

***Divide ut Regnes:***  
**The Illusory Nature of the Gender Divide in Contemporary Societies**

On 9 December 2016, film director Ali Miguel confirmed that Kelly Mantle would be the first performer to ever be considered for an Oscar nomination in both male and female categories, namely Best Supporting Actor and Best Supporting Actress<sup>1</sup>. The Academy's decision aims at acknowledging the actor's non-conforming gender identity<sup>2</sup>. Mantle, who identifies as gender-fluid, plays the role of a transgender prostitute in Miguel's movie *Confessions of a Womanizer*. According to transgender activist Jacob Tobia, "the fact that the Academy forces performers to be nominated on the basis of gender is an outdated tradition that we need to do away with"<sup>3</sup>. By openly challenging this well-established principle, the Academy is shedding the light on a broader debate: is division on the basis of gender essential to the very fabric of civilisation? There is no denying that the issue has become an integral part of the ongoing development of gender theory. This essay will therefore explore the question from a purely academic point of view.

***From social structuralism to gender roles***

First and foremost, it is essential to understand whether the current social structure has a direct effect on men and women and, if so, whether it is positive or negative.

Social structuralists argue that two major differences – men's greater strength and women's ability to bear a child – have constituted the basis for the gendered division of labour<sup>4</sup>. Under this theory, individual behaviour is determined by physiological differences, hence Acker's statement "sex is nature and gender is nurture"<sup>5</sup>.

While this divide seemed to make perfect sense in the past, the rapid evolution of postindustrial societies has undeniably led gender specialists to cast doubt on its legitimacy. On the one hand, men's physical attributes are increasingly less important

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<sup>1</sup> Calvario, L. "Oscars: Gender-Fluid Actor Kelly Mantle Submitted For Consideration in Both Male and Female Categories" (2016)

<sup>2</sup> Rojas Weiss, S. "This Gender-Fluid Performer Has Already Made History" (2016)

<sup>3</sup> Alamin, Y. "Gender-Fluid Actor Kelly Mantle Makes Oscars History" (2016)

<sup>4</sup> Eagly, A. and W. Wood. "The Origins of Sex Differences in Human Behavior: Evolved Dispositions Versus Social Roles" (1999): 409

<sup>5</sup> Acker, J. "From Sex Roles to Gendered Institutions" (1992): 565

considering the growing demand for intellectual work; on the other hand, lower birthrates and newly-created childcare opportunities have drastically lightened the burden that traditionally fell on women<sup>6</sup>.

Alice Eagly's social role theory approaches the question from a slightly different perspective. She underlines that today's social structure favours the emergence of sex-differentiated behaviours. According to her, the historical division of labour placed different responsibilities upon men and women, thus attributing them social roles solely on the basis of gender<sup>7</sup>. Consequently, expectations about both genders started to diverge, which prompted men and women to develop different attitudes and skills over the course of their lives<sup>8</sup>. Said differently, in contemporary societies, since men and women "tend to occupy different social roles, they become psychologically different in ways that adjust them to these roles"<sup>9</sup>.

This repetitive pattern has progressively led to the creation of so called gender roles, defined as "socially constructed rules that govern male and female behaviour"<sup>10</sup>. Theoretically speaking, women are expected to be communal (friendly, unselfish, concerned with others) while men are expected to be agentic (independent, masterful, competent)<sup>11</sup>. In order to fulfill society's expectations, individuals tend to behave in accordance with the gender role they are most likely to be associated with<sup>12</sup>. It can be deduced that gender roles are both descriptive and prescriptive.

### ***Domination patterns and role incongruity***

Two major undesirable effects result from the current gender divide. Firstly, categorising people on the basis of gender contributes to reinforcing men's domination

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<sup>6</sup> Eagly, A. and W. Wood. "The Origins of Sex Differences in Human Behavior: Evolved Dispositions Versus Social Roles" (1999): 412

<sup>7</sup> Dulin, A. "A Lesson on Social Role Theory: An Example of Human Behavior in the Social Environment Theory" (2007): 105

<sup>8</sup> Eagly, A and W. Wood. "Explaining Sex Differences in Social Behavior: A Meta-Analytic Perspective" (1988): 5

<sup>9</sup> Eagly, A. and W. Wood. "The Origins of Sex Differences in Human Behavior: Evolved Dispositions Versus Social Roles" (1999): 408

<sup>10</sup> Eagly, A and W. Wood. "Explaining Sex Differences in Social Behavior: A Meta-Analytic Perspective" (1988): 1.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem: 4

<sup>12</sup> Dulin, A. "A Lesson on Social Role Theory: An Example of Human Behavior in the Social Environment Theory" (2007): 105

over women; secondly, it gives rise to the role incongruity phenomenon. Both these consequences will be the subject of a thorough analysis in this section.

