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Michael Kimmel's "The Gendered Society" : Challenges and Solutions for the Degendering Process

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**MICHAEL KIMMEL'S "THE GENDERED SOCIETY":
CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS
FOR THE DEGENDERING PROCESS¹**Michael Kimmel. 2015. *Spoleczeństwo genderowe*, Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego.

A lack of unanimity appears to be a constant element of today's scientific reality among the theorists of sociological concepts. Therefore, the polyphony of scientific positions in the discourse of gender sociology should not be surprising. The concept of socio-cultural gender is ambiguous and unclear. In newer elaborations it gains other meanings, and consequently, its consistent codification and definition is no longer possible. Today's reflections on sociological theorists, focusing their analyses on the socio-cultural gender issue, have also been the subject of numerous disputes and controversies. Like many scientific concepts, the term "socio-cultural gender" has also undergone colloquialisation; as a result, it has become distorted semantically and used incorrectly. This concept has also gained a political dimension and has been decontextualized for ideological reasons, appearing as an argument or counter-argument in attempts to legitimize certain views.

Michael Kimmel represents a key position occupied by researchers in the eternal conflict of "nature versus nurture", focusing on questions about the sources and condition of human sexuality. Proponents of the "nature" theory, like Charles Darwin and Edward Wilson, claim that biology is the main shaping factor in determining the prevalent social order, as well

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as the tasks attributed to particular social and gender roles. Conversely, theorists such as Margaret Mead, leaning towards “education”, believe that socialization is the basis of varied behaviours among people.

Kimmel’s book “The Gendered Society” in its construction resembles a plain textbook, but it professionally introduces the basic issues and current debates surrounding the concept of socio-cultural gender. While there are different approaches in the field of gender studies, this book clearly describes and organizes them. However, this is not the first manual on gender issues, as works such as “Gender” by Harriet Bradley (2008), “Gender in World Perspective” by Raewyn Connell (2002), and “Woman, Man, and Society” by Renzetti Curran (2005) should be also mentioned. Although no Polish textbook has been written in the field of gender sociology, Kimmel’s book is very comprehensive and contains many threads also important to Polish realities.

The book raises issues not only directly related to gender, but situates the problem in a broader context, pointing to the sexuality of various social phenomena such as crime, racism, poverty, and human sexuality. Therefore, in the book gender is not a dichotomous category but is intersecting, or cross-cutting with other social phenomena, and determining the multidimensional nature of the location of social actors (see Bradley 2007, Connell 2002).

“The Gendered Society” consists of 3 parts divided into 14 chapters, making a total of 550 pages focusing on gender and various views on it in American society. An academic in the field takes his or her own position and, by advocating one of the parties to the conflict, usually objectifies his or her message by, for example, trying to speak the language of statistics. By justifying the formulated conclusions and claims, it refers to results of quantitative research from various sources, such as the Pew Research Center, the Federal Statistics Office, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the U.S. Department of Education, or the ACT Statistical Research Department.

The book contains many references to American media products (books, films, music, etc.), political events (e.g. presidential elections), and social (the Columbine High School massacre in Colorado). All these references are well-known and understood by all readers, which reminds us of the constant influence of global processes. The footnotes and explanations added by the editors of the book, however, show that some of the themes or references to some phenomena are very contextual, making the book sometimes unclear and unreadable for non-Americans. The author inserts private life experiences and witty comments between his reflections and, as a narrator, reveals his own views or feelings, not just impersonal narrative. Such a style of writing undoubtedly makes Kimmel’s message friendlier to people who are beginning their intellectual adventure with gender studies.

The Polish edition of “The Gendered Society” is introduced by Anna M. Kłonkowska. This multi-page foreword is a very important element of the work, as with caution it acquaints the reader with the notion of “gender” as the centre of further reflection. Kłonkowska writes about the “media hysteria that surrounds the term itself” in Polish media, but also stresses that media hype does “not translate into equally broad knowledge of its meaning or even a reflection on its semantics” (pp. 7–8). Thus, Kłonkowska further explains the meaning of the word gender and its pedigree, and describes the attempts to translate it into Polish in an adequate and semantically consistent way. She explains the issue from the perspectives of

both essence and constructivism, neither of which are characterized in a comprehensive or extensive way. Such a brief description barely signals the direction of thoughts of researchers dealing with issues related to gender.

