The Economic Tendency of Freethought

Voltairine de Cleyre

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to paint this happy, povertyless, crimeless, diseaseless world; I have been told I “ought to be behind the bars” for it.

Remarks of that kind rather destroy the white streak of faith. I lose confidence in the slipping process, and am forced to believe that the rulers of the earth are sowing a fearful wind, to reap a most terrible whirlwind. When I look at this poor, bleeding, wounded World, this world that has suffered so long, struggled so much, been scourged so fiercely, thorn-pierced so deeply, crucified so cruelly, I can only shake my head and remember:

The giant is blind, but he’s thinking; and his locks are growing, fast.
freedom we would not institute a wholesale robber to protect
us from petty larceny. Each associative group would probably
adopt its own methods of resisting aggression, that being the
only crime. For myself, I think criminals should be treated as
sick people.

“But suppose you have murderers, brutes, all sorts of crim-
inals. Are you not afraid to lose the restraining influence of
the law?” First, I think it can be shown that the law makes ten
criminals where it restrains one. On that basis it would not, as
a matter of policy merely, be an economical institution. Second,
this is not a question of expediency, but of right. In antebel-
lum days the proposition was not, Are the blacks good enough
to be free? but, Have they the right? So today the question is
not, Will outrages result from freeing humanity? but, Has it the
right to life, the means of life, the opportunities of happiness?

In the transition epoch, surely crimes will come. Did the seed
of tyranny ever bear good fruit? And can you expect Liberty to
undo in a moment what Oppression has been doing for ages?
Criminals are the crop of depots, as much a necessary expres-
sion of the evil in society as an ulcer is of disease in the blood;
and so long as the taint of the poison remains, so long there
will be crimes.

“For it must needs that offences come, but woe to him
through whom the offence cometh.” The crimes of the future
are the harvests sown of the ruling classes of the present. Woe
to the tyrant who shall cause the offense!

Sometimes I dream of this social change. I get a streak of
faith in Evolution, and the good in man. I paint a gradual slip-
ing out of the now, to that beautiful then, where there are
neither kings, presidents, landlords, national bankers, stockbro-
kers, railroad magnates, patentright monopolists, or tax and ti-
tle collectors; where there are no over-stocked markets or hun-
gry children, idle counters and naked creatures, splendor and
misery, waste and need. I am told this is farfetched idealism,

Freethought in America was an anti-clerical, anti-Christian
movement which sought to separate the church and state in or-
der to leave religious matters to the conscience and reasoning
ability of the individual involved. Voltairine de Cleyre (1866–
1912) was prominent both as a feminist and as a freethinker.
The following article, reprinted from Benjamin Tucker’s peri-
odical Liberty, was originally delivered by de Cleyre as a lec-
ture before the Boston Secular Society. It is an excellent exam-
ple of the interrelationship between the individualist-feminist
view of the church and of the state. In her essay “Sex Slav-
ery,” de Cleyre reiterated this two-pronged attack. She wrote:
“Let every woman ask herself, ‘Why am I the Slave of Man?’ …
There are two reasons why, and these are ultimately reducible
to a single principle — the authoritarian supreme power GOD-
idea, and its two instruments: the Church — that is, the priests
— and the State — that is, the legislators.”

Wendy McElroy
Freedom, Feminism and the State
The Economic Tendency of Freethought

Friends,—on page 286, Belford-Clarke edition, of the “Rights of Man,” the words which I propose as a text for this discourse may be found. Alluding to the change in the condition of France brought about by the Revolution of ’93, Thomas Paine says:

“The mind of the nation had changed beforehand, and a new order of things had naturally followed a new order of thoughts.”

Two hundred and eighty-nine years ago, a man, a student, a scholar, a thinker, a philosopher, was roasted alive for the love of God and the preservation of the authority of the Church; and as the hungry flames curled round the crisping flesh of martyred Bruno, licking his blood with their wolfish tongues, they shadowed forth the immense vista of “a new order of things”: they lit the battle-ground where Freedom fought her first successful revolt against authority.

