

Woman's Work for Human Freedom

Max Nettlau

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Seen from a distance, the Suffragists' movement evokes sympathies even among those who, as Anarchists, abhor their political aims. It is because we so seldom see people of all classes working together for a common purpose, leaving, the well-trodden paths of legality and conventionality, and to some extent, imposing sacrifices -upon themselves. All other movements—the women's and the Anarchist movements excepted—are class movements, which, however ideal their beginnings may be, necessarily lead to class egoism of growing narrowness, and, as in the case of Social Democracy, do everything to perpetuate the class which they seek to abolish! Even Anarchism—this is my personal opinion, from which many Anarchists may differ—has, by the introduction of mere class interest, lately been narrowed and thinned to Syndicalism, which may strengthen, but will perpetuate, the working class. Instinctively, therefore, we are glad to see people once more struggle together as men and women, as human beings pure and. simple, not as an artificial class—it reminds one of the early days of Socialism and Anarchism.

But the object of this struggle—the suffrage—what a pitiful object it is! Are men happy who have got it? They fought for it and gained it by revolutions, and what does it really mean? Thousands of you are permitted to give your vote to an ambitious person, who through this, with others similarly elected, becomes your master, dictates laws and taxes for you, and either supports or is unable to overthrow a Government, which by means of soldiers and police enforces these laws, exacts these taxes, and may kill you or deprive you of everything you own if you refuse to submit. The person who cringes for your vote, the moment he is returned becomes the tyrant who sets his foot on your neck. And what are you yourself when voting? You are a tyrant of the same description; because you also wish to impose your will on all others—wish to see people killed if necessary to enforce laws which may please you but not them. The political machinery is so complicated and all its grinding wheels are so masked by constitutional and patriotic cant, that few voters as yet feel the responsibility, which lies upon them, their active share, however small it may appear, in all the vile deeds done in the name of law and order. But the feeling of repulsion against the horror and humbug of Parliamentarism is growing; to the old parties it has long since become a mere matter of business—office and profits. Even its fondest admirers—Social Democrats and Labour parties—see how utterly powerless Parliamentary action leaves them, except in cases, not infrequent, when they simply act like the old parties, take part in Government, in compromises—in short, betray all their principles. If you wish to see a thing done, do not wait for others—do it yourself, here and now. This principle of *direct action*,

which at all times was the way of action of independent men and women, is rapidly spreading (and here Syndicalism does its most useful work); nay, even the many, many devices of warfare which Suffragists use as short cuts to their aims, their defiance of laws,—all this is direct action and opposed to Parliamentarism. Why, then, should the women's movement end in the miserable *cul de sac* of one out of so many extensions of the franchise, none of which made mankind happy?

How callous and cruel men have become by endless ages of political power. Few will shrink from acts, however infamous they appear to the non-political mind, the moment they consider their responsibility covered by superior orders, a title of law, or a majority vote. Fortunately, a great number of women still conserve natural feelings and sentiments, whilst others seem hopelessly driven by envy and ambition to take active part in the cruel doings of men. Instead of diminishing cruelty, they will add to it. women by authority and power become, like men, mere tools for oppression and cruelty. Are nuns in convents or female warders in prisons examples to the contrary? I believe not. No doubt the female Asquiths and Burnses are already among us, and even a Mrs. W. E. Gladstone may be in prospect for the long-suffering public; no doubt also that the female persons of this type, those craving for power, will sooner or later get into Parliament and double the attraction of that august assembly, and finally become members of the Government and sign death warrants. But once more I ask, Is *this* going to be the outcome of a movement that has roused so many thousands of women, and, I am glad to believe, set them thinking, and also willing to examine whether women's action might not find a truer scope, a higher goal?

Anarchism means an independent life—that is, a life shaping its own course independent of the economic, political, moral, and other interference of other people, and, we believe, bound up by the most varied voluntary ties of solidarity and co-operation with fellow beings to whom we feel attracted. If such a state of things had to be created artificially, it would be as unpractical to wait for its realisation as to wait for wings to grow on us. But important elements of Anarchism have always existed among.... men, and all these will rise by-and-by from their latent and hidden stage. One of these elements is, indeed, the present position of women.

Whilst, men, greedy for power, created the State and succeeded only in mutually enslaving each other, women, at one time crushed by the brutal force of men, conquered the home. Many homes are wretched, it is true, on account of the worthlessness of one or both of their components, or by their wrong assortment. But many women succeed in making the home a little Anarchist group, with no master, no slave; and the brutal qualities which men acquire in political and business life are softened down in the home. If economic difficulties can be staved off, such women live in a small way as Anarchists would, choosing their own work, their own leisure, their own friends; being on terms of equality with all, of solidarity with a family circle. It is a foretaste of coming Anarchism, and in this way women see much more of freedom—enjoy freedom, ease, and absence of cares—than men ever do. Why; then, instead of spreading this state of things from the happy women to the less happy and to the unhappy—instead of trying to make men who are softened in the home by true women, less and less brutal in business, official, and political life—instead of using their immense power for good to conquer freedom for women and men, why will they concentrate their energy on becoming men's accomplices in cruel public life?

