in the humanities and social sciences thus find themselves in the more female subunits (disciplines) of a still largely male-dominated larger unit (the professorate).

4. Conclusion

Change in the gender system has been uneven, changing the lives of some groups of people more than others and changing lives in some arenas more than others. I have offered two broad explanations for the uneven nature of change.

First, I argued that, because of the cultural and institutional devaluation of characteristics and activities associated with women, men had little incentive to move into badly rewarded, traditionally female activities such as homemaking or female-dominated occupations. By contrast, women had powerful economic incentives to move into the traditionally male domains of paid employment and male-typical occupations; and when hiring discrimination declined, many did. These incentives varied by class, however; the incentive to go to work for pay is

much stronger for women who can earn more; thus employment levels have been higher for well-educated women, despite the fact that they have higher earning husbands. I also noted a relative lack of change in the gendering of the personal realm, especially of heterosexual romantic, sexual, and family relationships.

Second, I explored the consequences of the co-occurrence of two cultural and institutional logics. Individualism, encompassing a belief in rights to equal opportunity in access to jobs and education in order to express one's "true self," promotes a certain kind of gender egalitarianism. It does not challenge the devaluation of traditionally female spheres, but it encourages the rights of women to upward mobility through equal access to education and jobs. To be sure, this ideal has been imperfectly realized, but this type of gender egalitarianism has taken hold strongly. But along with it, somewhat paradoxically, are strong (if tacit) beliefs in gender essentialism — that men and women are innately and fundamentally different in interests and skills (Charles 2011; Charles and Bradley 2002, 2009; Ridgeway 2009). Almost no men and precious few women, even those who believe in "equal opportunity," have an explicit commitment to undoing gender differentiation for its own sake. Gender essentialism encourages traditional choices and leads women to see previous cohorts of women of their social class as the reference point from which they seek upward mobility. The co-occurrence of these two logics — equal opportunity individualism and gender essentialism — make it most likely for women to move into nontraditional fields of study or work when there is no possible female field that constitutes upward

mobility from the socially constructed reference point. This helps explain why women integrated male-dominated professional and managerial jobs more than blue-collar jobs. Women from working-class backgrounds, whose mothers were maids or assemblers in nondurable manufacturing, could move up financially by entering blue-collar “male” trades but often decide instead to get more education and move up into a female job such as secretary or teacher. It is women with middle-class backgrounds, whose mothers were teachers or nurses, who cannot move up without entering a male-dominated career, and it is just such women who have integrated management, law, medicine, and academia. Yet even while integrating large fields such as academia, women often gravitate toward the more female-typical fields of study. And men continue to gravitate toward male-typical fields of study and jobs.

As sociologists, we emphasize links between parts of a social system. For example, we trace how gender inequality in jobs affects gender inequality in the family, and vice versa (England and Farkas 1986). Moreover, links between parts of the system are recognized in today’s prevailing view in which gender is itself a multilevel system, with causal arrows going both ways from macro to micro (Risman 2004). All these links undoubtedly exist, but the unevenness of gender-related change highlights how loosely coupled parts of the social system are and how much stronger some causal forces for change are than others. For example, because it resonated with liberal individualism well, the part of the feminist message that urged giving women equal access to jobs and education

made considerable headway and led to much of what we call the gender revolution. But even as women integrated employment and “male” professional and managerial jobs, the part of feminism challenging the devaluation of traditionally female activities and jobs made little headway. The result is persistently low rewards for women who remain focused on mothering or in traditionally female jobs and little incentive for men to make the gender revolution a two-way street.

While discussing the uneven character of gender change, I also noted that the type of gender change with the most momentum — middle-class women entering traditionally male spheres — has recently stalled (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2004, 2009). Women’s employment rates stabilized, desegregation of occupations slowed down, and desegregation of fields of college study stopped. Erosion of the sex gap in pay slowed as well (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2009). While the reason for the stalling is unclear, like the unevenness of change, the stalling of change reminds us how contingent and path-dependent gender egalitarian change is, with no inexorable equal endpoint. Change has been as much unintended consequence of larger institutional and cultural forces as realization of the efforts of feminist organizing, although the latter has surely helped. Indeed, given the recent stalling of change, future feminist organizing may be necessary to revitalize change.

¹ This essay is based on an article I published in 2010 (England 2010).

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