That battle-ground was eminently one of thought. Religious freedom was the rankling question of the day. “Liberty of conscience! Liberty of conscience! Non-interference between worshipper and worshipped!” That was the voice that cried out of dungeons and dark places, from under the very foot of prince and ecclesiastic. And why? Because the authoritative despotsisms of that day were universally ecclesiastic despotsisms; because Church aggression was grinding every human right beneath its heel, and every other minor oppressor was but a tool in the hands of the priesthood; because Tyranny was growing towards its ideal and crushing out of existence the very citadel of Liberty,—individuality of thought; Ecclesiasticism had a corner on ideas.

But individuality is a thing that cannot be killed. Quietly it may be, but just as certainly, silently, perhaps, as the growth of a blade of grass, it offers its perpetual and unconquerable protest against the dictates of Authority. And this silent, uncon-
every statute, every be-it-enacted that represents tyranny; ev-
erything you call American privilege that can only exist at the
expense of international right. Now cry out, "Nihilist — disinte-
grationist!" Say that I would isolate humanity, reduce society to
its elemental state, make men savage! It is not true. But rather
than see this devastating, cankering, enslaving system you call
social order go on, rather than help to keep alive the accursed
institutions of Authority, I would help to reduce every fabric
in the social structure to its native element.

But is it true that freedom means disintegration? Only to
that which is bad. Only to that which ought to disintegrate.

What is the history of free thought?
Is it not so, that since we have Anarchy there, since all the
children of the brain are legitimate, that there has been less
waste of intellectual energy, more cooperation in the scientific
world, truer economy in utilizing the mentalities of men, than
there ever was, or ever could be, under authoritative dominion
of the church? Is it not true that with the liberty of thought,
Truth has been able to prove herself without the aid of force?
Does not error die from want of vitality when there is no force
to keep it alive? Is it not true that natural attractions have led
men into associative groups, who can best follow their chos-
"ned paths of thought, and give the benefit of their studies to
mankind with better economy than if some coercive power had
said, "You think in this line—you in that"; or what the majority
had by ballot decided it was best to think about?

I think it is true. Follow your logic out; can you not see that
true economy lies in Liberty, — whether it be in thought or
action? It is not slavery that has made men unite for coopera-
tive effort. It is not slavery that produced the means of trans-
portation, communication, production, and exchange, and all
the thousand and one economic, or what ought to be economic,
contrivances of civilization. No — nor is it government. It is
Self-interest. And would not self-interest exist if that institu-
tion which stands between man and his right to the free use of
querable, menacing thing, that balked God, provoked him to
the use of rack, thumb-screw, stock, hanging, drowning, burn-
ing, and other instruments of "infinite mercy," in the seven-
teenth century fought a successful battle against that author-
ity which sought to control this fortress of freedom. It estab-
lished its right to be. It overthrew that portion of government
which attempted to guide the brains of men. It "broke the cor-
ner." It declared and maintained the anarchy, or non-rulership,
of thought.

Now you who so fear the word an-arche, remember! the
whole combat of the seventeenth century, of which you are
justly proud, and to which you never tire of referring, was
waged for the sole purpose of realizing anarchism in the realm
of thought.

It was not an easy struggle, — this battle of the quiet thinkers
against those who held all the power, and all the force of num-
bers, and all of the strength of tortures! It was not easy for them
to speak out of the midst of faggot flames, "We believe differ-
ently, and we have the right". But on their side stood Truth!
And there lies more inequality between her and Error, more
strength for Truth, more weakness for Falsehood, than all the
fearful disparity of power that lies between the despot and the
victim. So theirs was the success. So they paved the way for
the grand political combat of the eighteenth century.

