

THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC SOURCEBOOK

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ALFRED POLGAR

The Defenseless: A Conversation between Men

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My son, I noted with some discomfort that you keep your seat on the streetcar, instead of offering it to one of the women who otherwise must stand. Does it count as modern to be a boor?

Father, you have slept through some new developments. The women of your time acknowledged their weaknesses as a claim to all manner of protection and consideration, as the weak are owed by the strong. This obligation grew out of the circumstance that they didn't share the rights that men had; in so-called gallantry male compassion for female powerlessness found its refined expression. That has changed. It was the women themselves, due to an easily understood hunger for air and life, who shattered the bell jar in which they were vegetating. They have become comrades in work and play, in pleasure and struggle, and among comrades everything is equal. They've acquired better nerves and stronger muscles; they've emancipated themselves from the signs of slavery: the long skirt, the long hair; they've made a place for themselves where they wanted it and dismissed us from the necessity of offering a place of our choosing, in life as in the streetcar. If you do it anyway, then you risk a retort: "Thank you! I am not yet so infirm with age that I cannot stand!"

My son, certainly women no longer live today so much in the shadow and from the mercies of men, as they did in earlier times. | . . . | But the pelvis of a woman is still broader and heavier than our own; they still bear the children and the changing moon still demands from them its tribute—or has something changed in this respect as well?

Father, these particulars certainly still exist, but women wish that little be made of them; they probably fear that emphasizing them could justify viewing women as creatures of lesser value and usefulness in life, creatures of a second order. Gender, father, has become a secondary human characteristic. A man of contemporary thought distinguishes in his behavior as little between man and woman as, for example, between Christian and Jew.

My son, if things were as you say, then I would not so much blame the women, that no more chivalry or gallantry or whatever you want to call it is shown them, as the men who no longer show it. You have bypassed something very lovely if women awake in you at most desire, but no more longing to take care and protect. You have become very poor if that blessed joy in a woman is no longer vital which continually awakens in you the wish to thank them, merely for being.

As long as a man is still in love with love . . . he will offer his seat in a streetcar to a woman who otherwise has to stand. The missing links between that great cause and this small effect you can fill in easily yourself. Or is it that you no longer see love, my son, through your strong spectacles? Old man that I am, I still see it with my failing eyes.

Father! It is just a passing fog.

Insofar as the content of the New Objectivity includes the destruction of false glorification, it should fulfill its function to the utmost. For from this perspective it is a new impetus and a true beginning, a justified protest of the young against the war makers and despots who remain at the helm, the outcry and last hope of humanity. But if objectivity means Americanization, a refusal of the heart, of problems, of love, then it is not a protest against war but rather against its result, its continuation and, finally (see the recent German production of Maxwell Anderson's *What Price Glory?*), its approbation. It will be the task of the woman of tomorrow, full of instinct and cleverness, to distinguish the good components of the New Objectivity from the bad. In this task I see her significance, not simply for man and the masculine spirit (which, for the moment, is racing up a dead-end street with its masculine writing), but for the development of a genuine society, one no longer based on exploitation, but rather a true community of nations.

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ELSA HERRMANN

This is the New Woman

First published as *So ist die neue Frau* (Hellerau: Avalon Verlag, 1929), 32-43.

To all appearances, the distinction between women in our day and those of previous times is to be sought only in formal terms because the modern woman refuses to lead the life of a lady and a housewife, preferring to depart from the ordained path and go her own way. In fact, however, the attitude of the new woman toward traditional customs is the expression of a worldview that decisively influences the direction of her entire life. The difference between the way women conceived of their lives today as distinguished from yesterday is most clearly visible in the objectives of this life.

The woman of yesterday lived exclusively for and geared her actions toward the future. Already as a half-grown child, she toiled and stocked her hope chest for her future dowry. In the first years of marriage she did as much of the household work as possible herself to save on expenses, thereby laying the foundation for future prosperity, or at least a worry-free old age. In pursuit of these goals she helped her husband in his business or professional activities. She frequently accomplished incredible things by combining her work in the household with this professional work of her own, the success of which she could constantly observe and measure by the progress of their mutual prosperity. She believed she had fulfilled her life's purpose when income deriving from well-placed investments or from one or more houses allowed her and her husband to retire from business. Beyond this, the assets saved and accumulated were valued as the expression of her concern for the future of her children.

The woman of yesterday pursued the same goal of securing the future in all social spheres, varied only according to her specific conditions. The woman defined exclusively by her status as a lady determined the occasions when she would allow herself to be seen in public by considering the possible advantages to herself and her family, a standpoint that would often determine the selection of the places she would frequent and where she would vacation. Less well-off women often kept a so-called "big house." They invited

guests and took part in social functions to give the impression in their milieu that all the financial and social requisites for their husbands' career advancement were at hand. For every genuine woman of yesterday it was quite natural to make all manner of sacrifices in a completely selfless fashion, provided they served to advance the social ascent of the family or one of its members.

