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From Marriage

Gustav Landauer

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In his essay “Women’s Rights”, comrade Erich Mühsam has taken a stand on which I do not wish to follow him. In the statements against which he is undoubtedly entitled to object, even if he is completely wrong, I have not mentioned women’s rights in the slightest. Of course, women should have all the rights he demands for them, and even more, except for the right to have children about whose father they are in some doubt. This right should also be granted to them, and I have no doubt that so-called men will always be found who are willing to help them exercise this right.

Having a right means not being prevented by force from doing or not doing something. So nothing that deals with that can affect me. I do not need force and do not invoke it. But Mühsam is already entering the realm of freedom when he speaks of the conventions, customs, judgments and prejudices of our society.

Right is already against right: the Philistines have the right to have opinions, to choose their company, to express their opinion, and the anti-Philistines have the right not to worry about it. Yes, he can answer, but one must not remain silent about what others think and do, even if they are entitled to do so; one can get excited

and upset, take action against it, etc. Very true; and that is what I have done. And I have made use of the right to choose according to my own thinking, which I cannot ignore and which, on the other hand, has no particular significance for me — at the moment.

Mühsam took my remarks completely out of their context, measured them as they were against his opinions, which belong to a different context, and found that they were two different things and did not fit together. And here again he is right. So it remains for me to put what I said even more noticeably into the train of thought in which it belongs, and to firmly ask that it be left where it belongs. I sincerely hope that these statements will have an impact on a very serious matter, even on those who may still be hesitant at first. Thoughts can only be effective if they are understood. I will try to speak even more clearly.

* * *

I speak of marriage and family and say that they are completely voluntary unions and that the culture we want to help build is based on them. On the other hand, I have not spoken at all about monogamy and polygamy. In truth, monogamy is monogamy, that is, the life partnership between a man and a woman, and polygamy is polygamy, that is, the life partnership between a man and several women or a woman and several men.

On the other hand, what our moderns like to call “polygamy” or polygamous tendencies, in a strange misinterpretation of the word, are celibate love relationships. I say nothing for or against them; only when they are touted to us as a socialist replacement for the outdated “bourgeois” marriage do they belong in my context, which is about the very real creation of a very real society; marriage is necessary for that. Marriage; so it could also be polygamy. It does not even occur to me to say anything against them or to disparage the Muslim culture compared to ours.

A society of high culture can be based on polygamy just as well as monogamy; and polygamy is just as solid a structure of order as the core and origin of society that we have inherited.

I don't want to know anything about a socialism in which the parental home is abolished and the real father is replaced by an ideal father in heaven or in the community council. Do we know whether we can tolerate what is now beginning to rage as a substitute for the missing spirit within the institutions of coercion and domination that have taken its place: the freedom of irresponsible pleasure? Whether the most horrific torment and desolation, the most frail weakness and dull lack of energy must not result from all this? The spirit needs freedom and carries freedom within itself: where the spirit creates unions such as family, cooperatives, professional groups, communities and people, there humanity will, there it will have established the supporting form of all social unions, from the freedom and bondage of individuals filled with the spirit, seized by their strongest natural drive: marriage. Marriage was; it is, even if rare enough; it will be.