Part one is a kind of introduction to the current discourse of gender studies, in which the author accommodates a polyphony of narratives about sexuality. Cultural gender as a scientific category and social phenomenon is depicted both from the deterministic points of view of various biologists and the psychoanalytical perspective of psychologists, and of socio-biologists. Kimmel cites the arguments of numerous researchers and their works representing the various disciplines of science, to calmly, sentence after sentence, deal with premises whose truthfulness is often the result of beliefs which omit certain premises, and are not based on empirical evidence.

The author reflects on the way researchers who, based on the present form of cultural gender seeking to find its source in the past justifying its present form of nature or biology, think. Kimmel shows that such a cause-and-effect sequence, or maybe more of an effect-and-cause sequence, uses inverted logic that does not explain gender differences, much less gender inequalities. Gender differences in biological determinism are an argument legitimizing sexual discrimination. Researchers attempting to explain gender differences usually refer to different anatomical structures, which in their opinion determine one's predisposition to a particular profession or activity. Inspired by Freud's phrase "anatomy is destiny", they emphasize differences between men and women, while omitting their common traits. As a result, they arrive at a binary gender arrangement. Freudian psychoanalysis is, therefore, one of the elements contributing to the maintenance of sexual order in society, rather than explaining it. Kimmel also stresses that the differences within the male or female populations are much greater than those between them.

A whole array of diversity in the construction of "gender" is also presented in part one. Kimmel refers to Margaret Mead's pioneering research in the South Seas, concerning the tribes of Arapesh, Tchambula and Mundugumor, each of which formed the concepts of "masculinity" and "femininity" in their own particular way. This is a clear example of how culture has enormous impact on the shape of a particular gender, and one of the most important arguments that undermine the "naturalness" of the present system of forces in a society full of gender inequalities. The numerous arguments recalled in part one highlight that it is more accurate to talk about "doing gender" rather than "having gender". Pointing to mistaken thinking about the concept of "explaining" sexual differences, the author in the last part of chapter one, "Social construction of gender relations", presents an alternative approach and the scientific output of various sociologists debating gender issues. Both researchers and their work in the gender studies stream show the power of social constructivism, which at the intersection of gender, context and efficiency shows the emerging "cultural gender" (so colourful and diverse in its structure).

In the closing chapter of part one Kimmel shows readers how to think about gender from a sociological perspective. This perspective is a weave of three levels: identity, interaction, institution, and interactions between them. The sociological position becomes the basis for further analyses presented in the parts two and three, and explains the related phenomena of gender difference and inequality.

Chapter 6, “Gender Family: Biology Constructs Sex”, is one of the longest in the book. The author, taking into account the economic, social and economic changes occurring now, describes the history of the emergence of the American nuclear family. Initially, the jointly developed home space, in which both men and women deal with their belongings, is modified, resulting in the division between making money for the home in the public space, and the women’s role of a good mother and guardian of hearth and home, in which the housewife, weary of capitalist life, can take a breath. However, the history of the nuclear family was less fortunate than the project assumed, as summarized in the author’s words: “barely this traditional family was fully established and recognized to burst under the weight of the burdens that lay upon it.” (p. 191). Going further, it is worth pointing out that Kimmel shows how the division of labour inside the conjugal system contributes to production and reproduction within this microstructure of gender inequality: “It is in the family sowing seeds of gender difference, in the family that we realize for the first time being a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, has different and unequal meanings” (p. 197). The author notes that the male narrative about themselves clearly demonstrates their attitude toward this type of activity. Very often when fathers or husbands talk about work at home, they describe it as “help” or they say that they “declare some help” or “help,” as if this work always belonged to someone else.

