

THE CIVILIZED MAN AS LOSER

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The Dutch male is not in good shape. He is dying at a younger age, turning back the tide of equal employment opportunities for women, refusing to go along with sharing household duties as put forward in a plan by Annelies Verstand, Dutch State Secretary for Social Affairs, and to top it all off, the quality of his sperm has deteriorated drastically. The number of articles and books that have appeared about the so-called male crisis, is legion: the confused man, the useless man, the seduced man, the dependent man, the liberated man, the sissy society, the sexless male body and the prince who refuses to become king.

Quite a few of the authors are women. More so than men themselves, they seem to be looking for the new man. Men, at least in public, keep well away from taking stands when it comes to their own shifting roles and positions. Old male patterns still only work partly, and new accepted examples are few and far between. That fosters uncertainty and vulnerability and most men do not know how to deal with that. If they are not aware of the vulnerable roles in which they find themselves, the only one left available to them is that of the *loser*.

Man with All Your Might

Men are doing their utmost to sidestep their hidden, collective crisis. They do not easily allow women to draw them out and show their true faces. Modern women will no longer tolerate their being *bona fide* machos. According to the American anthropologist-biologist Lionel Tiger, men currently find themselves in a period of transition. In his book, *The Decline of Males* (1999) Tiger writes: "The current explosive interest in sport and pornography might well mean that men are trying to find new outlets for their masculinity, which they must otherwise suppress." The obsession with muscles and the solitary trend of masturbating at fantasies have not come out of nowhere. In the efficient technologies of anti-conception, artificial insemination and abortion practises, women have cornered the market when it comes to bearing and raising children. Men scarcely seem necessary anymore. When it comes to anonymous sperm donors and IVF, the reproductive roles of men have been reduced to zero. Our efficient forms of technology, deemed sacred by men, has led to a wave of blocked inseminations, from legal to illegal abortions and to an historically unprecedented rise in single

motherhood. One third of all babies born in industrialized countries grow up without their biological fathers.

The growing position of power that women have assumed in terms of reproduction has resulted in a quickly diminishing involvement of men in founding and maintaining a family life, according to Tiger. In the Netherlands fifty percent of children under the age of ten from families of divorced parents never see their fathers again. The men are bastards, they either do not want to assume or are caught in between the scarcely visible new role models. They are in the midst of an intensive transition from old stereotypical male codes to the few new and unknown male roles. Their tendency of sticking their heads in the sand and the fact men have become more well-behaved prevents them from tackling their insecurity with the decisiveness normally associated with their own sex.

Gaping Vulnerability

Women increasingly rule the roost: at home, at work, but also in the train or at a bar. In the majority of bad relationships and marriages in the Netherlands, it is the woman who initiates divorce proceedings. Many men have no idea about what hits them if they are left or sent away by their wives or girl friends. Their natural authority, being the breadwinner, protector and the old dominance no longer works. Neither does going along or being eager to please. Either at home or work, where male roles are just as easily fulfilled by women and where unresolved tensions and hidden conflicts concerning sexual relations speak volumes. Many highly educated women leave large companies after only a few years. One of the reasons being that men either do not want to or cannot give up their last remaining bastions. And the more insecure they are, the more they try and close invisible ranks.

It is even worse than that. Men are whistling in the dark and scarcely talk to one another about their gaping vulnerability. And if and when they actually do talk about it, it is more likely to be with women than with other men. The advertising industry and magazines for men, reap great rewards from this and put in overtime in the process. In addition to the existing sex magazines for men, every year new magazines appear that cater to a male readership, purporting to help them maintain their old view of masculinity. Superficial male behaviour is

presented as something profound. Making yourself (sexually) attractive to women is the predominant message. Last month's issue of *FHM* (For Him Magazine) appeared with an article about men who don't have a clue about what goes on inside a woman's head. Great subject you would think. But alas, in an exposé of seedy fantasies the woman is shown to be thinking about other men while doing it with you. This representation is the same old story. It only makes men go from bad to worse.

Well-behaved and Virile

New men who are acceptable and attractive to women and themselves, must not be sought in the public arena. Female colleagues and girl friends of mine regularly confide in me they are extremely happy with their friend, partner, or spouse. And when I speak to these men, they do not shout from the rooftops about how and where they have learned this new way of being a man and how they put it into practise. What they have in common is that they are socially and emotionally developed. Three Dutch authors, Peter Buis, Harry Walburg and Nicolaas Matsier all wrote books about the joys of being an equal partner and fatherhood. They are a good read, but are not bestsellers. Being well-behaved and virile do not mix well. What is missing is the element men have always excelled at: positive competition. Television bombards us with scores of programs where men are challenged to do certain things better. Football, and all kinds of other sports, the strongest man, cooking, quizzes and other game shows. But it's all rather civilized. The Dutch BNN channel (a recent channel aimed at a youthful audience) has a hit against being good with their program *Street Fighting*. But again it has nothing to do with being savvy when it comes to emotions or relationships. What we really need is a popular television show in which men physically and verbally compete as to who would be the best partner for a woman.

Multicultural Panache

In short: Dutch men are civilized, well-behaved and not exactly what you call wild. You can rely on them, they are reasonably trustworthy and you can count on them if you want to raise children. But in the long run they show little passion, are not romantic and can be terribly boring. And if difficulties arise in the relationship or with the family they are often unwilling to cooperate or ignore it completely. A recent survey has indicated that only 4% of men, after twenty years of social change, really share housework chores with their partner. Where are the men willing to

fight for their relationship and their (potential) children?

In our country, pacifism has been the trend for centuries, of rolling back violence and danger, but we have gone too far the other way. Consensus reigns supreme, confrontation is taboo. The polder model (third way) has tamed a lot of men. "We are civilized, and not here to argue, are we?" If you verbally lose your temper during a meeting, you are ignored and more apt to be quickly referred to the regional institute for mental welfare for being overworked. Us men don't argue with that friend of ours who mistreats his girl friend, wife and children. It's a free country, anything goes, my ass. The negative, anti-female brotherhood is still growing. But your Turkish male colleagues would be more than willing to argue with you to improve your behaviour. Men from the Dutch Caribbean islands and black men from Suriname are perfect for a passionate conversation about women, eroticism and making love. With most urbanized Dutchmen, everything descends to the crude level of jokes about sex, with precious little panache and romance.

Consensus and Confrontation

In her 1993 book *De man als held (The Man As Hero)*, Lisette Thoof is searching for the man who can make tender and passionate love, who can sustain a relationship rationally and emotionally, who can be headstrong and yet cooperate in sharing housekeeping and family responsibilities. This combination is in the making ladies, but in dribs and drabs and mostly in the younger generation. I can see a few beautifully burgeoning specimens of the new heroic men among my son and daughter's circle of friends. But without fathers who are willing to fight, they too will grow up well-behaved. He who is aware of his role as a vulnerable man in this period of transition and who dares to lash out every now and then, is well on his way to the new male role model. Change takes time.

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