Mark you! The seventeenth century made the eighteenth
possible, for it was the "new order of thoughts," which gave
birth to a "new order of things". Only by deposing priests, only
by rooting out their authority, did it become logical to attack
the tyranny of kings: for, under the old regime, kingcraft had
ever been the tool of priestcraft, and in the order of things but
a secondary consideration. But with the downfall of the latter,
kingcraft rose into prominence as the pre-eminent despot, and
against the pre-eminent despot revolt always arises.

The leaders of that revolt were naturally those who carried
the logic of their freethought into the camp of the dominant
oppressor; who thought, spoke, wrote freely of the political
fetich, as their predecessors had of the religious mockery; who
did not waste their time hugging themselves in the camps of
dead enemies, but accepted the live issue of the day, pursued
the victories of Religion’s martyrs, and carried on the war of
Liberty in those lines most necessary to the people at the time
and place. The result was the overthrow of the principle of
kingcraft. (Not that all kingdoms have been overthrown, but
find me one in a hundred of the inhabitants of a kingdom
who will not laugh at the farce of the “divine appointment” of
monarchs.) So wrought the new order of thoughts.

I do not suppose for a moment that Giordano Bruno or Mar-
tin Luther foresaw the immense scope taken in by their doc-
trine of individual judgment. From the experience of men up
to that date it was simply impossible that they could foresee its
tremendous influence upon the action of the eighteenth cen-
tury, much less upon the nineteenth. Neither was it possible
that those bold writers who attacked the folly of “hereditary
government” should calculate the effects which certainly fol-
lowed as their thoughts took form and shape in the social body.
Neither do I believe it possible that any brain that lives can de-
tail the working of a thought into the future, or push its logic
to an ultimate. But that many who think, or think they think,
do not carry their syllogisms even to the first general conclu-
sion, I am also forced to believe. If they did, the freethinkers
of today would not be digging, mole-like, through the substra-
tum of dead issues; they would not waste their energies gather-
ing the ashes of fires burnt out two centuries ago; they would
not lance their shafts at that which is already bleeding at the
arteries; they would not range battalions of brains against a
crippled ghost that is “laying” itself as fast as it decently can,
while a monster neither ghostly nor yet like the rugged Rus-
sian bear, the armed rhinoceros, or the Hyrcan tiger, but rather
like a terrible anaconda, steel-muscled and iron-jawed, is wind-
ing its horrible folds around the human bodies of the world,
gling, choking, vicious human life! Dearth of vitality there —
dearth of space for it here! This is social order!

Next winter, when the ‘annual output’ of coal has been
mined, when the workmen are clenching their hard fists with
impotent anger, when the coal in the ground lies useless, hark
to the cry that will rise form the freezing western prairies,
while the shortened commodity goes up, up, eight, nine,
ten, eleven dollars a ton; and while the syndicate’s pockets are
filing, the grave-yards fill, and fill. Moralize on the preservation
of social order!

Go back to President Grant’s administration, — that very
“pure republican” administration; — see the settlers of the Mus-
sel Slough compelled to pay thirty-five, forty dollars an acre
for the land reclaimed from almost worthlessness by hard la-
bor, — and to whom? To a corporation of men who never saw
it! whose “grant” lay a hundred miles away, but who, for rea-
sons of their own, saw fit to hire the “servants of the people”
to change it so. See those who refused to pay it shot down by
order of “the State”; watch their blood smoke upward to the
heavens, sealing the red seal of justice against their murderers;
and then — watch a policeman arrest a shoeless tramp for steal-
ing a pair of boots. Say to your self, this is civil order and must
be preserved. Go talk with political leaders, big or little, on
methods of “making the slate,” and “railroading” it through the
ward caucus or the national convention. Muse on that “peace-
ful weapon of redress,” the ballot. Consider the condition of the
average “American sovereign” and of his “official servant,” and
prate then of civil order.

Subvert the social and civil order! Aye, I would destroy, to
the last vestige, this mockery of order, this travesty upon jus-
tice! Break up the home? Yes, every home that rests on slav-
ery! Every marriage that represents the sale and transfer of
the individuality of one of its parties to the other! Every insti-
tution, social or civil, that stands between man and his right;
every tie that renders one a master, another a serf; every law,
thority resides, not in the majority, not in any proportion of the people, but in the whole people.”