With the professional activation of women, the role of mother and wife is gradually being transformed, which is also due to, among other factors, the transformation of men’s consciousness. This is in turn responsible for the division of household duties, family relationships, and the well-being of the household. Statistical data, patiently invoked by the author, is very useful in the analysis of these phenomena. However, it is not just a thoughtless reproduction of quantitative information. The author presents and highlights some trends that are noticeable in the context of family co-creation. For example, fathers who do more homework and spend more time with children are more likely to report a higher level of happiness than those who are not involved in such activities.

Approaching the issue of the role of homosexual parents, Kimmel shows how the voice “defending the family” is paradoxical, which at the same time prevents the creation of this type of institution/community for homosexuals. However, according to data from the American Sociological Review, the number of people opposed to single-sex marriages is steadily declining.

The information in the book and the analysis of various gender phenomena are undoubtedly of great value to American society. Unfortunately, the author’s perspective seems to be far removed from the actual situation in Poland, and is basically useless when considering it.

After many-sided reflection on the forms of heterosexual, homosexual, fuller, and less complete families, the main conclusion is that the presently perceived family crisis does not seem to be just a crisis of form and a series of challenges to its content. The gender composition of the family or the number of parents does not play such a significant role on how to fulfil parental responsibilities.

The author of “The Gendered Society”, like a solid sociologist, has not only described but also predicted the further development of female-male division of labour in American society: “My prediction is that the twenty-first century will bring ‘reintegration of spheres’ in

which home and work will become increasingly similar, and men and women will be more active participants in both spheres." (pp. 234–235).

The next chapter begins with a description of the educational situation in eighteenth-century America, when education was reserved exclusively for boys and men in the upper class. For many years it was alleged that differences in body structure determine the intellectual capacity of the individual sexes. Kimmel analyses the ideas of E. Clarke (1875) about the relation between sex and education. Clark believed that educated women are "pale, weak, neurotic and hysterical, suffering from indigestion and severe or painful menstruation" and even in having a "retained reproductive system" (p. 238).

Forcing the implementation of the coeducation program was thus a very difficult task, which was fulfilled. Importantly, this chapter describes the phenomenon of "gender police", an informal peer group whose task is to ensure that the rules of conduct typical of a given gender are clearly observed, in line with its biological gender. Thus, the elimination of legal and administrative barriers does not guarantee the equalization of binarily perceived genders, or the materialization of gender equality; aside from political changes, a change in human mentality is needed. The author, describing the realities of pre-school, school and student realities, including the teaching profession, puts forward many social issues related to the feminization of the teacher's profession (and hence lower remuneration), school violence, and sexual molestation, causes of which Kimmel sees, among others, in maintaining the pattern of hegemonic masculinity. As a result, educational institutions are often a space for demonstration as well as for supporting gender inequality.

Religion is another institution whose way of functioning is analysed from a gender perspective. The author closely investigates the monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam because, as he states it, "they are particularly committed to gender issues."

Usually, the transcendental essences of different denominations take a certain form and are adapted to human reality, and are therefore miscarried. However, Kimmel points out that "Many of the norms concerning gender relations – the commandments for the subordination of women, the deference of women to men – are not encoded into the initial scriptures, but come along later as commentaries on it." (pp. 279–280). However, this conviction can be argued against. An example of such is the exhortation of St. Paul in the Letter to the Ephesians, in which he calls women to surrender, or certain passages of the Old Testament, or – in the context of Islam – the Koran. Following this thought trail, Kimmel sees that such inference cannot go far beyond a specific historical context, nor can gender asymmetry. All goddesses, or women who could match the position or religious status of men, were "suppressed and descended into the underworld" to emerge as witches. The Bible and other canonical texts abound in rules, regulations, and prohibitions regulating interpersonal relationships. However, according to Kimmel their explanation and interpretation are in fact the foundation of the imperative of gender inequality. It is not surprising that for the author a paradox of monotheistic religions in which men dominate is the fact that the majority of followers are women.

