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Introduction: Charlotte Perkins Gilman on the Sociology of Families, Marriages, and Children

Michael R. Hill

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, michaelhilltemporary1@yahoo.com

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Introduction:

Charlotte Perkins Gilman on the Sociology of Families, Marriages, and Children

Charlotte Perkins Gilman died in 1935, but she remains today a provocative sociological writer; she makes us think, argue, and question our preconceptions, especially with regard to marriage and family. Several posthumous volumes of Gilman's work have been produced and it has been my pleasure to help present three of Gilman's (1997, 2002, 2004) major sociological writings to new generations of readers in English. As noted in the preface, it has been a special honor to acquaint an audience of Italian readers with a selection of her powerful writings on families, marriages, and children.¹ The present volume joins a small but growing collection of translations of Gilman's works into Italian. Gilman's classic work, *Women and Economics*, was early translated into Italian (1902), and is followed recently by translations of *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1976), *Herland* (1980), and a collection of tales (2008). An intriguing digital experiment is the new Italian thesaurus edition of *Our Androcentric Culture, or The Man-Made World* (2008). A recent book-length exposition, in Italian, on Gilman's life and work is provided by Laura Moschini (2006). My goal for Italian readers, in selecting and editing the exemplars in the present volume, was to provide each reader with insightful and often trenchant examples of Gilman's sociological analyses and judgments about one of our most central social institutions: the family. Now, thanks to Transactions Publishers, these lively and insightful selections are also made more readily available to English readers.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) was a pioneering sociologist, feminist pragmatist, author, and lecturer. She was born in Hartford, Connecticut, and attended the Design College of Providence, Rhode Island. Her sociological education was largely self-taught. Gilman supported herself through writing and lecturing. She was a three-month resident and frequent visitor at Hull-House, Jane Addams' sociological settle-

ment in Chicago, during 1895-96. Gilman was an active member of the American Sociological Association and presented papers at professional meetings of the association. One of her major accomplishments was the ability to explain sociological concepts and principles using the media of fiction and non-fiction alike.

Reading Gilman from a Sociological Perspective

Gilman is not always easy to read—she can infuriate, astound, and perplex—but she always engages and often amuses her readers. Writing in an earlier time distinguished by different sensibilities and problems, Gilman brilliantly transcends her era and speaks insightfully to twenty-first-century readers about many lively social issues. Gilman's central strengths are her penetrating sociological analyses of marriage, motherhood, and family relationships—the focus of the selections in this volume. Gilman's wit, astute skill as a writer, and forthright language make her work especially accessible—and intriguing. Gilman never hides her conclusions behind sociological jargon, as do many writers today.

One key to understanding Gilman's work is to grasp her specifically sociological purpose and persona. Several full-length biographies and scholarly studies address Gilman's productive and controversial career, but—as they are written primarily by literary critics rather than social scientists—most fail miserably to articulate her work and perspective as a professional sociologist. A few American sociologists have recently rediscovered Gilman, and their analyses are, by contrast, cogent and germane. The most penetrating is Mary Jo Deegan's (1997) lengthy essay on "Gilman's Sociological Journey from *Herland* to *Ourland*." Additional, specifically sociological interpretations of Gilman's work are found in: Clara Cahill Park (1936); Alice S. Rossi (1973); Bruce Keith (1991); my analytical synopsis of *Herland* (Hill, 1996); Patricia Lengerman and Jill Niebrugge-Brantly's (1998) chapter on Gilman; R.A. Sydnie and Bert N. Adams' (2000) discussion in *Sociological Origins*; Hill and Deegan (2002, 2004); and my brief biographical sketch (Hill, 2007).

