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Homes, Sex and the Asymmetry Hypothesis

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This article is about modern life. It is about family size. It is about sex (got your attention at last) and about what one might call the asymmetry hypothesis.

One of my acquaintances -- one of the world's top economists -- found last year that his marriage was breaking up. I did not ask too much. This year I inquired of him whether he had found a new partner. Yes, he said. What job does she have? She is an astronaut, he replied, and has numerous degrees from top American universities. But she was only the runner-up at NASA, so she did not actually go on the Shuttle. I was slightly stunned by this, not having run into many female astronauts in my time, but he went on to imply that for decades his new friend could not find a man who could match up to her financially and intellectually, as it were, and he was not sure that he could. That set me thinking.

Economists are beginning to realize how intimately interlinked are social and economic forces. Like most countries, Great Britain has witnessed a transformation in how people live together, and in the rate at which sexual relationships between men and women go on to split up. At the start of the 1960s, for instance, the average age of marriage for a woman in this country was 23. Now it is age 28. Men and women are staying single longer. Today, moreover, there is one divorce in Britain for every two marriages.

Women are now more highly educated and can look after themselves financially. They do better at school than boys. They go to university in equal proportions to the men and often go into better jobs. Their skills are in demand in the workforce. Nobody needs brute strength any more, and certainly having brutes in a high-powered white collar office, where teamwork matters, is worse than useless. In a sense,

the modern world of work is better suited to females. Thus, in 2002 a lot of women do not depend on men.

Partly for this reason, 13% of British adults now live on their own. In the early 1960s, only 4% of people did so. These numbers are even more notable if we think in terms of households rather than people: a quarter of households have only a single person in them. Even bearing in mind our greater longevity after widowhood, there has been a quite startling growth of what might be called chosen independence. Men are doing so as well as women.

Half of adults are married. In the 1960s, a full three quarters of males were. We have also seen an explosion of lone-parent families – now 12% of the population rather than 2% in the swinging Sixties. And more people are simply choosing their own company.

These patterns are fascinating. They are having effects on the economy and on markets. In particular, the housing market is undergoing dramatic alterations, because the size of the average household has been shrinking.

We are shifting away from large houses. In our new world, especially because people are having fewer children, the country has to think small. So we need lots of tiny homes now. Things will get more extreme. According to the best projections, 3 million extra homes will be needed by 2020.

But it is more interesting to consider the social repercussions of these new trends, and to debate where things might head in the very long run. And this takes us back to my friend's NASA astronaut, or more precisely to a trend so sharply illustrated by that example. The emergence of high-achieving, independent females is affecting the way our world operates.

A key idea to keep in one's head, in my judgment, is what I call the asymmetry hypothesis. This is the notion that women are fussier than men.

Common observation, and some research evidence, suggests that, to put it overly simply to make the point, clever men will happily marry

and live with averagely bright women while clever women will not behave in an equivalent way. I believe this asymmetry will have profound effects in the future. Of course cleverness is not really the point. To put it more generally, talented and prosperous women appear to find it hard to tolerate and care for men as partners who are not their equal or superior. Yet, because they are so concerned with looks, equivalent males seem less discerning.

My Massachusetts friends tell me that this asymmetry phenomenon is most marked in the few square miles surrounding Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. If you have a Harvard PhD, and are a heterosexual female, you are almost entirely stuck if affected by my asymmetry hypothesis. Probably unconsciously, you look down on men who do not have a Harvard doctorate or the equivalent. But as males with high qualifications often seem content to go for less successful woman, the pool of eligible men for you -- for sex and friendship -- becomes small.

Where will all this end? I don't know.

Yet I believe that interesting, talented women will choose to do more and more without men. Politicians take note.

If I ran a business, finally, I would spend a lot of time thinking about how to design products for the coming breed of astronaut amazons.