Hence “the overthrow of government” as a coercive power, thereby denying God in another form.

Upon this overthrow follows, the Cardinal says, the disruption of social and civil order!

Oh! it is amusing to hear those fellows rave about social order! I could laugh to watch them as they repeat the cry, “Great is Diana of the Ephesians!” “Down on your knees and adore this beautiful statue of Order,” but that I see this hideous, brainless, disproportion idol come rolled on the wheels of Juggernaut over the weak and the helpless, the sorrowful and the despairing. Hate burns, then, where laughter dies.

Social Order! Not long ago I saw a letter from a young girl to a friend; a young girl whose health had been broken behind a counter, where she stood eleven and twelve hours a day, six days in the week, for the magnificent sum of $5. The letter said: “Can’t you help me to a position? My friends want me to marry a man I do not like, because he has money. Can’t you help me? I can sew, or keep books. I will even try clerking again rather than that!” Social Order! When the choice for a young girl lies between living by inches and dying by yards at manual labor, or becoming the legal property of a man she does not like because he has money!

Walk up Fifth Avenue in New York some hot summer day, among the magnificent houses of the rich; hear your footsteps echo for blocks with the emptiness of it! Look at places going to waste, space, furniture, draperies, elegance, — all useless. Then take a car down town; go among the homes of the producers of that idle splendor; find six families living in a five-room house, — the sixth dwelling in the cellar. Space is not wasted here, — these human vermin rub each other’s elbows in the stifling narrow; furniture is not wasted, — these sit upon the floor; no echoing emptiness, no idle glories! No — but wasting, stran-

and breathing its devouring breath into the faces of children. If they did, they would understand that the paramount question of the day is not political, is not religious, but is economic.

That the crying-out demand of today is for a circle of principles that shall forever make it impossible for one man to control another by controlling the means of his existence. They would realize that, unless the freethought movement has a practical utility in rendering the life of man more bearable, unless it contains a principle which, worked out, will free him from the all-oppressive tyrant, it is just as complete and empty a mockery as the Christian miracle or Pagan myth. Eminently is this the age of utility; and the freethinker who goes to the Hovel of Poverty with metaphysical speculations as to the continuity of life, the transformation of matter, etc.; who should say, “My dear friend, your Christian brother is mistaken; you are not doomed to an eternal hell; your condition here is your misfortune and can’t be helped, but when you are dead, there’s an end of it,” is of as little use in the world as the most irrational religionist. To him would the hovel justly reply: “Unless you can show me something in freethought which commends itself to the needs of the race, something which will adjust my wrongs, ’put down the mighty from his seat,’ then go sit with priest and king, and wrangle out your metaphysical opinions with those who mocked our misery before.”

The question is, does freethought contain such a principle? And right here permit me to introduce a sort of supplementary text, taken, I think, from a recent letter of Cardinal Manning, but if not Cardinal Manning, then some other of the various dunce-capped gentlemen who recently “biled” over the Bruno monument.

Says the Cardinal: “Freethought leads to Atheism, to the destruction of social and civil order, and to the overthrow of government.” I accept the gentleman’s statement; I credit him with much intellectual acumen for perceiving that which many freethinkers have failed to perceive: accepting it, I shall do my best
to prove it, and then endeavor to show that this very icono-
clastic principle is the salvation of the economic slave and the
destruction of the economic tyrant.

First: does freethought lead to Atheism?

Freethought, broadly defined, is the right to believe as the
evidence, coming in contact with the mind, forces it to believe.
This implies the admission of any and all evidence bearing
upon any subject which may come up for discussion. Among
the subjects that come up for discussion, the moment so much
is admitted, is the existence of a God.