As far as power is concerned, it must be emphasised that calling attention to categories is a dangerous practice. Indeed, classifying individuals implies assigning them a specific value. Modern societies continue to witness the emergence of a series of infamous oppression-domination patterns and discrimination on the basis of gender is no different from discrimination on the basis of class, race, religion, ethnicity, age or sexual orientation. Gender appears rather as an organising principle than a characteristic; it is a pervasive symbol of power<sup>13</sup>. Acker piggybacks on this idea and argues that, in capitalist societies, the long-lasting gender divide reflects the fact that production is systematically privileged over reproduction<sup>14</sup>. Capitalist societies have an inherent gendered structure: while men are typically associated with production of goods and services, women remain associated with intergenerational reproduction, which is regarded as wealth-consuming and, as a consequence, secondary.

This gender hierarchy is far from being dismantled and it has a negative impact on female workers. Eagly and Wendy emphasise that “men’s accommodation to roles with greater power and status produces more dominant behaviour, and women’s accommodation to roles with lesser power and status produces more subordinate behaviour”<sup>15</sup>. In the meantime, women tend to have lower wages, more domestic responsibilities and be underrepresented in top positions.

A strict gender divide also gives birth to the highly-problematic issue of role incongruity. In an attempt to illustrate this phenomenon, the specific case of female leaders will be examined hereafter. In 1996, Virginia Schein’s essay “think manager, think male”<sup>16</sup> confirmed the hypothesis that leadership roles are largely associated with male behaviour. It also brought to light female leaders’ main challenge: combatting the inconsistency between “the predominantly communal qualities that perceivers associate with women and the predominantly agentic qualities they believe are required to

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<sup>13</sup> Acker, J. “From Sex Roles to Gendered Institutions” (1992): 567

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem: 567

<sup>15</sup> Eagly A and W. Wood. “The Origins of Sex Differences in Human Behavior: Evolved Dispositions Versus Social Roles” (1999): 412

<sup>16</sup> Schein, V. “Think Manager – Think Male: A Global Phenomenon?” (1996): 33

succeed as a leader”<sup>17</sup>. That is, expectations based on their gender directly conflict with expectations based on their position.

As a result, female leaders suffer serious prejudice. They constantly have to strike a balance between agency and communion: “nice, friendly female leaders may be criticized for not being assertive and decisive enough [...] but strong, decisive female leaders may be criticized for not being nice and warm enough”<sup>18</sup>. Research also suggests that success and likeability are positively correlated for men and negatively correlated for women<sup>19</sup>, which explains why women leaders are evaluated less favorably than men. Moreover, they are less likely to be promoted<sup>20</sup>, more likely to be sexually abused in the workplace<sup>21</sup> and systematically regarded as less competent<sup>22</sup>. In other words, the maintenance of strict gender roles is highly detrimental to women as it hinders their professional ascension, thus reinforcing the well-known glass ceiling effect.

Nonetheless, women are not the only losing party. So are their male peers. At this point, it should be highlighted that women’s style of leadership is considered the most efficient and that people see feminine qualities as “a new form of innovation for today’s world”<sup>23</sup>.

From Facebook CEO’s Mark Zuckerberg and Sheryl Sandberg to Google CEO Sundar Pichai, many progressive leaders are embracing the revolutionary path of transformational leadership. Research shows that its efficiency is second to none as it helps increasing the performance of both the company and its employees<sup>24</sup>. Interestingly enough, women score higher than men for each component of transformational

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<sup>17</sup> Eagly, A and S. J. Karau. “Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice Toward Female Leaders” (2002): 575

<sup>18</sup> Eagly, A. and L.L. Carli. *Through the Labyrinth : The Truth about How Women Become Leaders* (2007): 163

<sup>19</sup> Sandberg, S. *En avant toutes: les femmes, le travail et le pouvoir* (2013): 80.

