



Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology

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PART IV

EARLY AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY

I. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* (1898)

“When the mother of the race is free, we shall have a better world.”

NOTE ON SOURCE: This passage is from Gilman’s book, *Women and Economics: A Study of the Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution*, published in 1898. Included here are excerpts from the first and last chapters.

Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

Charlotte Perkins Gilman is known for her critical views on the economic dependence of women. Her position was an unusual one at the time, linked as it was to a conception of the influence of social forces on what seemed like individual situations (e.g., marriage). Rather than argue that women should have the vote, Gilman argued that the gendered division of labor produced warped human beings (male and female). It is impossible to read her without also recognizing that she wrote within a current of eugenicist thinking, common to the period. Late nineteenth-century Reform Darwinism sought racial improvements through improved social arrangements and, at its most pernicious, better breeding (e.g., mate selection). In the passages included here Gilman uses “race” to mean both “the human race” and, sometimes, to hint at racial distinctions among humans. When reading, it may be useful to keep this mind, and to consider the historical connections between sociology, progressive reform, and evolutionary theory. Gender pronoun uses and references to “man” or “woman” have been retained as Gilman wrote them, as we can expect they were consciously intended.

Preface

This book is written to offer a simple and natural explanation of one of the most common and most perplexing problems of human life – a problem which presents itself to almost every individual for practical solution, and which demands the most serious attention of the moralist, the physician, and the sociologist.

To show how some of the worst evils under which we suffer, evils long supposed to be inherent and ineradicable in our natures, are but the result of certain arbitrary conditions of our own adoption, and how, by removing those conditions, we may remove the evils resultant.... It is hoped that the theory advanced will prove sufficiently suggestive to give rise to such further study and discussion as shall prove its error or establish its truth.

Chapter I.

Since we have learned to study the development of human life as we study the evolution of species throughout the animal kingdom, some peculiar phenomena which have puzzled the philosopher and moralist for so long, begin to show themselves in a new light. We begin to see that, so far from being inscrutable problems, these sorrows and perplexities of our lives are but the natural results of natural causes, and, that, as soon as we ascertain the causes, we can do much to remove them.

In spite of the power of the individual will to struggle against conditions, to resist them for a while, and sometimes to overcome them, it remains true that the human creature is affected by his environment, as is every other living thing.

Without touching yet upon the influence of social factors, treating the human being merely as an individual animal, we see that we are modified most by our economic conditions, as is every other animal. The sheep, the cow, the deer, differ in their adaptation to the weather, their locomotive ability, their means of defense; but they agree in main characteristics, because of their common method of nutrition.

The human animal is no exception to this rule. Climate affects us, weather affects us, enemies affect us; but most of all we are affected, like every other living creature, by what we do for a living.

In view of these facts, attention is now called to a certain marked and peculiar economic condition affecting humans, and unparalleled in the organic world. We are the only animal species in which the female depends on the male for food, the only animal species in which the sex-relations is also an economic relation. With us an entire sex lives in a relation of economic dependence upon the other sex, and the economic relation is combined with the sex-relation. The economic status of the human female is relative to the sex-relation.

It is commonly assumed that this condition also obtains among other animals, but such is not the case.

In the human species the condition is permanent and general, though there are exceptions, and the present century is witnessing the beginnings of a great change in this respect.

In studying the economic position of the sexes collectively, the difference is most marked. As a social animal, the economic status of man rests on the combined and exchanged services of vast numbers of progressively specialized individuals. The economic progress of the race, its maintenance at any period, its continued advanced, involve the collective activities of all the trades, crafts, arts, manufactures, inventions, discoveries, and all the civil and military institutions that go to maintain them. The economic status of any race at any time, with its involved effect on all the constituent individuals, depends on their world-wide labors and their free exchange. Economic progress, however, is almost exclusively masculine. Such economic processes as women have been allowed to exercise are of the earliest and most primitive kind. Were men to perform no economic services save such as are still performed by women, our racial status in economics would be reduced to most painful limitations.

To take from any community its male workers would paralyze it economically to a far greater degree than to remove its female workers. Men can cook, clean, and sew as well as women; but the making and managing of the great engines of modern industry, the threading of earth and sea in our vast systems of transportation, the handling of our elaborate machinery of trade, commerce, government – these things could not be done so well by women in their present degree of economic development.

This is not owing to lack of the essential human faculties necessary to such achievements, nor to any inherent disability of sex, but to the present condition of women, forbidding the development of this degree of economic ability. The male human being is thousands of years in advance of the female in economic status. Speaking collectively, men produce and distribute wealth; and women receive it at their heads.

The economic status of the human race in any nation, at any time, is governed mainly by the activities of the male: the female obtains her share in the racial advances only through him.