Gilman was a prolific and significant author. She is undoubtedly one of the more consequential women writers of the twentieth century and her (1892) semi-autobiographical story, "The Yellow Wall-Paper," is today one of the top-selling texts used in American literature courses across the USA. In all, Gilman wrote more than 2,000 published works, including the entire contents of each monthly issue of *The Forerunner*, a sociologically astute journal that she wrote, edited, and published from 1909 to 1916. It is a special treat that the selections in this volume,

save one, are drawn from the difficult-to-find issues of *The Forerunner*. Gilman's many books and principal autobiographical materials include: *Women and Economics* (1898); *Concerning Children* (1900); *The Home* (1903); *Human Work* (1904); *The Man-Made World* (1911); *His Religion and Hers* (1923); a lively autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1935); *Herland* (1979); *The Diaries of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1994); *A Journey from Within: The Love Letters of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1897-1900* (1995); *With Her in Ourland* (1997); *The Dress of Women* (2002); and *Social Ethics: Sociology and the Future of Society* (2004). For a useful and virtually complete bibliography, see Gary Scharnhorst's (1985) detailed compilation.

Gilman's Challenges to Twenty-First Century Readers

Gilman challenges her readers on at least three temporal and theoretical levels. The first regards the continuing relevance of Gilman's analyses of past patterns to the lived realities of today. To what extent, and in what instances, do Gilman's empirical findings still hold without modification? The second concerns Gilman's forward-looking critiques, projections, and programmatic suggestions. In which specific cases, to date, has Gilman been proved wrong-headed or essentially correct? The third, and most important, level pertains to the viability of Gilman's overall theoretical framework. That is, if Gilman were alive and writing today, what would she logically conclude and instrumentally advise about the patterns of family, marriage, and motherhood that we currently observe? Do we find her conclusions helpful and practical? Each reader of this volume will find many passages that resonate and others that outrage, but the fundamental challenge is to assess Gilman's perspective as a constructive and progressive whole, to identify and evaluate the basic principles that give cohesion and coherence to her sociological vision.

The word choices made by Gilman a hundred years ago have not been altered in this volume, and this requires sensitivity and understanding on the part of the reader in two special instances. It behooves us to realize that when Gilman employed the terms "race" and "primitive" she was rarely ethnocentric, and never perversely bigoted. Gilman almost always employed "race" inclusively, to mean all "humanity" and "the human race" to reference all members of *homo sapiens*. In other instances, "race" refers to identifiable culture groups or societies having distinctive, recognized social patterns that may have been more or less enlightened, but *not* to erroneous presumptions about biological superiority or genetic inferiority. Today, Gilman would likely use alternative constructions and

terminology to convey her intended meanings. Rather than refer to “the Japanese race,” for example, she would likely mention “the Japanese people,” or simply “the Japanese.”

The term “primitive,” as used by Gilman, refers simply to the reality that not all social groups possess the technological, medical, and scientific knowledge characteristic of “modern” societies. Gilman clearly affirms the potential for social progress and steadfastly opposes racial bigotry. She believed firmly in the fundamental humanity and brotherhood of all peoples. This does not mean, however, that she side-stepped her strongly felt obligation to criticize specific groups, cultures or institutionalized practices that she judged to be harmful, undemocratic, repressive, or reactionary.

Finally, a note on the editing and preparation of the essays in this book: With help from copyeditors at Transaction, I have corrected obvious typographical/typesetting errors that appeared in previously published versions. Similarly, punctuation is modernized in those places where the effect is unobtrusive and contributes to readability without impairing Gilman’s distinctive style and cadence. The now peculiar time-bound spellings of Gilman’s era, her archaic word choices, and her sometimes-dramatic use of capitalization are generally allowed to stand.

Gilman on the Family

In writing about family as a core social institution, Gilman clearly understood that her readers’ biases about family are likely deep and strong. When discussing the family, she observed:

[W]e are confronted...with the most sensitive, powerful, universal, and ancient group of emotions known to man. This complex of feelings, tangled and knotted by ages of ironbound association; fired with the quenchless vitality of the biological necessities on which they rest; intensified by all our conscious centuries of social history; hallowed, sanctified, made imperative by recurrent religions; enforced with cruel penalties by law, and crueler ones by custom; first established by those riotous absurdities of dawning ethics, the sex-taboos of the primitive savage, and growing as a cult down all our ages of literature and art; the emotions, sentiments, traditions, race-habits, and fixed ideas which center in the home and family—form the most formidable obstacle to clear thought and wise conclusion.²

If, on first reading, the selections in this volume seem puzzling or difficult to comprehend, it is worth asking if the underlying problem may lie, at least in part, with the reader’s unexamined defenses against ideas that challenge his/her deepest emotions and cultural biases.