While thinking about religiousness from a gender perspective, femininity seems to be always subordinate and inferior, but there are some social phenomena that support the sexuality of women in the religious space, defined in terms of affirmative action and expression of subjectivity (see Giddens). The author cites studies conducted in the United States among

Muslims who practice wearing the hijab as “an expression of their opposition to colonialism in the Middle East and support for the gender differences imposed by their religion” (p. 284). Also, research by Etsuko Maruoka, a doctoral student, indicates that wearing the hijab by Muslim students at Stony Brook was often an expression of rebellion against parents who “earnestly attempted to Americanize them.”

Such an attitude undoubtedly casts a completely different light on issues of faith. What for some may be seen as an expression of oppression by religious institutions, for others is an expression of rebellion, self-determination and decision-making on, for example, social issues. Such a position brings us closer to the perspective of social constructivism on religious issues.

The author also discusses the issue of religious fundamentalism, which he believes intensifies at times when the doctrine is poorly grounded, threatened and questioned. Turning towards fundamentalism usually takes place in a crisis situation, when a “return to the roots” is seen as a guarantee of restoring social order.

Part two characterizes institutions from the point of view of classical sociology, such as family, education and religion. However, in a society that proclaims the dream of “from a bootblack to a millionaire”, one cannot overlook the analysis of labour institutions from the gender perspective. The chapter entitled “The separate and unequal” discusses issues of unequal pay and gender division of labour, gender discrimination, and the changing composition of the workforce. These topics may be considered by gender specialists as obvious and commonplace. However, for many social science adepts, this book is a guide to a world of gender inequality which has not yet been recognized. The author explains the importance and scale of phenomena such as “glass ceiling”, “sticky stairs” and “glass escalators”.

Kimmel sheds new light on the issue of molestation of workers, as the causes of sexual assault are not always sexual (qualifying the same kind of behaviour for violence). Molestation is a form of determining informal borders, a method to sustain them, what is most important also becomes a tool to show a person “where her place is”. Such activities can therefore be regarded as a form of violence, and not merely an abnormal realization of sexual needs. One of the issues rarely dealt with in the debate on gender inequalities, and described in Kimmel’s monograph, is the phenomenon of the “glass basement”, a situation where men are employed in the most risky and dangerous occupations, and the “preference” of men when recruiting for high-risk positions is actually discrimination with harmful consequences. However, the author claims that men often bitterly defend these professions from feminization.

Chapter 9 is presents the phenomenon of tokenism, a situation in which an individual becomes the only representative of a minority, be it ethnic, national, gender, religion or any other. According to Rosabeth Moss Kanter, professionally such circumstances are conducive to increasing contrasts. The “token” person becomes above the average, seen as the sole representative of a different group, losing meaning as an individual unit. With regard to gender, tokenism produces a very special relationship that puts women in the worst possible position. Kimmel writes: “When women have the status of a token, men maintain a numerical advantage and are able to maintain their gender privilege by limiting the woman’s entry into the workplace as well as her advancement and experience. When men have the status of a token, they are welcome and use their gender privilege to quickly climb up” (p. 334). This gender context partly explains the effect of “glass moving stairs”, and also the fierce defences of

the present state of affairs, which undoubtedly favors the benefits of being a male in cultural gender of American society. In addition, what seems to be very important from a perspective of people wanting to change the current situation of women, and as a result of men on the labour market, is the fact that privilege is almost always invisible to the people who hold it.

One of the most important institutions shaping private and social life is politics. And that is precisely the theme of the penultimate chapter of part two of "The Gendered Society." The author once again makes the reader aware that politics is another area of life shaped by cultural gender. Politics has been part of the male domain for centuries and has also been shaped by their abilities and expectations. For hundreds of years it was largely a "reserve of masculinity", giving a sense of power and agency. And like every space whose borders are guarded by male rules, their gates opened up for women in the twentieth century, mainly due to the pressure of the suffragette movement. However, the mere consent of men to allow women to enter into the political sphere, after years of socialization and gratification of women in passive and submissive behaviour, does not cause gender equality to materialize. Kimmel presents one of the more interesting statistics, in which the United States ranked in 71st position in the overall ranking of female legislators – surprisingly in the same category as Bangladesh, Sudan and the United Arab Emirates (countries which are stereotypically seen as not supporting gender and social equality.)

