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Socialism and Sex

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”THAT will reconcile me to life,” writes Emerson, ”and renovate nature, to see trifles animated by a tendency, and to know what I am doing.” And which of us, tortured and reduced well nigh to despair by the horrible degradation of human dignity in the existing hypocritical and unnatural sexual relations, does not feel the need for such a vision of the end and meaning of our present pain, if still we are to fight on. This essay by K. P.¹ is one of those jets of thought which pierce the misty confusion of times when the air is full of the dust of out-worn forms and faded beliefs with a ray of positive and reasoned conviction, pointing the road to a new order in human life more in correspondence with our consciousness of reality.

Following the method which is the recognized basis of rational generalization concerning the future development of society among all schools of scientific Socialists, the author of ’Socialism and Sex’ traces in rough outline the growth of certain broad tendencies in the past, the form they have assumed in the present, and the indications they afford as to their probable direction in the future. But he differs from most scientific Socialists in taking the two fundamental functions of animal life, nutrition and

reproduction, as together and equally the determining factors of social development among mankind. Economic relations alone are not the main root from which all other relations among men have sprung; sexual selection, he holds, has played an equal part with the struggle for subsistence, in forming each variety of social life. A particular method of sex relationship. and a particular method of wealth distribution would seem always to have corresponded to one another and existed simultaneously in every community, both expressing the same fundamental idea of appropriation by horde, tribe, group, family, or individual. Common possession, the supremacy of women, the supremacy of men, have succeeded one another, both in the relation of the sexes and in the relation of human beings towards wealth; and now we find ourselves in a period of transition in which new relations of both sorts are in process of formation; the relations of fundamental human equality.

”The leading principle of modern socialism ”(ie. the coming form of economic relations) is that ”a human being, man or woman, unless physically or mentally disabled — has no moral right to be a member of the community — unless he or she is laboring in some form for the community.” The main object of Socialism is to secure to each individual a free field for his labor, and the supply of his needs in return for his work. This is the economic independence which is essential to the moral dignity of each man and woman in a free society. But our present form of sexual relationship is an effectual bar to the attainment of this economic independence by women.

At present the work of the majority of women, i.e., those who are married, and are not actively engaged in productive labor, may be divided into two classes.

Firstly, the difficult and onerous task of rearing children. A task often fulfilled with a reckless or despairing ignorance, which is fatal to the mother’s health and happiness, and is actively injurious to the community.

from the community, doubtless, under certain conditions the population question invites serious attention; but is it conceivable that in a free Socialist society there is likely to be even the shadow of an excuse for entertaining such a repulsive idea as that of the positive and active interference of the public — "the state" — in a matter so personal and delicate?

Anyone who has studied the feelings of women on this subject will admit that it is, to say the least, extremely improbable that a large number of them in a condition of economic and social freedom would insist upon producing a dozen, or even half-a-dozen children. The majority would be content with two or three; and the small number whose maternal impulses craved larger fulfillment would be counter-balanced by that other minority who would prefer to have no children at all. Most women at the present time marry in absolute ignorance of physiology; this ignorance being fostered by our corrupt morality as a safeguard of "virtue," i.e., unreasoning submission and self-repression. Consequently, they accept an unlimited number of children as "God's will," without permitting their own reason, or even their own feeling, any part in the matter. A condition of things already breaking down and hardly likely to outlive the slavery of women.

We fail, therefore, Anarchist theory apart, to see the practical force of K. P.'s position with regard to "state sanctioned births." For the rest, his essay is the utterance of one who, with clean hands and a pure heart, dares to scale the heights of truth, and to approach every side of life with the reverence of sincerity.

Whenever I find my dominion over myself not enough for toe, and undertake the direction of toy neighbor also, I overstep the truth, and come into false relations to him. I may have so much more skill or strength than he, that he cannot express adequately his sense of wrong, but it is a lie and hurts like a lie both him and me. Love and nature cannot maintain the assumption; it must be executed by a practical lie, namely, by force. — *Emerson.*

Secondly, home duties, i.e., cleaning and moving from one place to another a variety of objects, mostly superfluous for human well-being, and which might be thrown out of the window with more advantage to the real dignity of life than the famous stone that Thoreau decided unworthy of the expenditure of energy required to dust it. Very often a large slice of such a woman's time is wasted over some muddling cooking, which with a little organization might be accomplished (what is necessary of it) with infinitely less labor. A handful of intelligent persons, with adequate appliances, might easily perform the labor of food preparation for a whole community; whereas, we have now, at least one woman in every household spending half her day on it, generally with lamentably inadequate results.