The result will be disastrous for progress: what women conquered by the effort of ages, freedom and mutual respect in the home, will be exchanged for a public life that makes them wretched duplicates of men. Instead of helping to free men by their influence on men and on children by

their example, which, in the end, could not be resisted, we shall have male and female Asquiths, male and female police constables—the horrors of the State, which women could soften and finally remove if they only wished to, would be doubled and perpetuated.

No franchise for women, but disfranchise men—this ought also to satisfy their desire for complete equality which is yet absent, a desire which pushes forward the better, the enthusiastic part of the Suffragists. (Not the ambitious ones, for they wish to be elected, to rise above the others, and to trample equality under their feet.) To disfranchise men sounds queer, but for long it has been done by Anarchists and Syndicalists who *abstain from voting*. This “strike of the electors”—what immense support it would win from women who persuaded the men at their side not to vote, to make a desert round the State, to withhold all support from the State, to boycott all connected with the State, and thus to ignore, to “cut” the State, which, if deprived in this way of support and supplies, must by-and-by climb down, linger, and die of inanition—and mankind would be free! This would be the true scope of woman’s action—to extend her own freedom to us all, and woman would thus lead the way in the emancipation of humanity.

It is too much, perhaps, to expect, that all efforts would be concentrated on this purpose, but every small beginning counts; the decisive weight will be composed of numberless small particles, and now that women are roused and enthusiastic let them begin.

If women smart under oppression, why not abolish the power that crushes them instead of wishing to have a share in it? When I said how, in my opinion, this might be done in private life by exercising a convincing influence on men, I did not wish to deny that women may also further their case by public action, to which they are roused at present. But what is their cause but the cause of all of us—that of human freedom?

Many of them, working women and girls, are exploited worse than ever men were, because they are weaker. Only the destruction of capitalism can change this thoroughly; in the meantime they can struggle for somewhat better conditions of life, an everyday struggle which revolutionary Syndicalists do not reject. These working women ought to adopt all the methods of action of Syndicalism, but all other women ought to help them by a boycott of all sweated industries, by supporting their strikes, by helping them to organize co-operatively, etc.

But there are other problems which women alone can solve among themselves, if only, moved by a generous spirit, they would declare war to *prejudice*; that *moral slavery* under which they all suffer, and which is more harmful to them than a thousand Asquiths. If men are often cruel to women, is this a reason why women should be cruel to their own sisters? From their monster gatherings in England rises the stale, shallow cry of “Votes for women!”—a cry for power and new masters. How beautiful would it be if the cry were heard at last: “*Humanity to women, and, before all, among women! War against moral prejudice!*”

This prejudice is old and manifold, as we all know. The unmarried mother is an outcast, more pitied by men than by women; the fallen girl on the streets is an outcast, sympathised with by many men; but, mercilessly despised by almost all women. In a lesser degree this ostracism aims at every free sentiment a woman may feel, at every thought outside the trammels of respectability. Again, female servants are considered as less than domestic animals by their mistresses. But who can enumerate all the torments which women inflict on women, moved by prejudice, envy, jealousy, vanity, etc.?

Here is a field for direct action for all women who will reject and scorn these prejudices and act in this spirit; and from the immense meetings all over England, and soon all over the globe, that new cry should arise: “*No further victims to prejudice!*”

Other problems are near, like that of *war*. Let these meetings declare that women henceforth will consider soldiers and officers as they would consider murderers who had killed or were preparing to kill their own children—for they intend to kill the sons of mothers in other countries, and foreign soldiers intend to kill their own sons. Where is the difference? Murderers all! Women should therefore cense all social relations with soldiers and officers—make them feel the isolation of the anti-social beings they are.

In this way many problems would soon be a step nearer solution, once women look at them in an unsophisticated way and tackle them directly. If they trust to their future lady Members of Parliament, they will only be told that war is necessary, soldiers are essential, morals cannot be touched, labour laws will have to wait, etc. They will be fooled as men have been by their representatives in Parliament for all these centuries.

If all these demands are considered too bold, the cry might be raised: “*Stop the hanging of men and women, of girls and boys in Russia!*” and were all social relations to cease with those near and far connected with Government and Parliament until at least *this* is achieved, would not such a cry sound wider and louder than the paltry cry for doubling the machinery of political humbug and fraud, reviving the dying Parliamentarism, and making women the accomplices of the crimes of power and authority?

Those women who are Anarchists might do good work, I believe, if at the present moment of awakened interest they would explain to all women the fallacy of politics. As women are quickwitted, perhaps they will soon be as willing to fight politics as they now are to cry for a share in them; and then they would give inestimable help to the cause of coming human freedom.

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