Her primary task, however, she naturally saw to be caring for the well-being of her children, the ultimate carriers of her thoughts on the future. Thus the purpose of her existence was in principle fulfilled once the existence of these children had been secured, that is, when she had settled the son in his work and gotten the daughter married. Then she collapsed completely, like a good racehorse collapses when it has maintained its exertions up to the very last minute. She changed quickly, succumbing to various physical ailments whose symptoms she had never before noticed or given any mind.

The woman of yesterday was intent on the future; the woman of the day before yesterday was focused on the *past*. For the latter, in other words, there was no higher goal than honoring the achievements of the "good old days." In their name she strove to ward off everything that could somehow have disturbed her accepted and recognized way of life.

In stark contrast, the woman of today is oriented exclusively toward the present. That which is decisive for her, not that which should be or should have been according to tradition.

She refuses to be regarded as a physically weak being in need of assistance—the role the woman of yesterday continued to adopt artificially—and therefore no longer lives by means supplied to her from elsewhere, whether income from her parents or her husband. For the sake of her economic independence, the necessary precondition for the development of a self-reliant personality, she seeks to support herself through gainful employment. It is only too obvious that, in contrast to earlier times, this conception of life necessarily involves a fundamental change in the orientation of women toward men which acquires its basic tone from concerns of equality and comradeship.

The new woman has set herself the goal of proving in her work and deeds that the representatives of the female sex are not second-class persons existing only in dependence and obedience but are fully capable of satisfying the demands of their positions in life. The proof of her personal value and the proof of the value of her sex are therefore the maxims ruling the life of every single woman of our times, for the sake of herself and the sake of the whole. | . . . |

The people of yesterday are strongly inclined to characterize the modern woman as unfeminine because she is no longer wrapped up in kitchen work and the chores that have to be done around the house. Such a conception is less informative about the object of the judgment than the ones making it, who have adopted a view about the essence of the sexes based upon various accidental, external features. The concepts *female* and *male* have their ultimate origin in the erotic sphere and do not refer to the ways in which people might engage in activity. A woman is not female because she wields a cooking spoon and turns everything upside down while cleaning, but because she manifests characteristics that the man finds desirable, because she is kind, soft, understanding, appealing in her appearance, and so on. | . . . |

Despite the fact that every war from time immemorial has entailed the liberation of an intellectually, spiritually, or physically fettered social group, the war and postwar period of our recent past has brought women nothing extraordinary in the slightest but only awakened them from their lethargy and laid upon them the responsibility for their own fate. Moreover, the activity of women in our recent time of need represented something

new neither to themselves nor to the population as a whole, since people had long been theorizing the independence and equality of woman in her relationship to man.

The new woman is therefore no artificially conjured phenomenon, consciously conceived in opposition to an existing system; rather, she is organically bound up with the economic and cultural developments of the last few decades. Her task is to clear the way for equal rights for women in all areas of life. That does not mean that she stands for the complete equality of the representatives of both sexes. Her goal is much more to achieve recognition for the complete legitimacy of women as human beings, according to each the right to have her particular physical constitution and her accomplishments respected and, where necessary, protected.

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TEXTILE WORKERS

My Workday, My Weekend

First published in *Mein Arbeitstag, Mein Wochenende. 150 Berichte von Textilarbeiterinnen*, ed. Deutscher Textilarbeiterverband (Berlin: Textilpraxis Verlag, 1930), 187–189.

As far as I'm concerned, the work at home would be enough. . . . The workday begins at 4:45. Make the beds, comb my hair, feed Mizzi and the rabbits, drink something warm, and the clock reads 5:30. It is time to go to the factory. Lunch box and coffee thermos in hand, and it's off to the work bench. 6:00 start, year in, year out. I do my work standing. We work nine and a half hours a day. 8:30 to 9:00 in the morning we have a break to eat. In this half hour I usually have a lot of socks with me to darn, because the time at home is short. Back to work at 9:00 until 12:00. From 12:00 to 1:00 in the afternoon is lunchtime. I usually have some mending to do; sometimes a letter to write as well. At 1:00 it starts up again until 5:00 or 5:30—after twelve hours away, back home!

Without a rest it's off to the stove to prepare lunch for the coming day. Then washing, drying, a bit of dinner, finishing by 9:00 in the evening at the latest. Then I'm finished too and want nothing but some peace.

Thursday evenings the wash is usually put in to soak. Friday evening it's washed, Saturday morning hung out to dry. Afterwards it's off to the factory till 12:00. Sunday morning is for ironing, often for baking too, but always for cooking for Sunday and Monday. Sunday afternoon (usually in the winter) I mend the linen and clean up. At 4:00 I can rest a little.

My view is that if a housewife and mother could be at home, then the household and children would be better served. In France, Alsace, and Saxony the women do not work in the factory and their life is easier than in Bavaria. In Bavaria the poor women live like slaves, so to speak. (Housewife, mother, factory worker.) The way of life is rugged and hard, as is the weather. But there are also women who have been used to the factory since they were fourteen and don't want to have it any better. *As far as I'm concerned, the work at home would be enough*, because my health isn't all that it could be. How could it be otherwise when you have to work in an overheated environment?

Six days of vacation once a year, but that's no relaxation, just the opposite. That's when the apartment gets whitewashed and painted, big washes get done, and spring cleaning. And these