

The Marriage Controversy

Freedom Press (London)

October, 1888

Most of the letters on marriage in the *Daily Telegraph* have been well worthy of the silly season; none of them have thrown fresh light on the most difficult of Social problems. And what else could be expected when the editor boasts that he has excluded every correspondent who might perchance "bring a blush to the cheek of the Young Person" by any ill advised attempt to go to the root of the matter, socially, economically, physiologically or psychologically? Nevertheless, in spite of all the platitudes of all the prudes, the controversy as a whole is highly significant.

It would have been of some importance if only from the fact that the question "Is marriage a failure?" has stared at every passer by from the notice board of every news-agent in the country, day after day and week after week. The continual spectacle of that heading in big type can hardly have failed to set many vaguely discontented people thinking as they never ventured to think before; to lead them to question what before never occurred to them as seriously questionable.

If our existing marriage system were generally suited to our present desires and needs, such questioning would be a comparatively small matter. But the inquiry claims special notice as a passing indication of a wide-spread social movement. It is but a feather on the stream, but it shows how the current runs. Twenty years ago would any editor of a respectable middle-class newspaper have dared to raise a question about marriage? Would it have been a paying speculation to admit even the faintest murmurs of discontent with the modern family system? For as one of the "Pillars of Society" says in Ibsen's play, "The family is the kernel of Society." If the kernel may even be suspected of being unsound, what of the whole nut?

The connection of the *Daily Telegraph* correspondence with one of the least generally recognized and most important movements in the world of advanced thought is in itself curious and interesting.

Since Darwin drew attention to the great part played by sexual selection in the evolution of animal life, a small number of thinkers have been impressed by the deep interest attaching to the various forms of sex relation that have existed, and are existing, among human beings. Writers like Morgan and Maclaren (not to mention foreign authors, whose books are not yet generally known in England) have brought together much information on this subject, and it has begun to be recognized that the history of sex relations is a study of fundamental importance; for without it no clear understanding is possible either of the growth of society in the past or of the social problem with which we are confronted to-day.

This year Mr. Karl Pearson, Professor of Mathematics at University College, London, has published a valuable contribution to the new branch of inquiry in the three concluding essays of his book "The Ethic of Free Thought." These essays profess to be nothing but outlined suggestions of the nature of the problems to be considered and the method by which they may be solved. They sketch out in broad lines the subject matter of the coming science of sexology. Even as sketches their author claim for them no sort of completeness. They are intended to suggest lines of thought for others and to draw attention to the vast social significance of the questions involved, rather than to set forth any special conclusions. Mr. Pearson has not yet arranged for publication the facts from which he has drawn the few generalizations he permits himself, and he is too profoundly imbued with the scientific spirit to ask his readers to accept on faith even a working hypothesis. But his ideas are luminous with thought-provoking originality, and the pure and noble spirit in which he handles questions too long obscured and degraded by morbid sentiment is in itself an enormous contribution towards their right understanding. It is like a current of fresh air, a gleam of sunshine, in a close, dark room.

The first essay, on "The Woman's Question," passes in rapid survey the complex problem raised by the growing movement towards female emancipation. Do we at all realize the meaning of the social revolution which must ensue if women succeed in making good their claim to equality? The second is "A Sketch of the relations of sex in Germany", showing how fundamental changes in the form of sex relationship have modified social life; with some suggestion as to the causes from which these changes may have sprung. The third essay is on "Socialism and Sex."

The historical school of economists in Germany, and with them Karl Marx, have dwelt very strongly upon the fundamental importance of economic development in the history of society. The way in which wealth has been produced and distributed in any nation is the great root fact, and from that all those social institutions and movements, with which historians have too long been exclusively occupied, have sprung. Laws and governments, class struggles and foreign wars, the deeds of kings and legislators, all originate in the economic condition of the race; all take their significance from the economic relations between men and from the form in which they hold property.

Mr. Pearson contends that sex relations have played as fundamental a part as economic relations in social evolution. To each form of the ownership of wealth has corresponded a particular form of sex relation, and the latter has by no means always been the result of the former. Sometimes a change in sex relation has been the cause which would appear to have revolutionized economic conditions. Each has acted and reacted upon the other. The two together lie at the foundation of social life. On their variation depends the growth of society. And they have continually varied. It is sheer blindness to fail to perceive that the great economic changes, which all intelligent men are beginning to recognize as inevitable today, will be accompanied by equally wide changes in sex relationship.

We Communist-Anarchists disagree with Mr. Pearson's State Socialism; we disagree with the moral basis on which he builds it; but his rough outline of the probable future of sex relationship is radiant with the belief in Man which is the key-note of Anarchism,

He holds that the entire absence of the organized interference of the community in the personal relation of men and women will be the natural accompaniment of Socialism, and that complete freedom of intercourse, common education, and economic equality between the sexes will do what marriage laws and social restraints have failed to accomplish in destroying the mental depravity and heartless license which disgrace modern social life.*

In the July number of the *Westminster Review* Mrs. Mona Caird, a young novelist, has summarized a portion of Mr. Pearson's essays, in an article entitled "Marriage," though without acknowledging by more than a passing allusion the source from which her material has been obtained. Without the reservation and qualification with which Mr. Pearson has put forth his views, and without Socialism, Mrs. Caird's article appears somewhat strained and vague, but it is written in popular language, it is the utterance of a woman's cry of revolt, and it has done what Mr. Pearson's essays have not done, arrested public attention. The outcry in the daily papers has been the result.

