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The Family As A Type Of Society

Charlotte Wilson

20 April 1886

Throughout the 17th Century, from the pedant James's time to the Middle-class revolution of 1688-9, there raged a controversy about the nature and sanction of government. Blows, and words heavy and fierce as blows were given and taken. A transient victory sometimes declared itself for one side, sometimes for another. One of these passing successes was more than ambiguous, and even a defeat, when a Commonwealth, as it thought itself, came to be administered by one absolute man, Master Cromwell.

The sides were taken for and against the divine or natural right of kings; or for and against the unquestionable and indefeasible right of kings, conferred, as Hobbes, a stout contemporary defender of government and authority, put it, by an irretrievable *plebiscite*, or vote of the whole people. This was government by consent which, strange to say, could not be withdrawn and by contract which could not be cancelled.

Hooker, "the judicious," as John Locke styled him, was on the same side, another supporter of monarchy, or external regulation of life by one or more rulers other than oneself; though

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he allowed himself to say that "to live by one (i.e., another) man's will is all men's misery." But, according to him the contract could be dissolved and the consent gainsaid, as an extreme measure, and in the last resort. He was reasonable, and as a judicious man indisposed to contradict and stultify himself. Yet this concession to common sense was evidently made with a grudge.

But, by far the most numerous, and at the same time be it said the most consistent upholders of monarchy, or generally of ARCHY (if one may be permitted to coin a word of which Anarchy or Anarchism is the denial), like "the learned" Sir Robert Filmer, founded their contention and claim upon the Family as the type of Society and social polity and economy. It is not our concern here, and it would be worse than useless, to expose the erratic erudition of this pundit. That has already been done to one's heart's content in the first of Locke's, his opponent's, "Two treatises of Government," in which, as Locke thinks "the false principles and foundation of Sir Robert Filmer and his followers are detected and overthrown."

We commend it to our readers, if they ever have an idle hour, or are not tired enough, as pastime or soporific. But what we want to lay stress on here, is that Sir Robert was right, and went wrong, and that he went wrong because he did not go farther. He did not carry his principle of the family life out to its issues and did not make the most of his foundation for upbuilding. The true human society can erect itself upon the family basis; or rather, it can grow from that root. It is enough, and there is no other.

And, when Locke, in his haste to controvert Filmer and his like, and to project the middle-class Constitution of 1689, denied Filmer's premiss as well as his conclusions, he cut himself away from his own roots. He was like a man sitting on a branch, and sawing it off from the living trunk. The basis he proposed to substitute is an impossible one, and never existed. The social

This autonomous commune of autonomous units, the springs of whose life are in reasonable good will, is Anarchism realized. Anarchy is just, reasonable and kind home-rule. It may be a very high and apparently almost too high ideal. But the higher we aim, the higher we strike, even if we miss the highest once and again. Life is growth. Anarchism will grow to be. Everything is solved by just going on, and still going on. The ideal gives the right direction, and power to follow on.

There is also a counterstroke to be noted here; for the true social life that has grown out of the completed family life will react upon family life generally and upon both its stages, but in a marked degree upon the first inchoate stage. Life is an ascending spiral movement, and on a higher spire the details of the lower repeat themselves in new higher and richer shape. This applies here; but any full consideration of this transfiguring reaction of the wider general life upon the narrower family life must be reserved.

Suffice it to say that it will be by way of assimilating the first family stage to the second, of smoothing the transition from the one to the other, and of softening and shading off the edge of division between family life as a whole, and the common social life. It will be a letting of fresh air and light in upon the whole idea and practice of the family. All this waits for illustration.

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It is mongrel or hybrid, and all the more monstrous on that account, because it is a cross between the old imperial slave and serf-holding idea and some stray and fragmentary notions of genuine Anarchist liberty that have chanced to be picked up by the wrong handle and are only half understood and less than half applied. Hence, the individuality of modern civilization is mere empty individualism, another name for isolation and collapse, and its society is but a masked war of all against all.

When civilization vanishes, Society will appear. It is not as if it had to come. It is really here already in its fair beginnings. But it is hidden, bound and suffocated by civilization. It is our business then to strip off civilization, to dissolve it, to applaud every solvent of this crust, that fetters and chokes the creative free spirit and goodwill of man.

Every one, be he ever so private a man or woman, may be doing something to this end. Opportunity is always with us. Perhaps we fail to see it always, because sometimes it is too close to us. All the same, this kind of disintegrating conduct is never out of season. Some ways of it we hope to show another day.

But, dwell now, upon the true Society, based upon, or rather naturally growing out of, what the family is meant to be, what it is at its best and ripest, and when it has come quite to itself.