Women consume economic good. What economic product do they give in exchange for what they consume? In what way does she earn from her husband the food, clothing, and shelter she receives at his hands? By house service, it will be instantly replied. Although not producers of wealth, women serve in the final processes of preparation and distribution. Their labor in the household has a genuine economic value.

For a certain percentage of persons to serve other persons, in order that the ones so served may produce more, is a contribution not to be overlooked. The labor of women in the house, certainly, enables men to produce more wealth than they otherwise could; and in this way women are economic factors in society. But so are horses. The labor of horses enables men to produce more wealth than they otherwise could. The horse is an economic factor in society. But the horse is not economically independent, nor is the woman.

The labor which the wife performs in the household is given as part of her functional duty, not as employment. To take this ground and hold it honestly, wives, as earners through domestic service, are entitled to the wages of cooks, housemaids, nursemaids, seamstresses, or housekeepers, and to no more. This would of course reduce the spending money of the wives of the rich, and put it out of the power of the poor man to 'support' a wife at all. Nowhere on earth would there be "a rich woman" by these means. Even the highest class of private housekeeper, useful as her services are, does not accumulate a fortune.

But the salient fact in this discussion is that, whatever the economic value of the domestic industry of women is, they do not get it. The women who do the most work get the least money, and the women who have the most money do the least work.

Without going into either the ethics or the necessities of the case, we have reached so much common ground: the female of the human species is supported by the male. Whereas, in other species of animals, male and female alike graze and browse, hunt and kill, climb, swim, dig, run, and fly for their livings, in our species the female does not seek her own living in the specific activities of our race, but is fed by the male.

Now to the alleged necessity. Because of her maternal duties, the human female is said to be unable to get her own living. As the maternal duties of other females do not unfit them for getting their own living and also the livings of their young, it would seem that the human maternal duties require the segregation of the entire energies of the mother to the service of the child during her entire adult life, or so large a proportion of them that not enough remains to devote to the individual interests of the mother.

Such a condition, did it exist, would of course excuse and justify the pitiful development of the human female, and her support by the male. Is this the condition of human motherhood? Does the human mother, by her motherhood, thereby lose control of brain and body, lose power and skill and desire for any other work? Do we see before us the human race, with all its females segregated entirely to the uses of motherhood, consecrated, set apart, specially developed, spending every power of their nature on the service of their children?

We do not. We see the human mother worked far harder than a mare, laboring her life long in the service, not of her children only, but of men: husbands, brothers, fathers, whatever male relative she has; for mother and sister also; for the church a little, if she is allowed; for society, if she is able; for charity and education and reform, – working in many ways that are not the ways of motherhood.

In spite of her supposed segregation to maternal duties, the human female, the world over, works at extra-maternal duties for hours enough to provide her with an independent living, and then is denied independence on the ground that motherhood prevents her working!

The working power of the mother has always been a prominent factor in human life. She is the worker *par excellence*, but her work is not such as to affect her economic status. Her living, all that she gets – food, clothing, ornaments, amusements, luxuries – these bear no relation to her power to produce wealth, to her services in the house, or to her motherhood. These things bear relation only to the man she marries, the man she depends on, – to how much he has and how much he is willing to give her. The female of the human species is economically dependent on the male. He is her food supply.

Chapter 15.

The relation of the sexes, in whatever form, has always been observed to affect strongly the moral nature of mankind.

What we call the moral sense is an intellectual recognition of the relative importance of certain acts and their consequences.

No human distinction is more absolutely and exclusively social than the moral sense. Ethics is a social science. There is no ethics for the individual. Taken by himself, man is but an animal; and his conduct bears relation only to the needs of the animal – self-preservation and reproduction. Every virtue, and the power to see and strive for it, is a social quality. The highest virtues are those wherein we serve the most people, and their development in us keeps pace with the development of society. It is the social relation which calls for our virtues, and which maintains them.

Every social relation has its ethics; and the general needs of society, as a whole, are the basis of ethics. In every age and race this may be studied, and a clear connection established always between the virtues and vices of a given people and their local conditions. The principal governing condition in the development of ethics is the economic environment.

In the hunting and fighting period the best hunter and fighter was the best man, praised and honored by his tribe. To be patient and self-controlled was an economic necessity to the hunter: to bear pain and arduous exertion easily was a necessity to the fighter. Therefore, the savage, by precept and example, cultivated these virtues.

In the long agricultural and military periods we see the same things. In the peasant the virtues of industry and patience were extolled: it takes industry and patience to raise corn. In the soldier the virtues of courage and obedience were extolled, and in every one the virtue of faith was the prime requisite of the existing religion. Slowly the industrial era dawned and grew. With this change in economic conditions has changed the scale of virtues.