ist to understand the things that each person regards as his own private affair, as his own personal misfortune or as something he likes, in their interconnectedness. When I say: in our conditions our proletarians are becoming dull, submissive, crude, superficial and to an ever increasing extent drunk, is that an attack on the personal freedom of anyone? Well, I also say that it is a characteristic of our time that, along with the old religion and morality, large sections of the population have lost all stability, all holiness, all firmness of character; that the family has been eaten away by destruction; that women have been swept into the whirlpool of superficial sensuality, of colorful, decorative greed for pleasure; that the natural, reckless proliferation of the population in all sections of the population, guided by science and technology, is being replaced by childless sexuality. that among the proletarians and the bourgeoisie, gypsyism is taking hold of the better people, who can no longer bear to do joyless work under the prevailing conditions; I say that all this is no longer just social, a relationship between people, in all levels of society, but is beginning to affect individual bodies and make people neurasthenic, hysterical or even more seriously ill. All these are necessary descriptions of our situation; and there is no other way of dealing with all this than the renewal of the spirit, society and bodies, which we summarize as socialism. And so I speak as the epitome of a multitude of individual phenomena that come together to form a unity, a community or interaction, of the degenerate, unfettered and uprooted women and their entourage of men who proclaim promiscuity, who want to replace the family with the pleasure of variety, the voluntary bond with boundlessness, and the fatherhood with state maternity insurance. Whether it's a bakery or not, in cultures where men are not satisfied with the role of nameless stallion, and even among higher mammals, children are not taken out of the oven and do not come from the sultry breeding ground of gypsy festivals and carnival mornings, but they have a father and a mother.

But I need not talk about it any further, because it does not belong to our past or present. What the communists want is not the same as polygamy, it was originally a third structure of order, which I propose to call community marriage, and today, like all communism, it has degenerated into disjointed dilettantism. The institution of marriage is therefore so ineradicable and has long been the solid foundation of every social order, because it has much less of the accidental and artificial about it than the other associations of togetherness that rely on it. No matter how powerful the community spirit that creates and fills communities or interest groups of any kind, no matter how magnificent the works of art that arise as their symbols, all the necessity that is imprinted on them always stems from the element of love.

But love has become inseparably bound to marriage and has filled it, which is after all only a social construct for practical purposes, with the necessity of an animal-divine nature. All our intimacy, all our sacredness, all our fantasy and mysticism, all our religion resides in this union of the two sexes with the offspring that arise from their union, and so does all our lust and animal delight. This has nothing to do with it and is not affected at all by the fact that men and women sometimes foam up with more or less intense eroticism before or alongside marriage.

We do not need to let our sad jokers and miserable farce producers persuade us that every lovely little affection or sensually colored friendship or flaring passion is adultery. When a mature man and a girl who has grown into great love — regardless of whether they have shared romantic longing and engagement or whether love only came in marriage — have joined together in marriage, their will to be together and their agreement become so firm that they are inseparably bound, although each is an individual and can experience things of their own in every area, including things that hurt and must hurt the other party. We suffer from many false and bad conventions, but no convention is worse than adultery and the usual separation that follows from it.

Something else is what I would like to call pre-marriage: immature people often need it in our circumstances and often only come to themselves in this premature union and from it to true marriage. Everything that arches like an ideal heaven over the practice of our social life: all the madness that lives in religion, philosophy and art, in the soldierly march or in the revolutionary hymn, is therefore so powerful, the community spirit is so superior to all artificial and violent or clever creations, that this genuine society is founded on the structure of marriage and that in marriage something reigns and has taken shape which is at the same time the purpose of man and the force of nature: the vehement and indomitable drive of the sexes towards each other, the memory and desire of man for woman and woman for man.

Since our mind is memory and since nothing in us, our memory, is as strong as the memories of nature, which we are, it is no wonder that we are not like animals, in which the memory of sex awakens again and again and again sinks. The animal has mating seasons, and afterwards the dream of love is over again; other memory powers or instincts have repressed it. But man always and everywhere has the present memory of sex and therefore transfers eroticism to everything; man and woman mate for the reason of love, not just for the purpose of reproduction; sexual love lives in relationships with children and grandchildren, and so we think everything we think with erotic coloring: sex stirs in us when we look at a tree, when we are active in thought or creation, when there is friendship between man and man or woman and woman. There is no mention of any contrary feelings or of all the things that have been invented today by hasty and obliging half-scientists, by those and for those who do not have one very essential thing in their thinking or in their nature: gradation and difference in degree: harmony. This is how we see this double: just as love already permeates all our individual actions and actions by nature, from our kind of memory, so love again fills all our community institutions from marriage.