A society of free equals, of friendly men and women, who know how to give and take, understand sharing, and the community of work, rest, and enjoyment, who crave for no dominion or appropriation, knowing each one to be as divinely here as any is here, recognising that those, who, like children in the natural course or like what are now called criminals by misbreeding or misadventure, are not yet in Society, are only worthy of nurture and healing to the end that they may enter the Commune, where their brothers and sisters, awaiting their coming, are free and a law unto themselves.

contract, whether of Hooker, Hobbes, Locke or Rousseau, is a fiction of constitution-mongers which has no place in history.

Filmer was right. The family, rightly understood, and taken in its full development, is the social and civil type, sole and sufficient. Society is a growth and not a manufacture. States, Governments, and all other forms of usurpation and appropriation, whether these are the dominion of one or of a few or of the most, and whether over our life or the means of living, are also growths. They are outgrowths and expansions of the family life in its incomplete stage—truncated side-issues—cases of arrested development.

Our historical retrospect has been of use if it has brought us to see that all history is essentially of a piece, and that wherever you cut into it and take out a slice, you find the same struggle going on between true and false Society and true and false theories of association. The 17th Century repeats itself with variations and expansions and advances in the 19th Century, and we may learn lessons from the old-time controversy in taking the right side now.

We shall not be with Locke and those of his way, at all; and we shall be with Filmer only in part and so far forth as his principle, the family life. But we shall not halt with him, when he halts. We shall not call leaves fruit, nor caterpillars butterflies.

For the family is a life, life is procession or growth, and living process has stages or steps. The family, as we usually understand it without due reflection, is only *the first stage of the family*, wherein it is imperfect, falling short of its aim and end, that is to say, of its truth and full reality. This is the grub and cocoon stage. Or it may be said, the tree if life is as yet only in its leafage—a promise unfulfilled.

It consists of father, mother and children. The father is governor, having authority and dominion. His will and word are the law of the household. He has the father's power, the *patria-potestas* on which the whole Roman Civil Law and the derivative jurisprudence of modern states are founded. The land, the

house, the wife and children are his. These last are not yet their own. They are his. He is landowner, householder, and proprietor. He, like LOUIS XIV. is the State. He is the father of his country, and of his people, like the kings of Homer and Sir Robert Filmer who are derived from him.

The wife may be under coverture, as the lawyers say; the children are in tutelage. They are under his governance—for their good perhaps—it may be, for the common good of all. That depends on whether the development is going to be arrested at this stage or not. Yet, even in the natural family at this point of its growth, there are prophecies of fulfilment, and germs of promise of better things.

And in themselves these are already alleviations and temperings and counter-weights. Authority is kind; commands are reasonable. The children are not expected to make bricks without straw. The father gives them what they need, and does not require of them more than they are fit for. The rule of the house is not "To each according to his works," but according to his needs, and from him according to his faculty. The father does not exploit them.

There is no bargaining for what they shall have in return for what they do. They do not compete for livelihood, the weaker going to the wall. In all these respects, the family is a commune, if it is in other respects an autocracy, though benevolent, generous, and genial.

But in the natural course of things, the children will grow up to manhood and womanhood, and then will be *the perfect state of the family*, and it will show what it was meant to be all along, unless it is rudely hampered and hindered by the strong brute hand resisting the stream and purpose of nature. All are now equally adult. The father and mother fall into their true place as equals with the rest. They have become brother and sister of the brothers and sisters. The children have risen to the father's level, bearing up their mother with them.

Their emancipation is hers also. They are now themselves and their own. There is now perfect equality and community. None waits any longer to be given, but takes what he needs, and each does what he can without command. There is spontaneity and autonomy now; and Society—or true association of equals free and brotherly—has appeared in its first and unitary form. *The final stage of family life is the first form of Social life.*

But what of arrest? It must equally be said, that the first and incomplete stage in the evolution of the family, when arrested, and therefore shorn of its promising features, which have withered and fallen away like buds frost-bitten, is the first form and prototype of the State, the Church, and of Society as it is, consisting of proprietors and the expropriated, of capitalist exploiters and their wage-earning serfs, of governors and subjects. All these are the legitimate offspring of the spurious because frustrated family—the natural and inevitable development of an arrested development—themselves monstrous and mutilated because their parent was so.

For when the family is arrested at the first stage, the spirit of dominion and the habit of domineering and appropriating are at once established; and these go a-field for further sustenance and exercise. The father who is lord and master seeks to be the father of two or more families. He becomes the chief, the king. Moved by the same spirit and habit now grown inveterate, the tribal chiefs go to war in the hope of coming home bigger fathers. But wars bring captives, and captives become servants and slaves. And this servile element once introduced into the family or tribe, the arrest of development has become final.

Renewal of growth, and advance towards fulfilment of the family ideal of a society of equals and friends are inhibited and rendered quite impossible. There is no more passage this way to freedom and equity. For, here is the school and hotbed of Greek slave-owning Republics, of Roman domestic and agrarian slavery, of mediaeval serfdom, and of the present mongrel hypocrisy which calls itself civilization.