Chapter 10 draws attention to another very important issue. Recalling the history of US presidential elections (Martin Van Buren vs. William Henry Harrison, George Bush vs. John Kerry, George W. Bush vs. Al Gore), he underlines the way in which the US election campaigns use the inequalities of individual states by very effectively exploiting cultural gender. To humiliate or discredit a rival, it is enough to present him as feminine, delicate, or unmanly in the eyes of voters. And, as practice shows, this tactic seems to be particularly effective.

Kimmel puts forward in the book one of the most important and essential questions about the process in which sex, sexuality, balance between work and family, women's rights to decide on their own fertility become political (Kimmel 2015: 362). Each of these spheres is, indirectly, legally regulated by topical regulations, but in debates on these issues, the voice of women seems to be unheard or drowned out. In addition, in the whole debate related to social policy focusing on procreation, the author highlights the role not only of women-mothers but also men-fathers who should join and raise their voices in matters of parenthood.

The next pages of the chapter are devoted to the brief historical outline of feminist movements that have contributed to the women's revolution. Starting with the "first wave" the suffragette movement focused on women's entry into the sphere of public life, through the "second wave" of liberation in personal life, to the "third wave", which is focussed on institutional discrimination, interpersonal violence, plurality of meanings, and feminist approaches. The author also characterizes liberal feminism, radical feminism, as well as multicultural feminism, which seems to be a concept combining the greatest diversity and multiform feminism on a global scale.

In sociology, the three flagship institutions of socialization are family, education, and religion. Kimmel decided to expand this circle by enriching it with peer groups, workplaces and the media. The starting point for the author's deliberations is that media in the modern world are the primary socialisation institutions. So, it seems sensible to argue that in a given

cultural context the media are becoming another institution based on gender difference, so as to be able to create and reproduce it at the same time.

Moreover, reading chapter 9, it is notable that programs, journals, books, etc. reserved for “real men” cannot be shared with the opposite sex. This is because the “her” is always inferior to “his”, and the space contaminated with femininity requires retreat to the “reserve of masculinity”. According to Kimmel: “Girls can try to go to the boys’, but boys must never go to the girls’ sphere. Separate never means equal.” (p. 390).

The described phenomenon, which allows white middle-class men to return to the “reserve of masculinity” for a moment, is the phenomenon of “afro-americanization of white youth.” This means that white men consume rap (which is considered a genre coming from the streets of downtown) and fashion, use the language typical of the isolated African-American environment, and mimic their characteristic physical gestures. We can ask ourselves: why is this happening? The author, however, answers it without leaving any doubt: “The masculinity of the ghettos is much more “authentic”. The masculinity of white suburban men has become so safe and disinfected and their lives so planned – school, study, work, marriage, family, death – that they strive for something that seems “real” (p. 404). The author very aptly notes that the consumption of “decadent downtown” does not exceed the “border of the ghetto” (in the end, the demolition of the border would involve the annihilation of the “reserve of masculinity”, and what “real man” would undertake this fratricidal act?) and evokes the words of Kevin Powel that this phenomenon is a “cultural safari for white people”.

In conclusion to this part, I would like to quote a thought that, in my opinion, best summarizes Michael Kimmel’s reflections on the socializing influence of “his” and “her” media: “They are part of a gigantic cultural apparatus designed to reproduce gender inequality, giving the impression that such inequality is naturally occurring from existing gender differences. The media first make a difference and then they tell us that inequality is their natural consequence” (p. 386).

The third and final part of the book focuses on individual experiences, embedded in society and culture, and more broadly in the context of microcosm. Kimmel decides to investigate deeper affections such as friendship and love and how they are experienced by differently constructed genders. He shows how over the years love has ceased to be the domain of men, and goes into the hands of women, making their way into a profound relationship (this phenomenon is referred to as “feminized love”). Feminine exuberance manifested in physical closeness, expressed verbally, becomes the norm and the principle by which love qualifies. This definition of lofty feelings, combined with the current pattern of cultural design of hegemonic manhood (see Connell 2013), makes men more restrained by trying to eradicate suspicions of homosexuality that they do not expect. The author, ending his reflections in chapter 12, invokes a scientist who casts doubt on the meticulously described image of love. Francesca Cancian postulates the broadening of the meaning of this notion so that everyone can choose their own language of love.