Among the rich, the activity of women is mostly expended in misdirecting the labor of others.

A great deal of the second class of work is essentially degrading. It is unnecessary, and it is inartistic. It creates nothing, it produces nothing of real beauty and utility, and therefore it fails to satisfy the strongest and most human instincts of the worker.

The method of remuneration is equally destructive to self-respect. In both classes of employment, payment is doled out to the worker at, the good pleasure of her lover. The more pressure she can put upon him the more payment she can exact; and to an ungenerous and unscrupulous woman there are no limits to this pressure but the generosity and wealth-gaining powers of the man she exploits in virtue of her position of economic dependence; whilst to a selfish man the woman appears merely as the hired instrument of his pleasure and comfort, in fact, his chattel-slave.

We live in days of the individual ownership of social wealth and the individual ownership of women by men. it is no new observation that the position of woman and wage-worker are very similar under these conditions of universal exploitation. Both must labor, not at their own pleasure, but at the pleasure of a master. The wage-worker can refuse his employer's terms, but only at the risk of star-

vation, the woman is bound to her lover by the same tie, and in both cases the current morality of the masters preaches the submissive acquiescence of the slave, and stigmatizes revolt as anti-social and foolish.

Nevertheless, K. P., and we are heartily at one with him, preaches immediate revolt in the matter of sex relationship among those individuals who are mentally prepared for the change. A sudden and universal alteration in this matter is likely to cause more suffering than a mode of change "whereby society would grow accustomed to the new type by its appearance as a more and more frequent variation."

But what is this new type of sex-relationship corresponding to the "economic independence" of all the members of the new economic organization of society?

Women are divided by nature, says K. P., into two classes: those who are fulfilling the task of child-bearing and child-rearing, and those who are not; many women passing from one class to the other in the course of their lives.

The first class are engaged in social work, which, if it is efficiently performed, unfits them during the time so occupied to take an active part in other productive labor; and equally with other workers they are entitled to the supply of their needs from the common stock.

The second class are on the same economic footing as men, and K. P. believes that they will mentally and physically be able to maintain that footing. He adduces examples which have come under his own observation as to the work efficiently done by healthy peasant women in southern Germany, Switzerland, and Northern Italy, and adds, "the student of civilization will find that there was a time when the woman physically was on a par with the man, while mentally she was his superior."

We look forward with deep interest to the publication of the evidence which K. P. informs us he has collected on these points.

The sex relationship of these economically independent men and women would be "a relation solely of mutual sympathy and affection; its power and duration would vary according to the feelings and wants of individuals." "When marriage is no longer regarded as a profession for women, and nigh the only way in which they can gain the comrade-ship of men and a wider life — when the relations of men and women are perfectly free, and they can meet on an equal footing — then so far from this free sexual-relationship leading to sensuality and loose living, we hold it would be the best safe-guard against it. Men and women having many friends of the opposite sex with whom they were on terms of close friendship, would be in less danger of mistaking fancy or friendship for love, and the relation of lovers would be far less readily entered upon than at present, when in some social circles man and woman must be lovers or exhibit no sign of affection. Every man and woman would probably ultimately choose a lover from their friends, but the men or women who being absolutely free would choose more than one, would certainly be the exceptions ; — exceptions, we believe, infinitely more rare than under our present legalized monogamy, accompanied as it is by socially unrecognized polygamy and polyandry — by the mistress and the prostitute."

"The sex-relationship of the future will not be regarded~' (necessarily and essentially) "as a union for the birth of children." Lovers "will not have children without the mature consideration and desire of the woman, if not of both."

So far, we have rather noted the contents of 'Socialism and Sex,' than commented upon them, for the greater part of this pamphlet is both in manner and spirit the finest declaration which has appeared in English of Anarchist belief with regard to the difficult and delicate question of which it treats. We summarize for our readers only that that they may be thereby incited to read the whole for themselves.

Nevertheless, we have one thing against the author. Doubtless, motherhood is a social function claiming adequate remuneration