Modern Industrial Progress and Woman

A distinguished Austrian political economist, Prof. Joseph Schumpeter, Austrian exchange professor to Columbia University, professor of political economy at the University of Gratz, has prepared the following interesting treatise on changing industrial conditions in relation to woman. He holds that the lifting of the burdens of motherhood makes a great change in family life imperative.

If any public question is in process of being threshed out people soon cease to do any thinking of their own about it and have a way of settling down to repeating indefinitely sets of arguments which from the very fact of their logical weakness seem to derive an emotional force. This we can always observe when large issues are fought out. What we think about them is only handmaid to what we feel about them. But this is specially true in the particular case of the gallant fight for equality which our women are waging, for hardly anywhere else is there so much room for vague hopes and fears, and hardly another issue has so nasty a spike for the feelings of many of us.

Now I do not wish to argue on either side. All I want is to point out that all ideas and social institutions and habits, which have anything to do with the relations and relative positions of the sexes are determined by, or have a tendency to adapt themselves to, the general conditions under which a nation lives. We cannot hope—much as we may want to—to keep any social institutions—marriage, for instance—what it is at a given point of the long road of social evolution if those conditions change. As a matter of fact, though the name may remain the same, the institution of marriage and what it really means and implies is forever changing. There is as much difference between what it is to be married now and what it was to be married a few hundred years ago as there is between the Twentieth Century Limited and a saddle horse, although our legal definitions and our ideals of marriage have changed much less rapidly and thoroughly than the facts have. And there is some use in glancing over the historical evolution of the position of women to see how the necessities under which we have lived have shapened, together with everything else, also this particular element of our lives.

Woman in Primitive Times.

In primitive conditions the precariousness of the existence of the small clans that roamed about very much like herds of deer imposed on them the necessity of the strongest members of the group being always ready to fight an enemy or to hunt for food, specializing, as it were, in the profession of warrior and hunter and leaving everything else to the women.

This accounts for the position of women in primitive times. It is not quite exact to speak of their "subjection" or to style them "beasts of burden." They simply had a sphere of activity cut out for them, from which men were debarred just as much as they were debarred from joining his hunting expenditions. The tie of marriage was loose then, for the conditions of life were too unsettled to give it that stability which we find later, and the members of the clan were too much thrown together to admit of that strict privacy of family life which has been so potent a factor in shaping our lives in more civilized stages.

Still, manhood has always been more or less monogamic, and a very popular argument, which is so singularly out of place now, was quite true then—the argument that physical force is the foundation of the very existence of the social group and that it ought to give precedence in the management of the group.

Family life as we know it came into existence only much later, when people settled down on the land. It owes its origin to the fact that the house had become an economic point and that the ties of clanship lost steadily in importance. This, by the way, disposes of the argument that the family is the "cell" of the social group. The contrary is true. The family evolved out of a bigger group, it appeared comparatively late, and social groups have been able to get along without it for a very long spell of time. Well, when the family in our senes of the word, did come into existence, the place of the wife was again determined by inexorable necessities. And this meant, at that time, that the social position of women in general was so determined, for practically all of them were wives, a spinster being just as exceptional a phenomenon as a bachelor was then. They were, indeed, most unhappy exceptions, because married life was then the necessary basis of everything outside the walls of a convent. In their homes wives were supreme rulers.

They managed the whole of all those industrial functions which the rural household of the middle ages implied. They did what manufacturers and tradesmen do for them today. They produced, or supervised the production of most of what was consumed, of food, of clothing, in fact of everything from the raw material up to the final produce. So their day was well filled with work that had nothing trivial or subordinate about it, and if their husbands managed public affairs and represented their women folk in courts, they were probably quite pleased with it, looking at the arrangement simply as one of division of labor, and their advice was often asked for even in councils of war. Besides, there was another thing to take up their energies. Children were no economic burden; on the contrary, they were an asset. And the mortality in the first years of life was tremendous.

Return to the Past Impossible.

So it was nothing unusual for women to be mothers of twenty or even thirty children, which, of course, made the whole of their lives center in their motherhood and its duties. It may be observed, in passing, that in those times that ideal was formed of what a woman should be and of how she should think and behave, which still lingers in many minds and which still many of us want women to conform to, in spite of all conditions having passed away which created and justified that ideal.

For, needless to say, those conditions have passed away or are passing away, and they will never return. What I have called their industrial function has been taken away from women and has been reduced, or is being reduced, to fussing about menus, table decorations and similar problems. The peasant's wife is happier in this respect, for she still lives, to some extent, under those old conditions. The laborer's wife has never had much of a home. But all those women who have not got to go out to work now offer the most tragic case of unemployment ever witnessed, with all its effects on happiness and character.

And the folly of it! Whoever would think of preventing the men who drove the stage coaches and who have lost their jobs because the railroads crushed them out of existence, from looking for other jobs? Yet this is all that the hostility against the women's movement really amounts to. Here is perfect willingness to do useful work, and perfect ability to do it—and no scope for it or very much less scope than the biggest fool of a man has!