The first socialist to turn from religion to nature, from communism to individualism, from the community of women to marriage, from the dullness of the religious fog, which was no longer genuine but artificial, to clarity of mind, was Proudhon. But in his time Proudhon saw the same picture that we see again today. He experienced, as we do, the mental and social constitution from which communist tendencies in our time arise. There is no possibility of communism; the intellectual preconditions are lacking that would allow it to even make the beginnings, which would then again fail because of nature. But the necessity for a kind of proletarian-gypsy imitation and distortion of communism lies in the decrepitude and intellectual and social decay of our time. Real communism would be a solid structure of order; Gypsyism is disorder and instability, just as everyday communism, which is not based on sects or communities, is impotent dilettantism and mostly just chatter. The resistance to marriage, to this free union, to this devotion and this coming together for life, in which resistance is often made into a virtue and a propaganda out of necessity, is a symptom of chaotic disintegration.

To make a new theory and sexual ethic out of the plight of mothers who are abandoned by their impregnating fathers and are left to misery, which is propagated under the name of maternity protection and which, as I said, wants nothing more than to abolish fatherhood, I call this a worrying sign of the intellectual and social decline of our time. I am not thinking of criticizing anyone's private life or giving them advice; but it is the task of the social-

and Young Germany, who were already very rhetorical. I will not go into the passage to which Mühsam refers, however; the fact that he quotes the difficult-to-understand words incompletely and leaves out the important opening passage suggests to me that he did not understand them when he took them as entirely appropriate to his case. Rahel represents a truly powerful ferment and confusion of a great nature; she was significant in her thinking, namely in the activity of thinking; what was thought, the content that resulted from this passionately practiced activity, does not always need to be taken too solemnly.

the spirit and its fantasies and its social embodiments arise from love, from separate and exclusive love. So religion must always submit to nature and accept individuals and individual marriages as the basic form of society.

Christian love, universal love, only becomes social reality in community love; and the institutions of this Christian love are always destroyed by the institution of natural sexual love: marriage. But what has always prevailed in all ages is particularly true for our time. We have no religion and therefore cannot attempt communism. Our socialism is based on individuals; our communities should be based on families. Our community spirit can derive its intimacy, its strength, its passion and its action from no other delusion than the separate and exclusive natural delusion of sexual love. How it does this does not need to be asked here. Here we are not talking about processes in the consciousness of the individual, but about the back and forth between people. But we have already mentioned the memory that, in ever more subtle gradations, carries the love from marriage over to the community, the people, humanity. Anyone who finds this too mysterious may express the same thing in other words by saying that happiness in the home and the health of a close community enables us to live in justice and to improve our community life.

When socialism arose again in our times, it was initially connected with a religious reaction against the French Enlightenment, against Voltaire. One cannot understand Fourier, the Saint-Simonists, Pierre Leroux and others if one does not know that their communism and their women's community were connected with the attempt to invent some kind of theocracy, a new state religion. These early socialists could not imagine a solution to social questions without common property in the economy and love.²

² The brilliant Rahel Varnhagen was also influenced by this camp, as well as by the German Romantics, who were full of similar ideas, but without the real urge to achieve them, and by the intermediary members of the Romantics

Marriage and family cannot be separated from one another. Whatever real society still exists or already exists in the past, present and future, as I wish it and as I help to build it, alongside the violent institutions of the state and the robbing institutions of parasitism, is based on man and woman living together, managing their affairs together and caring for themselves and their children together.

If everything that people do with each other in times of the community spirit is colored by love, then, once again, there is no universal love. Society is not and should not be based (it should not be, by my will) on equality, on the strength of feeling towards all people; where there is no clear and decisive gradation, there can be nothing but weakness and decay. My house, my castle! My house, my yard and garden, my wife and my children — my world! I wish that all larger bodies that arise from it, first of all the community and the professional association, should be based on this feeling, on this exclusive sense of belonging, on this free union, on this small community, on this natural community. They too will then call out to everyone else out there in the other world: our community; you others leave us in peace; we are free and autonomous in what concerns us. And so the more comprehensive associations, going ever further.