Going further and evoking much information Kimmel proves that the ideals of beauty are constantly changing and are undoubtedly a product of culture, so we can assume that gender-building is reflected in beauty canons. In American society, men aspire to the appearance of a Greek god, with thick, lush hair and extensive musculature. In turn, women are striving for

the ideal of long-haired, slender, wasp-waisted figure, with big beautiful eyes and full lips. The author evokes Naomi Wolf's "myth of beauty", the unattainable cultural ideal of beauty, which uses a certain pattern of beauty to re-enslave women, this time in their own bodies. A consequence of the lack of acceptance of one's own appearance is the endemic of bulimia and anorexia in American society, and although they remain the primary domain of women, their numbers continue to increase among men. Kimmel describes in the book one more interesting body-related observation, namely, once again it has also become a cultural subject of highlighting the differences between women and men. The culturally developed body remains in close relation with sexuality, both understanding and feeling under the influence of gender constructs. In the chapter "Gender Body", the author focuses on the characterization of "his" and "her" sexuality. Kimmel describes gender sexual orientation, which at a young age "emphasizes the future rather than the present, it often happens in the same time as the future and the present". Feeling, giving way to continuous border designation in close proximity, all of this is related to the agreement or prohibition of the next step, and also the pressure of the peer group and social expectations. Importantly, Kimmel points out that the gender gap in sex work has declined in recent years, both equally through technological change and with the availability of sexual education. At the turn of three decades, mostly female sexuality undergoes transformation, transforming itself into an "active sexual attitude". The author in his reflections on sexuality shows how many factors affect the way in which intimacy is experienced, such as sexual orientation, social class, ethnicity, race, or having children, etc.

In the last chapter of his book, the author touches on violence, one of the very difficult issues absorbing American society. Aware of the complexity of the causes of violence in society, the author seeks clarification for this phenomenon by referring to data derived from quantitative research. Although violence seems to be related to biological sex, Kimmel argues that its causes cannot be sought solely in physiology, because testosterone itself is what triggers aggression, and does not cause it. Aggression, offenses, and murder are something that affects women (in this case statistics are not comforting because in the 1970s there was a noticeable increase in female crime). The chapter "Gender Violence" presents a number of positions because it not only considers the scale of the phenomenon from the perspective of women and children, but also speaks to men who are victims of, for example, marital violence (which is not usually the case) and even to perpetrators of violence.

The epilogue is a sort of summary, a vision of the future, and also an expression of the author's personal opinion. He cites Floyd Dell in his reflections: "feminism, for the first time will give freedom to men". To the surprise of the sceptics, Kimmel does not postulate to "socialize" society. He reiterates that one does not have to be identical, in order to be considered equal to another person. The purpose of his rhetoric is not to "sterilize" or unify human sexuality, but merely to separate cultural gender from its stereotyped features. According to Kimmel, at a time when gender variability is accepted, the person will again be able to feel the full variety of emotions and impressions (integrating what has so far been in the separation).

"The Gendered Society" can be considered as a kind of primer for the beginning researcher in the field of gender studies. Key concepts contained and explained in the text are highlighted in bold. At the end of each chapter, we can find a table summarizing key concepts from that chapter. Kimmel captures the whole debate about gender as well as phenomena related to it,

in the most holistic and meticulous way, achievable within 550 pages. In his reflections the author comes out of the role of an impersonal narrator, presenting his own position in key issues, thus joining the representatives of involved sociology. Taking into account the nature of the author's arguments and his positions in the ongoing debates, we may include the "The Gendered Society" along with works that are part of the genesis of constructivism. Kimmel emphasizes the role of socialization, social practices, institutions and social structures, draws the readers' attention to the social dimension of gender construction, and the circumstances under which it is produced and reproduced. "The Gendered Society", though focused primarily on the gender situation in the United States, has the capacity to arouse social sensitivity far beyond the borders of this nation.

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