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The Economic Relations of Sex

Voltairine de Cleyre

1891

To the Editor of The Open Court:

Possessed of rather more than ordinary interest in the sex question, and agreeing with Professor Cope that any proposition for the amelioration of the condition of women should be discussed and decided by women, I am moved to certain remarks suggested by his article on “The Material Relations of Sex” in the first number of *The Monist*.

All through its perusal I was impressed by his unconscious recognition of an underlying question, which, apart from woman’s inferiority, determines the relations of the sexes. This is plainly apparent in the paragraph alluding to the communistic system of wealth production and distribution, in which he admits the possibility of promiscuous sex-relations. While I agree with Professor Cope that to institute communism would be a decided blow at progress, since progress consists in a constant widening of individual liberty while communism invokes authoritarian direction, nevertheless, I hold that in acknowledging the possibility of variety in sex relations under the communistic regime, he has admitted that the present social arrangement of sex is the necessary outgrowth of our economic conditions.

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Retrieved on December 22, 2011 from libertarian-labyrinth.org
From *The Open Court*. V, 11 (1891), 193. 2801–2802.

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Postulating the fact of woman's mental and physical inferiority, our writer sees no possible ultimatum for her but the service of maternity and child-bearing in return for "protection and support" from some man, or set of men called a "state." This brings us at once to two vital questions:

Is woman's inferiority the cause, or the effect, of her economic subjection?

Is economic independence for woman a possible ideal?

I think it can be clearly proven that the mental constitution of woman, like that of man, has never failed to rise where restrictions upon equal freedom have been torn down. Whenever woman has had the same opportunity as man, results have proven that her capacities for development are as unlimited as his. It may be objected that I am instancing exceptional cases instead of dealing with types. My reply is that only in exceptional cases have women enjoyed the same opportunities as men. Yet these cases are sufficiently numerous to warrant the conclusion that nature affords no insuperable obstacle to sex-equality in brain; and that inferiority in the typical woman must be regarded as the result of her dependent economic condition, created by the artificial restrictions of man.

Concerning the physical disability of the sex, it is more difficult to show the beneficent results of liberty, since even the most advanced of women are so hampered by body-dwarfing, dress, and custom that we have scarcely sufficient data for opinion concerning her possibilities of physical development. Such as we have would indicate that much of her present incompetence during periods of gestation and nursing, is incidental to the present defective social arrangement which condemns woman to the wasteful drudgery of individual housekeeping, and all the slavish work of the much lauded family-life.

However, even physical inferiority need not prove the eternal barrier to economic independence which Professor Cope would make of it. To-day industrial progress demands not so much physical strength as skill. Undoubtedly the elephant has physical

strength superior to man, yet that he is no competitor against man I need waste no space to prove. Likewise the Hercules of ages past would have no place in competitive industry to-day simply because he would not be adapted to his environment. Granting the present physical disability of woman, it by no means follows that, with equal opportunity, she would be unable to compete with man in the fields of productive industry. Indeed one general complaint of the workingmen is that they are competing, and, by the law of the survival of the fittest, have already driven men out of several branches of employment, such as textile fabrics, shoe-making, etc. No great amount of strength is required, but skill and patience; and it is the universal testimony of the overseers that women are equally skilful and more reliable.

There is a class of economic reformers called anarchists, who contend that with opportunity to exploit nature thrown free to the human race, the hours of labor would be so reduced as to enable one to produce sufficient to satisfy all his needs by three hours work per day. This with our present machinery, the possibilities of further reduction being left to further developments. They also contend that such freedom must necessarily result in constant labor-demand, thus securing the laborer against the present nightmare of involuntary idleness. Under such conditions, bearing in mind that the ever increasing displacement of physical strength by machinery, keeps reducing the physical burden of productive labor, woman's economic independence becomes a realisable ideal, and the whole matter of sex association changes. When woman comprehends her independence, marriage will no longer be a matter of "protection and support," which Professor Cope declares is the basis of monogamic wifehood. It will become a matter of mutual co-operation, based, let us hope on something higher than the sale of the powers of motherhood, and demanding the same standard for man as for woman.

Whether monogamy or variety will then obtain depends on which of these systems produces the higher type of humanity. At

present it is impossible to decide, since without the independence of woman there can be no equality, and without equality no true adjustment of sex relations.

Voltairine de Cleyre.