What we socialists want, who want to build society rather than the state, is to unite not by force but by spirit, and this is based on the free, independent individual. It is not a demand on any powers, but a mighty fact of nature that every individual stands alone as if in empty air. The world is embodied in him, he relates everything to himself, he allows everything to come to him, to pass through him and feeds on it.

How, on the basis of what impulse can this egoist nevertheless unite freely with his fellow men in community? Never merely out of prudence, out of utility, out of intelligent calculation of common interests. He must be permeated, completely filled, carried away and overwhelmed by something. From time to time something of

this kind has come over people with demonic compulsion: a religion.

Communism was connected with every genuine religion; and genuine communism only exists among religious people. This is why real, reasonable, humanly possible communism exists today only in scattered religious sects. Religious communism finds the individual and the small figure of the individual family, which is not a legal, i.e. moral or artificial-social, but a natural person of the second power, a new individual, hateful and repugnant.

This exclusivity or egoism of the individual and the family is destroyed by the divine power of empathy with the universe. No universal love prevails; religion cannot achieve the impossible, and religion is strength and buoyancy, not decay and weakness. But the community that gathers around the Lord's table is the bond that binds the individuals into a solid structure; and nothing can come between the community and the individual. The private property of the individual ceases; everything is gathered in a common fund; or there is no money at all; everyone works together and eats together. In place of the marriage between man and woman comes the complete community of women and children of the community that is fervently religious towards one another. Thus communism and the community of love have always been connected with one another, always with religion.¹

¹ The demand for a community of goods, women and children can, as is well known, already be found in Plato's state utopia, where it most likely came via various detours from oriental sects. — This rule was taught and lived in a multitude of "heretical" sects of Christianity. It found a particularly clear expression in the 16th century in the pantheistic sect of the libertines in Geneva. A libertine, Benoile Ameaux, the wife of a councillor, defended herself before the Genevan consistory as follows: The community of saints is only complete when all things are common: goods, houses and the body. It is just as hard-hearted for a woman to reject a man who desires sexual union with her as it is for a poor man to be denied food and drink. — Among the Mormons, this very strange sect that arose in the 19th century, polygamy is linked to a strange contempt for women: women are only supposed to share in the full blessing of salvation by being sealed to a saint,

What is called communism and free love today, especially among the so-called communist anarchists, is amateurish enthusiasm without any possibility of existence and without any sense of reality and realization. Communism and the love community or community marriage of the religious have always been possible and reasonable at times: in this third form of marriage, too, there is a firm order, the possibility of larger unions that are built on top of it. But this real communism, borne by a demonic spirit, has failed again and again, hardly ever getting beyond the attempt. It did not perish because of the state or the church; these were often just external helpers of inner necessity. The decline of religious power was to blame: nature overthrew religion.

Why is real communism not viable in the long term? Because there is one thing that is even more powerful than the blow of religious madness: nature.

Nature, which has created us individuals as realities — here we are speaking in images; what else can we speak of? No one needs to tell me that there is no personified nature that has created — nature that does not leap over itself and its primal drives, does not allow itself to be blown together in the long run with a religious storm. There are individuals, and the individual finds the universe and humanity entirely within itself; it needs its fellow human beings in the same way that it needs the whole world: through the senses for knowledge, as food for consumption, so the individual needs the world, so it is the world.

Half the world: for the world is only complete in the human couple, in man and woman. Nature cannot be replaced by a spirit form, even of the most demonic and compelling kind, which it itself has already created as an eternal necessity: the love that drives us beyond our individuality is never permanently the child of the spirit; the true, the inverse relationship is always established: that

i.e. by being married, and for the sake of Christian mercy the saint is required to marry several to take soul women.