

Elsa Herrmann, *This is the New Woman* (1929)

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.