Future generations will, I believe, smile at our attempt to limit women to one profession, and a moribund one at that, just as we wonder at the frame of mind which in bygone days led people to arranging marriages without so much as consulting the women. Every one knows the state of things I am speaking of, though few will admit it. Least of all, the women themselves. They struggle hard, ever since the house ceased to be a little self-contained industrial world.

But that is not even so. I have emphasized the fact that of old a large amount of energy and vitality of women has been absorbed by child-bearing. Now the birth rate having steadily fallen for a multitude of causes, their available energy and therefore their wish to be doing something has been immeasurably increased. None of all these facts we can hope to alter. We cannot return to medieval conditions of life. We cannot undo the network of industrialism. The causes, therefore, of this movement are unalterable and the unrest must last until its objects are obtained.

Whatever our works and ideals, it is absurd to call the women's movement a whim, which will pass provided only it is not taken seriously and provided its symptoms are sternly put down. There are, and there always have been, political and social movements, and this is the right way to look at it. But the women's movement is not one of them; it is made of very different stuff. The sooner we recognize this the better. He is no statesman who does not see it and who does not know how to distinguish the women's movement from political bubbles.

It is a movement which it may be possible to guide, but which it is imperative to guide only toward its goal, for it will get there anyway. Let us apply this to the particular case of dealing with the question of suffrage, which is only one element of the much broader problem I have been speaking about and a comparatively insignificant one. Yet it is a step on a long road, a step which is absolutely unavoidable. The more men fight the suffrage the better the cause will prosper. All the resistance is good for is to show the power of the trend of things and to make the victory—which is sure to come—the more significant and dramatic.

The Family Viewpoint.

Why, then, fight out a losing battle? Why not give in as long as it can be done with some measure of dignity and grace? There has been rumors recently of the Austrian Prime Minister, Count Sturgkh, intending to bring a bill granting the suffrage to women not, indeed, before the Austrian Parliament, but at least before the provincial Diet of the Kingdom of Bohemia. Now there is, owing to the prevalence of rural conditions, no strong movement for the vote among the Austrian women. But as it is sure to grow strong before long and as there is really no good reason against it, the minister may think it the proper things to do to avoid needless struggles by going beyond the popular wish for a time. And if this be so, he is certainly setting an example for what statesmanship should be.

But how will all this affect the family? For an answer we need only look at patent facts. Already now the marriage rate is far below what it was. This is the natural consequence of the fact that marriage and family life are, on the one hand, less necessary, and offer, on the other hand, more difficulties to us than they did to those who went before us. It goes a long way to prove that family life, as we know and love it, is a creation of circumstances different to ours and that it cannot adapt itself to our environment without ever-increasing friction.

Far from me to see in marriage and family nothing but a bald economic necessity or to overlook or underrate all their ideal values. But ideals are flowers which only bloom on economic branches. Without metaphor, every ideal grows out of certain conditions of life and before it can be realized these conditions must first be given. This does not mean that family life will disappear right off. All we must expect to see is that with the family ceasing to be an economic necessity, the marriage rate will decline still more and family life in our sense of the word will undoubtedly be exposed to dangers which will grow as time wears on. But this is no fault of the women or of their struggle for equality; it is simply the result of those changes in the conditions of our lives which are the cause of both that struggle and that decline.

We may be sorry that things should draw the way they do. But after all, we must not look at the change as an unmixed evil. Married life, freed from economic expulsion, may well be expected to develop into something ethically higher and aesthetically fairer as far as it will survive. For it will then have to stand on its true merits and on what husband and wife are personally to each other. And there is hardly any reason to fear, as many people do, disastrous effects on morals.

On the contrary, morals will improve if anything, and many glaring evils we suffer from will be put a stop to. It really takes a lot of misapprehension to impute to the modern trend of things anything like an immoral tendency. Nor have religion or the social order anything to fear.

The new order of things which may come about will be new, but it will be an order all the same, capable of rules as definite as any we have now. But there is finally one comfort for all those who dread the passing of conditions, which they feel happy in and with which all that is best in them is associated, and that comfort is, that all changes come about slowly, step by step, and that family life will not die as long as there is a strong wish to keep it up. This work is even a symptom for the fact that the fatal hour has not arrived yet. And it would have to grow weaker and finally to vanish before present conditions can wear away.

Willing to Give Way.

A woman of fifty, made up to look about twenty-five years old, got aboard a street car at a crossing, to find every seat occupied. She stood for a moment and then, selecting a poorly dressed man about fifty-five years of age, she inquired: "Are there no gentlemen on this car?" "Indeed, I dunno," he replied, as he looked up and down. "If there ain't, and you are going clear through, I'll hunt up one for you at the end of the line." There was an embarrassing silence for a moment, and then a light broke in on him all of a sudden, and he arose and said: "You can have this seat, ma'am. I am allers perfectly willing to stand up and give my seat to anybody older than myself." That decided her. She gave him a look which he will not forget to his dying day, and, grabbing the strap, she refused to sit down, even when five seats had become vacant.

Why She Failed.

"Aunt Mary, why is it that you never married?"

"I suppose, my dear, it was due to my policy of watchful waiting."—Detroit Free Press.

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