After all, the thinkers are only engaged in consciously seeking, investigating and formulating what Society as a whole is dimly and unconsciously yearning and striving after. Where darkness is pain, these are they who go forth to search for light.

Just now the pain is very real. From year to year it grows more acute, as the new life bruises itself in the darkness against the outworn forms that crush it back.

For many ages an individualizing process has been going on among us. A tendency has developed in the single human being to separate himself in his own consciousness, and consequently in his attitude and conduct, from his fellows; to look on himself not merely as a part of a group of kinsmen, or a patriarchal family, or a tribe, but as a distinct unit in the society to which he belonged, to count himself as one, and not merely a fraction. Gradually men have begun to recognize that each is, for himself, the center of all things; and as the conscious recognition of this fact has grown, the claims of the individual have grown with it. After a fight of many ages he has won freedom of opinion; now he is claiming freedom of action, the acknowledged responsibility of self-guidance. But, it may be objected, is such a self-centered individual still a social being, does not his claim to independence imply antagonism to his fellows? He is still so essentially social that life except in association is a misery, a mutilation to his nature. Unless his social instinct is fully gratified, his whole being is distorted and his existence a weariness, as we see in the case of the unsocial monopolists of power and property to-day. But the terms of the association must be enlarged for the free individual. They must acknowledge his full individuality. They must be rational, not arbitrary, or they become an insufferable bondage to be cast off at all costs.

* 'Socialism and Sex,' was published last year as a pamphlet (W. Reeves. 185 Fleet Street, E.C., price 2d.) and reviewed at length in *Freedom* for April 1887. In that review we pointed out our one difference with the author. We do not believe that the over-population difficulty will exist in a free communistic community, nor that the interference of even public opinion will be called for in the matter.

At the present time this process of individualization has advanced to such a point that every man of ordinary capacity thinks it right that he should manage his own personal affairs and be responsible for his own thoughts and conduct. He would consider it shameful that his family, or his relations, or the circle of families among whom he lives, should openly guide him and be responsible for him.

Every *man*, who is worthy to be called a man, thinks this; but not by any means every *woman*. Until the present generation, the family, in its narrowest modern sense (*i.e.*, the father, mother and children under age), has been the real unit of society. True, the man counted as one individual among other men; but he was always supposed to represent and control his wife and children.

Moreover within the narrowed family circle the ancient patriarchal communism still legally lingered down to the present decade, and the father possessed the right to administer the wealth of the whole group, no matter by whose labor it was gained.

The passing of the Married Woman's Property Act in 1883 was the first signal that the process of individualization had reached women, that the last composite or artificial social unit was being broken up by the development of humanity. Reactionary as our legislators are, they were driven at last to recognize that even a married woman is an individual human being who has a claim to independent existence, and not economically a mere appendage to some man, or fraction of a family group.

Driven, we say, but what drove them? There are two powerful forces at work in society, between which as between an upper and nether mill-stone the modern family system is being ground to powder. One is the mad race for wealth of our competitive industrialism. The other the spread of knowledge and education. The first is dissolving the family, as an economic group, and at the same time placing the possibility of economic independence within the grasp of women; the second is inspiring them with the desire to claim that independence and the capacity to use it.

Women's labor is cheaper than men's, not so much because they have less muscular strength or technical skill, as because they have married or unmarried prostitution as an alternative profession to productive labor; a providential circumstance of which the capitalist is delighted to avail himself. Hence modern mechanical invention tends more and more to create increasing facilities for women to become independent wage-earners, with smaller wages for men in consequence of female competition and the destruction of the family among the working class as a result. With the loss of his exclusive control of the common purse strings, the authority of the man is at an end so soon as the woman chooses to dispute it; and the education of a personal struggle with the world, and even such odds and ends of intellectual training as girls get now, all dispose our young women to rebellion.

An educated, thoughtful woman, whose mind has been trained to regard truth rather than custom as the measure of right, refuses as an educated thoughtful man refuses, to throw the responsibility of her life upon other people. She insists on guiding her own conduct and living according to her own nature and not some one else's idea of what that nature ought to be. She insists that the people with whom she is associated shall recognize her claim to a free expression of her individuality as equal to their own. She will not be deluded into an irrational self-mutilation by high-sounding commonplaces about duty and self-sacrifice. She will insist on knowing, weighing, deciding for herself according to her own instincts of self-development.

There are not many such women among us to-day; but there are ever-increasing numbers of women tending in this direction, as the spread of education puts the opportunity of mental growth within their reach.

The tendency to revolt is spreading, but the prospect before the rebels is dismal in the extreme. Those who have the courage of their opinions can as things are dispense with the insulting interference of church and state in their personal relations with their lovers; but what then? From chattel-slaves they have become wage-slaves. It requires a high courage to relish the sweets of economic independence when one's energy is largely absorbed by the cares of motherhood, and the merciless rush of competition perpetually reduces one's wages below starvation level. Yet this is the only prospect before the majority of emancipated women as long as our present economic condition lasts. The dread of it causes many a victim of marriage to smother her conscience and her suffering and hug her chains-many a girl who has had dreams of better things to sell her beauty and her soul because she is terrified by the difficulty of finding a market for her labor force. Women who are awake to a consciousness of their human dignity have everything to gain

because they have nothing to lose, by a Social Revolution. It is possible to conceive a tolerably intelligent man advocating palliative measures and gradual reform; but a woman who is not a Revolutionist is a fool.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Freedom Press (London)
The Marriage Controversy
October, 1888

Freedom: A Journal of Anarchist Socialism, Vol. 3, No. 25, online source RevoltLib.com,
retrieved on April 12, 2020.

theanarchistlibrary.org