<sup>20</sup> Y.S. Hae and S.C. Bang. “What Are the Top Factors that Prohibit Women from Advancing into Leadership Positions at the Same Rate as Men?” (2013): 4

<sup>21</sup> McLaughlin, H., A. Blackstone and C. Uggen. “Sexual Harassment, Workplace Authority and the Paradox of Power.” (2013): 625.

<sup>22</sup> Heilman, M. and A. Wallen. “Penalties for Success: Reactions to Women Who Succeed at Male Gender-Typed Tasks.” (2004): 419

<sup>23</sup> Gerzema, J. and M. D’Antonio. *The Athena Doctrine: How Women (and the Men Who Think like Them) Will Rule the Future* (2013): 256

<sup>24</sup> McColl-Kennedy, J. and R.D. Anderson. “Impact of Leadership Style and Emotions on Subordinate Performance” (2002): 545

leadership<sup>25</sup>, which makes them extremely valuable leaders. *De facto*, transformational leaders promote consistent vision and moral values to their subordinates; they act as role models in order to inspire them and tend to foster positive thinking, active mentoring, teamwork and deep commitment<sup>26</sup>.

Besides, after surveying more than 64,000 people in thirteen countries, John Gerzema and Michael D'Antonio revealed in their book *The Athena Doctrine* that qualities people think an ideal leader should possess are mostly regarded as feminine<sup>27</sup>. They believe that feminine traits such as flexibility, empathy and honesty<sup>28</sup> are keys to solving today's challenges in a fast-paced and interconnected world. In that regard, it should be noted that the adjective "feminine" has been chosen because these particular traits are mostly found in women's behaviour. However, it does not exclude that such qualities be displayed by men.

Yet, due to the direct effects of role incongruity, women are still struggling to make it to the top and men remain reluctant when it comes to embracing what is often described as a female way of leading. It is thus clear that, in the field of leadership, the traditional divide between men and women is hugely detrimental to society as a whole.

### ***Social role theory: towards gender-fluid societies***

Society has no choice but that of evolving for the better. The legitimacy of the current gender divide has sparked a heated debate in the field of gender studies. As illustrated by the case of female leaders, the imposition of such segregation has damaging effects on modern societies. In that respect, Alice Eagly's social role theory is a beacon of hope for gender-neutral advocates. It stresses that gender roles are dynamic, meaning that they adapt to societal change<sup>29</sup>. What seems immutable today will be challenged by those who violate their assigned social and gender roles tomorrow. Undoubtedly,

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<sup>25</sup> Eagly, A., M.C. Johannesen-Schmidt and M.L. van Engen. "Transformational, Transactional and Laissez-Faire Leadership Styles: A Meta-Analysis Comparing Women and Men (2003): 569-591

<sup>26</sup> MSG experts. "Transformation Leadership Theory" (n.d.)

<sup>27</sup> Gerzema, J. and Michael D'Antonio. *The Athena Doctrine : How Women (and the Men Who Think like Them) Will Rule the Future* (2013): 11

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem: cover

<sup>29</sup> Dulin, A. "A Lesson on Social Role Theory: An Example of Human Behavior in the Social Environment Theory" (2007): 108

deeply-committed fathers as well as brilliant female engineers will therefore pave the way for future gender-fluid societies.

Establishing a gender divide is nothing but the mere application of the everlasting *divide ut regnes* principle: “[...] causing discord and conflict amongst racial/ethnic groups, or exploiting class, religious, age or gender differences to divide and diminish power of various groups according to these sociological classifications”<sup>30</sup>. Dividing is conquering. Forcing individuals to fit in unnecessary and artificial categories is distracting them from understanding who they truly are.

By allowing Kelly Mantle to compete in both Best Supporting Actor and Best Supporting Actress categories, the Academy has carved an unprecedented path. Nevertheless, the real question is whether the aforementioned categories were truly needed in the first place. There is no evidence that coming to terms with a rigorous gender divide would shake the very foundations of society. On the contrary, it is evident that setting individuals free from gender norms is the first step towards progress. As Michael D’Antonio and John Gerzema brilliantly observed, individual achievements depend on a society that transcends gender stereotypes.

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<sup>30</sup> Hagopian, J. “Divide and Conquer: The Globalist Pathway to New World Order Tyranny” (2015)

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