Physical courage has sunk; obedience, patience, faith, and the rest do not stand as they did. We praise and value today, as always, the virtues whereby we live. Every animal develops the virtues of his conditions; our human distinction is that we add the power of conscious perception and personal volition to the action of natural force.

All our virtues can be traced and accounted for. The great main stem of them all, what we call "love," is merely the first condition of social existence. It is cohesion, working among us as the constituent particles of society. Without some attraction to hold us together, we should not be able to hold together; and this attraction, as perceived by our consciousness, we call love. The virtue of obedience consists in the surrender of the individual will, so often necessary to the common good; and it stands highest in military organization, wherein great numbers of men must act together against their personal interests, even to the sacrifice of life, in the service of community.

As we have grown into fuller social life, we have slowly and experimentally, painfully and expensively, discovered what kind of man was the best social factor. The type of satisfactory member of society today is a man self-controlled, kind, gentle, strong, wise, brave, courteous, cheerful, true. In the Middle Ages, strong, brave, and true would have satisfied the demands of the time. We now require for our common good a larger range of qualities, a more elaborate moral organization. All this is a simple, evolutionary process.

But the moral development of humanity is a most tempestuous and contradictory field of study. [*Some virtues, like accuracy and punctuality, have been developed to suit our business activities while others remain to be developed.*]

Our condition may be described as consisting of a tenacious survival of qualities which we ought, on every ground of social good, to have long since outgrown; and an incessant struggle between these rudimentary survivals and the normal growth. We have felt within ourselves the pull of diverse tendencies [*and, needing an explanation for this, we made up "the devil", or located the trouble in "woman-kind."*]

[*Because of this, women were not allowed to develop the moral qualities to advance, confined instead to the "functional activities of her sex."*]

In keeping her on this primitive basis of economic life, we have kept half humanity tied to the starting-post, while the other half ran. We have trained and bred one kind of qualities into one-half the species, and another kind into the other half. And then we wonder at the contradictions of human nature! For instance, we have

done all we could, in addition to natural forces, to make men brave. We have done all we could, in addition to natural forces, to make women cowards. And, since every human creature is born of two parents, it is not surprising that we are a little mixed.

We have trained in men the large qualities of social usefulness which the pressure of their economic conditions was also developing. We have trained in women, by the same means, the small qualities of personal usefulness which the pressure of their economic conditions was also developing.

By dividing the economic conditions of women and men, we have divided their psychic development, and built into the constitution of the race the irreconcilable elements of these diverse characters.

The largest and most radical effect of restoring women to economic independence will be in its result in clarifying and harmonizing the human soul.

It is not alone upon woman, and, through her, upon the race, that the ill-effects may be observed. Man, as master, has suffered from his position also. The lust for power and conquest, natural to the male of any species, has been fostered in him to an enormous degree by this cheap and easy lordship. His dominance is not that of one chosen as best fitted to rule or one of ruling by successful competition, but is a sovereignty based on the accident of sex, and holding over such helpless and inferior dependents as could not question or oppose. When man's place was maintained by brute force, it made him more brutal; when his place was maintained by purchase, by the power of economic necessity, then he grew into the merciless use of such power as distinguishes him today.

Another giant evil engendered by this relation is what we call selfishness. Social life tends to reduce this feeling, but the sexual-economic relation fosters and develops it. To have a whole human creature consecrated to his direct personal service, to pleasing and satisfying him in every way possible – this has kept man selfish. Pride, cruelty, and selfishness are the vices of the master. No wonder that we are all somewhat slow to rise to the full powers of democracy, to feel full social honor and social duty, while every soul of us is reared in this stronghold of ancient and outgrown emotions – the economically related family.

When the mother of the race is free, we shall have a better world, by the easy right of birth and by the calm, slow, friendly forces of social evolution.

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion

1. Gilman declares that great changes regarding the economic subordination of women were taking place. How different are the state of things today? What explains these great changes? Do you think they are permanent?
2. What does Gilman mean when she says, "The male human being is thousands of years in advance of the female in economic status"? How is this different today?
3. Many later feminists have made the argument that women's labor in the household is as productive as men's, but that it has gone uncompensated (see Marilyn Waring's *If Women Counted*, for an example). What would Gilman say to this argument?

4. Some have argued that economic inequality is fair since/when based on the amount and quality of work an individual engages in. How does Gilman's argument about women's work and women's economic dependence undercut this argument? Explain how Gilman's perspective here is a deeply *sociological* one.
5. Where do our morals come from, according to Gilman? How does she compare here with Marx and Engels? With Durkheim? With Veblen?
6. Gilman often writes in the evolutionary vernacular of the day. How is this evolutionary perspective linked to her argument against the economic dependence of women? Is the argument satisfactory? How would a person today respond?