Now, the idea of God is, in the first place, an exceeding con-
tradiction. The sign God, so Deists tell us, was invented to
express the inexpressible, the incomprehensible and infinite!
Then they immediately set about defining it. These definitions
prove to be about as self-contradictory and generally conflict-
ing as the original absurdity. But there is a particular set of
attributes which form a sort of common ground for all these
definitions. They tell us that God is possessed of supreme wis-
dom, supreme justice, and supreme power. In all the catalogue
of creeds, I never yet heard of one that had not for its nucleus
unlimited potency.

Now, let us take the deist upon his own ground and prove to
him either that his God is limited as to wisdom, or limited as
to justice, or limited as to power, or else there is no such thing
as justice.

First, then, God, being all-just, wishes to do justice; being
all-wise, knows what justice is; being all-powerful, can do jus-
tice. Why then injustice? Either your God can do justice and
won’t or doesn’t know what justice is, or he can not do it. The
immediate reply is: “What appears to be injustice in our eyes,
in the sight of omniscience may be justice. God’s ways are not
our ways.”

Oh, but if he is the all-wise pattern, they should be; what is
good enough for God ought to be good enough for man; but
what is too mean for man won’t do in a God. Else there is no

some of the voters.” (Mr. Harrison being a pious Presbyterian,
he would probably add: “The majority vote of the whole was
for another man, but I had the largest electoral vote.”) “Then
you are the representative of the electoral college, not of the
whole people, nor the majority of the people, nor even a ma-
jority of the voters. But suppose the largest number of ballots
cast had been for you: you would represent the majority of the
voters, I suppose. But the majority, sir, is not a tangible thing;
it is an unknown quantity. An agent is usually held account-
able to his principals. If you do not know the individuals who
voted for you, then you do not know for whom you are act-
ing, nor to whom you are accountable. If any body of persons
has delegated to you any authority, the disposal of any right or
part of a right (supposing a right to be transferable), you must
have received it from the individuals composing that body; and
you must have some means of learning who those individuals
are, or you cannot know for whom you act, and you are utterly
irresponsible as an agent.

“Furthermore, such a body of voters can not give into your
charge any rights but their own; by no possible jugglery of
logic can they delegate the exercise of any function which they
themselves do not control. If any individual on earth has a right
to delegate his powers to whomsoever he chooses, then every
other individual has an equal right; and if each has an equal
right, then none can choose an agent for another, without that
other’s consent. Therefore, if the power of government resides
in the whole people, and out of that whole all but one elected
you as their agent, you would still have no authority whatever
to act for the one. The individuals composing the minority who
did not appoint you have just the same rights and powers as
those composing the majority who did; and if they prefer not
to delegate them at all, then neither you, nor any one, has any
authority whatever to coerce them into accepting you, or any
one, as their agent — for upon your own basis the coercive au-
walk the street! And you, street-walkers, be grateful that there are well-lighted dens of the city; in the country you might die upon the roadside. Goaded human race! Be thankful for your goad. Be submissive to the Lord, and kiss the hand that lashes you! Once more misery is the diet of the many, while the few receive, in addition to their rights, those rights of their fellows which government has wrested from them. Once more the hypothesis is that the Government, or Authority, or God in his other form, owns all the rights, and grants privileges according to its sweet will.

