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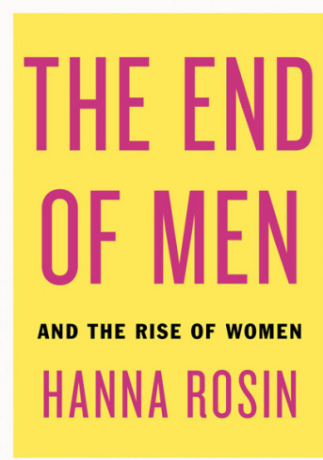
SOCIETY

Is It Really the End of Men?

There are downsides to pitting the sexes in a constant, one-up, one-down battle for supremacy

By Erika Christakis and Nicholas A. Christakis @NACChristakis | Sept. 11, 2012

It's a story as old as Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, the trope of a gender reversal that puts "women on top," but in a new book that's getting lots of attention, a journalist is trying to prove that this fiction has become a reality. In *The End of Men: And the Rise of Women*, Hanna Rosin argues that changes in the world economy have dramatically shifted gender roles. Women have adapted more skillfully to the new socioeconomic landscape by doggedly pursuing self-improvement opportunities, rebranding as the economy requires it, and above all possessing the kind of 21st century work attributes — such as strong communication skills, collaborative leadership and flexibility — that are nudging out the brawny, stuck-in-amber guys. Rock steadiness, long a cherished masculine trait, is about as useful in our fleet-footed economy as a flint arrowhead. Life favors the adapters, and it turns out they're more likely to be women.

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Rosin is a gifted storyteller with a talent for ferreting out volumes of illustrative data, and she paints a compelling picture of the ways women are ascendant: women comprise the majority of undergraduate and graduate students on campuses nationwide and are outstripping men for professional degrees; newly employed single women are actually making more money than single men; women seem to have more ambition and a better ability to plan for the future. Moreover, as women gain more financial and cultural power, rates of teen pregnancy, violence and other bad outcomes have dropped. (There may be too much of a good thing: alarmingly, Rosin points to evidence that women may themselves become more violent toward men as they assume the cultural profile of traditional manhood.)

She's even sanguine about college hookup culture, claiming that young women are pretty happy with the crude

status quo; they don't want to make any commitments that would jeopardize their career prospects and are willing to forgo what one forlorn undergraduate described as "someone to take me for a frozen yogurt" to avoid being trapped by an early marriage. We ourselves aren't so sure about this point since, from our perspective, the decline of college dating (which hasn't led automatically to marriage since the 1950s, by the way) denies both young women *and* men an opportunity to practice relationship skills they'll need in order to find long-term partners later. And it's hard to imagine why anyone tolerates the strikingly retro imbalance of [sexual satisfaction](#) (to wit: ability to reach orgasm) that accompanies casual hookup culture.

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But while *The End of Men* captures a profound change in our cultural zeitgeist, one still has to wonder: Why are the relations between men and women still portrayed as a zero-sum game? Why do we need to establish who is winning and losing the war? So much of the coverage of gender issues — indeed the book's cover title itself — pits women and men against one another. In this way, Rosin, who mainly eschews biological explanations for gender differences, still cleaves to a binary characterization of men and women: when one is up, the other must be down. But history suggests that society is better served, and not only economically, when we see men and women engaged in cooperation rather than pitched battle.

When we see one sex as "on top," it makes it harder to recognize the downsides. American women are clearly having their "moment," but, as Rosin notes, their higher powers have resulted in bigger anxieties and more unhappiness than 40 years ago. That's a bitter pill for feminism. Rosin attributes the problem to women's inability to cede authority and delegate household responsibilities to their partners, but that explanation assumes they even have partners. We know that many women are single mothers, in precarious financial straits trying to keep their families afloat without a glimpse of any kind of man in the picture. They have achieved a new sense of autonomy, Rosin notes, that has undoubtedly contributed to declining levels of sexual violence. But they're hardly the fierce amazons we'd like to imagine.

Even the relatively equal and reportedly strong marriages of the educated class — the stable unions where financial and family responsibilities are traded off over the course of a marriage — show some chinks: experts put estimates of [sexless marriages](#) as high as 15% to 20%.

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There is something else inescapable with this kind of dichotomy: if it is O.K. for women to be seen as superior in some regards, it's also O.K. for men to be seen as superior in others. That's not an argument about how women and men are "meant" to be, innately or in some ultimate, unchanging sense. But surely we can be honest with ourselves about what we see in front of us at a given moment in time, whether we are talking about [rates of murder](#) or rates of admission to graduate engineering programs. Former Harvard president Larry Summers was excoriated for his hypotheses about women and science and mathematics (mainly by people who had not carefully read his remarks), but one wonders if Summers had said something positive about women rather than men whether his remarks would have been noted at all. A world in which men and women are seen in opposition

means that whenever we say a nice thing about one gender, we must be saying something bad about the other. But that is not the sort of world that helps us address complex problems, and it's not the sort of world most of us would want to inhabit.

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