The Organization of This Volume

The selections in this volume are arbitrarily divided into four thematic groups. While each selection is distinctive, each links conceptually into Gilman's wider understanding of society, family, marriage, and children. For Gilman, patriarchal thinking too often prevents the family *as a social pattern* from contributing constructively to the wider social good. The home is anchored in a massive nexus of institutional patterns wherein traditional male prerogatives have significant consequences for everyday life in families. In order to improve family life, Gilman argues, it is necessary to reform the overall society in which families exist. These results are interactive and cumulative, Gilman hypothesizes. Thus, better family life leads, in turn, to a more humane and progressive society. Within her general framework, the following themes may be discerned.

Family, Home, and Society

Today's family, posits Gilman, is not so much a naturally-occurring pattern of social organization as it is a distinctly *man-made* institution that privileges men over women (selection 1). Males, Gilman asserts, have usurped the original matriarchal basis of society; the family, as a social institution has been reshaped for the direct and continuing benefit of patriarchal men. In Gilman's 1909 address to her colleagues in the American Sociological Society (selection 2), she outlines the social factors that affect the home which, in turn, affect the family. Of special interest to Gilman are what she calls (1) the "material" (or physical and economic) aspects of society and (2) the role or position of women in society as a whole. In societies where large numbers of women live in poverty and/or affluence, in separately organized domiciles, the result for children is dreadful. This selection reveals Gilman as a professional sociological theorist talking frankly with her peers.

In an imaginative sociological parable on "ancestors" (selection 3), Gilman conducts a sociological thought experiment in which the main protagonist looks back through time to see *all* of his distant family relations. Tracing one's "roots" is a serious passion for many genealogists, a religious issue for members of the Church of Latter Day Saints, and a source of pride for members of organizations like the Daughters of the American Revolution. But, is it right to base social acceptance on who a person's ancestors were? Who counts as "family"? Who counts as "kin"? How far back should we look? We are better off looking forward—Gil-

man suggests—to the future.

During Gilman's era, the majority of American families still lived in rural settings, and married women were likely wives of farmers. Thus, Gilman addresses the social and economic realities confronting farm wives, a distinctly oppressed group within a generally wealthier and rapidly industrializing, increasingly urban society (selection 4). Here, Gilman argues for widespread collective action on the part of women, primarily for the purpose of better realizing their duties to their children. With the present shift to a fully urbanized society, Gilman would now more directly address her city sisters, but she would likely argue that two things have not changed: (1) the rural countryside remains the best environment in which to raise children, and (2) the economic desperation and social isolation of farm wives, however many fewer in number today, continues largely unabated.

Men and Marriage

Life can be lived by women without a husband (selection 10), as a spinster or a widow, for example, but for most women marriage—to a man—is the norm, and is the primary means by which families are created. Thus, women who want children typically become institutionally entangled with men via marriage, often with momentous consequences. By asking, and answering, the question: Does a man support his wife? (selection 5) Gilman draws us squarely into the internal economics of the modern household. Does it make sense in an industrialized world—where most people generate income as wage earners—for husbands, but not wives, to be the only family members with paying jobs? Gilman asks this question from the viewpoints of (1) society as a whole and (2) the individual family as a domestic unit. Does a housewife's unpaid labor contribute to the community or injure it economically? To provide an answer to this surprisingly complex question, Gilman takes us step by step through the economics of everyday life, including an analysis of the money economy in a hypothetical woman-centered household. Gilman concludes that monetary dependency, whether between men, between two women, or between a man and a woman, is seriously problematic, not only for each couple but also for society generally.