The freethinker who should determine to question it would naturally suppose that one difficulty in the old investigation was removed. He would say, "at least this thing Government possesses the advantage of being of the earth, — earthy. This is something I can get hold of, argue, reason, discuss with. God was an indefinable, arbitrary, irresponsible something in the clouds, to whom I could not approach nearer than to his agent, the priest. But this dictator surely I shall be able to meet it on something like possible ground." Vain delusion! Government is as unreal, as intangible, as unapproachable as God. Try it, if you don't believe it. Seek through the legislative halls of America and find, if you can, the Government. In the end you will be doomed to confer with the agent, as before. Why, you have the statutes! Yes, but the statutes are not the government; where is the power that made the statutes? Oh, the legislators! Yes, but the legislator, per se, has no more power to make a law for me than I for him. I want the power that gave him the power. I shall talk with him; I go to the White House; I say: "Mr. Harrison, are you the government?" "No, madam, I am its representative." "Well, where is the principal?—Who is the government?" "The people of the United States." "The whole people?" "You, then, are the representative of the people of the United States. May I see your certificate of authorization?" "Well, no; I have none. I was elected." "Elected by whom? the whole people?" "Oh, no. By some of the people, —
But, in the practical, the moment you admit a supreme authority, you have denied rights. Practically the supremacy has all the rights, and no matter what the human race possesses, it does so merely at the caprice of that authority. The exercise of the respiratory function is not a right, but a privilege granted by God; the use of the soil is not a right, but a gracious allowance of Deity; the possession of product as the result of labor is not a right, but a boon bestowed. And the thievery of pure air, the withholding of land from use, the robbery of toil, are not wrongs (for if you have no rights, you cannot be wronged), but benign blessings bestowed by “the Giver of all Good” upon the air-thief, the landlord, and the labor-robber.

Hence the freethinker who recognizes the science of astronomy, the science of mathematics, and the equally positive and exact science of justice, is logically forced to the denial of supreme authority. For no human being who observes and reflects can admit a supreme tyrant and preserve his self-respect. No human mind can accept the dogma of divine despotism and the doctrine of eternal justice at the same time; they contradict each other, and it takes two brains to hold them. The cardinal is right: freethought does logically lead to atheism, if by atheism he means the denial of supreme authority.

I will now take his third statement, leaving the second for the present; freethought, he says, leads to the overthrow of government. I am sensible that the majority of you will be ready to indignantly deny the cardinal’s asseveration; I know that the most of my professedly atheistic friends shrink sensitively from the slightest allusion that sounds like an attack on government; I am aware that there are many of you who could eagerly take this platform to speak upon “the glorious rights and privileges of American citizenship”; to expatiate upon that “noble bulwark of our liberties — the constitution”; to defend “that peaceful weapon of redress, the ballot”; to soar off rhapsodically about that “starry banner that floats ‘over the land of the free and the home of the brave.’” We are so free! and so brave!

We don’t hang Brunos at the stake any more for holding heretical opinions on religious subjects. No! But we imprison men for discussing the social question, and we hang men for discussing the economic question! We are so very free and so very brave in this country! “Ah!” we say in our nineteenth century freedom (?) and bravery (?), “it was a weak God, a poor God, a miserable, quaking God, whose authority had to be preserved by the tortuous death of a creature!” Aye! the religious question is dead, and the stake is no longer fashionable. But is it a strong State, a brave State, a conscience-proud State, whose authority demands the death of five creatures? Is the scaffold better than the faggot? Is it a very free mind which will read that infamous editorial in the Chicago “Herald”: “It is not necessary to hold that Parsons was legally, rightfully, or wisely hanged: he was mightily hanged. The State, the sovereign, need give no reasons; the State need abide by no law; the State is the law!” — to read that and applaud, and set the Cain-like curse upon your forehead and the red “damned spot” upon your hand? Do you know what you do? — Craven, you worship the fiend, Author-ity, again! True, you have not the ghosts, the incantations, the paraphernalia and mummery of the Church. No: but you have the “precedents,” the “be it enacted,” the red-tape, the official uniforms of the State; and you are just as bad a slave to state-craft as your Irish Catholic neighbor is to popecraft. Your Government becomes your God, from whom you accept privileges, and in whose hands all rights are vested. Once more the individual has no rights; once more intangible, irresponsible authority assumes the power of deciding what is right and what is wrong. Once more the race must labor under just such restricted conditions as the law — the voice of the Authority, the governmentalist’s bible-shall dictate. Once more it says: “You who have not meat, be grateful that you have bread; many are not allowed even so much. You who work sixteen hours a day, be glad it is not twenty; many have not the privilege to work. You who have not fuel, be thankful that you have shelter; many