Families are distinguished, one from the other, by surnames (selections 6 and 11). These names, Gilman observes, are the names of *men*—fathers and husbands. Despite the presumed advances in women's rights achieved since Gilman's analysis in 1911, including the use of "Ms."

and some women who keep their maiden names when married, the ponderous fact still remains that the surname for virtually all women in American society is a patronym, a name derived from a father rather than a mother. Note, for the record, that Gilman had three patronyms at various times: Charlotte *Perkins* (her maiden name), Charlotte Perkins *Stetson* (her first husband's surname), and ultimately Charlotte Perkins *Gilman* (her second husband's surname). Gilman succinctly and poignantly catalogues the differential advantages men enjoy by virtue of always having the same family surname.

For Gilman, marriage should be a partnership of equals. Nonetheless, our patriarchal society privileges the male partner in heterosexual unions. Socially, women are defined as “competing” with men (selection 8) and as requiring alimony (as distinct from child-support) when marriages dissolve in divorce (selection 7). Men, Gilman shows, are lionized for being prolific “fathers,” whereas women largely earn obscurity as “mothers” (selection 9). If motherhood is to achieve its rightful due, then society and marriage must be radically transformed.

Motherhood

Throughout the readings in this volume (and especially in selections 12-15), Gilman posits that children deserve better care and attention than can be provided by “average” women who are untrained in the principles of right motherhood. Gilman employs the concept of “social parentage” and contrasts this idea with notions of parenthood rooted in the traditions of previous eras. Motherhood and children should receive priority, she argues, but not in self-defeating ways that preserve outdated and injurious inequities between husbands and wives. As a sociologist, Gilman's concrete, practical words of instruction give solid support to politicians who campaign on platforms of “putting children and families first.” Gilman presents a powerful brief for her version of the New Motherhood.

Children and Parents

The most significant activity assigned to marriage, family, and home as enduring social patterns is the biological reproduction, early care, and socialization of children (selections 16-20). Birth and death are dynamic transitions in human life. Husbands and wives become mothers and fathers, widows and widowers. Children become siblings and orphans.

Sons and daughters become heads of families, caretakers, and executors. Children are born into potentially large networks of pre-existing family relationships not only with parents and siblings, but also with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins of various degrees. Through the mechanism of human reproduction, society not only reproduces itself but also opens the door to social transformation and renewal. For Gilman, children are literally our future, and thus we must take extraordinary care to rear our children wisely.

What should be the fate of children who, by definition, have no control over the social situations into which they are born? Gilman argues that no child should suffer, even if the parents make mistakes. Gilman's general solution is to radically improve the economic, political, and educational status of women. If a woman has a child out of wedlock, she should be able to raise her baby in a loving home free of economic want. Similarly, a pregnant young wife whose husband is suddenly killed in an accident should be able to support herself and her soon-to-be-born child. Gilman examines the concept of "illegitimacy" (selection 18), traces its roots, and argues for a society in which children are not damned by their parents' errors, for a society in which changes in longstanding, fundamental social patterns are not only desirable but are also possible. Gilman's prediction that "bastard," as a socially significant category, if not as a derogatory epithet, would be eliminated has been slowly realized. Finally, Gilman asks, "Is childhood happy?" (selection 20). Not generally, she concludes, but it can become so.

Conclusion

Gilman believed deeply that women's values make for better societies. Whereas men's values are destructive, competitive, and often violent, women embrace regeneration, cooperation, and compassion. Each family is a microcosm of society in which these values struggle for recognition and acceptance. Patriarchal families necessarily produce double standards and inequalities between husbands and wives, resulting in inferior mothers and, as a direct consequence, substandard children. To improve society, we need healthy, happy children. The latter requires well-trained, competent mothers, widespread social parenting, and enlightened, non-patriarchal marriages. This is Gilman's social program and comprises the theme that runs without apology through all of the selections in this volume.

—*Michael R. Hill*

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Notes

1. This edited volume of Gilman's work was originally prepared at the request of Giuseppina Cersosimo who directs the Italian sociological series, *Esplorazioni*, published by Edizioni Kurumuny. It will soon appear—in Italian translation—as *La sociologia della Famiglia. Matrimoni e figli*.
2. Quoted from Gilman's 1909 address to the American Sociological Society, selection 2, below.