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S. Beckett.

Second Series, Number 3

October 8, 1910

Teachers College Bulletin



Technical Education Series A, No. 1

The Economic Function of Woman

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Price Ten Cents

28921

Published by
Teachers College, Columbia University
525 West 120th Street
New York City

Teachers College Bulletin

Published fortnightly from September to May inclusive. Entered as second class matter January 15, 1910, at the New York, N. Y., Post Office, under act of July 16, 1894.

These Bulletins include the Dean's Report, the Announcements of Departments, the Alumni Bulletins (4 issues per year), Syllabi of courses of study, Announcements of the School of Education and the School of Practical Arts, and the Technical Education Series.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Dr. Devine's paper on "The Economic Function of Woman" is printed as the first number in a series which is intended to present from time to time material, primarily for the benefit of students in The School of Household Arts and the School of Industrial Arts, Teachers College, but which it is hoped may find a wider use as well. This paper deals with the fundamental question of the economic importance to be attached to woman's work in the home. One hears on every hand prophecy of the future of woman's work—that she must be an independent wage-earner; that even the woman with a home and family will in time be found going out to daily employment; or, on the other hand, that we must hold fast to our appreciation of the work of woman within the home and must place upon it the economic value which it merits. Dr. Devine's article presents the relation of the work which woman does within the home to the work of the world outside and will be found a reassuring word to those who are questioning the future. To those who have been considering the problems of the household the paper has already, evidently, become something of a classic, for one finds quotations from it scattered here and there throughout the literature of the "home economics movement." In its present form the paper it is hoped will be available for class use in courses in applied economics in schools and colleges.

The paper is here printed through the courtesy of Dr. Devine and of the publishers of the original article, the American Academy of Social and Political Science, Philadelphia.—Benjamin R. Andrews.

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THE ECONOMIC FUNCTION OF WOMAN¹

Social reformers have usually found in the political economist an enemy or at best a very conservative ally. The social reformer has often come from the ranks of the politicians and statesmen; still more often has he appeared as a moral or religious prophet; but seldom have the rôles of reformer and economist been united in one person. In answer to the searching question, Shall men be reformed or shall they be fed, the economist has held consistently to the position that they must at any rate be fed. The social reformer has wavered between two opinions, admitting the contention of the economist, but forgetting it straightway when his activity begins.

The social reformer would simplify and eliminate, until but some one thing needful remains as an immediate and final step in attaining social salvation. The economist insists upon the inherent difficulty and complexity of social progress declaring that any step forward must be based on material prosperity and that material prosperity must be based on efficient wealth production and economical wealth consumption.

Though there has been this rift between the leaders of social reform movements and the movements of economic theory, it is not to be inferred that there has been no definite relation between the development of economic science and the changing social and industrial conditions of men. Economic theory has contained within itself the germ of evolutionary growth. If in looking back upon its history we ignore social changes, we shall be tempted to describe the development of the science as a mere series of errors and refutations of error; for it has been continually engaged in discarding outgrown theories. This is not, however, a distinguishing characteristic of economics. An Oxford lecturer on geography remarks that the history of the science of geography is particularly interesting because it exhibits a surprising number of gross errors, accepted as truths in one generation and refuted

1—Reprinted, by permission: American Academy of Political and Social Science, Publications, No. 183. Philadelphia.

by the discoveries of succeeding generations. Political economy simply shares this characteristic with geography and with other physical sciences which boast as many and as serious errors as either. There is one difference which should be noted. The modifications in geography have been made not because the geographical configurations have actually changed, not because parallels and meridians could have been at any time more conveniently located than they now are, but because knowledge has increased with the centuries and new facts about existing objects have been discovered, while in economics the changes have been in a much less measure due to the discovery of hitherto undiscovered relations, to a clearer sight and a more accurate judgment. They have been made in large part because the data of the science have themselves changed. Economics has to do with relations between changing and progressive beings and those relations cannot be constant. Each great system of economics, the Mercantilist, the Physiocratic and the Malthusian, no less than the Ricardian, has arisen to explain industrial conditions which actually existed, and each has embodied or prophesied either temporary remedies or a far-reaching reform. Social reformers have sometimes recognized this bridge between the present and the future; in other words, they have recognized the economic basis of their proposed reforms. The result of such recognition may be to dampen excessive zeal, but it will often increase real efficiency. When a reformer realizes that the slow-moving but potent economic forces are working in the direction of his cherished reform, he may well become more patient, but he may also become more calmly confident, and his ardor may even become greater.

If it were not for the economic element in the single tax movement, in the movement for the organization of labor, in the movement for the nationalization or the municipalization of industries, and in the temperance movement, there would be little in any of them to explain their vitality. "Progress and Poverty" startled and held the attention of thinking people, because it boldly rested its case on one universally recognized industrial fact and one almost universally accepted economic theory. The persistence of poverty in the midst of progress, deepest and most abject at the very spot where the accumulation of wealth is great-

est, is the obvious fact. The theory that, of the various shares in distribution, land rent alone is an income secured without any corresponding service, that it absorbs all the advantages which accrue from superior soils and from superior location—the economic theory of rent—forms the second pillar of the single tax doctrines. The statement of this fact and this theory, interwoven with wonderful skill, and yet wonderful simplicity, constitutes the substance of the single tax literature—a literature which has perhaps done more than any other literature of the generation to give for the general reading public a meaning to economic theory and an interpretation to industrial facts.

The movement for the better organization of labor to protect its interests finds also its economic basis. This is recognized by economists as early as Adam Smith and as recent as General Walker. The former very distinctly warned laborers that masters were in a universal, though tacit, combination not to allow wages to mount any higher and whenever possible to bring them lower. The movement for the organization of labor—organization in order that action might be always more intelligent and more conservative because better considered; organization in order that action might be more effective because united; organization for educational as well as for directly practical ends—finds swift acceleration in the same conditions that decree a profit from the combination of employers and the consolidation of their funds.

Nationalism, too, socialism, collectivism, or whatever be the best term to designate the increase of united industrial action through the means of political machinery, has little difficulty in justifying its attacks on many features of the existing industrial system, on the ground that they have become from an economic standpoint unsound and wasteful. We are witnessing a most interesting movement in this persistent extension of municipal and State activity to one field after another, in the interests not of a ruling family or of a class, but really in the interests of the State, of the people.

We should be willing to see it go on until the people, after experiment, have deliberately and intelligently decided in regard to every separate branch of industry whether it shall be managed on collectivistic or individualistic principles. If the science of economics pronounces no dictum in favor of socialism, neither

does it pronounce against it. Public or private management is a question which in the future must be decided not once for all, on rigid lines, but for each branch of industry upon its individual merits. That which secures the most efficient production and the most economical consumption is economically best.

The economic basis of the temperance agitation is comprehensively discussed in a paper submitted to the Academy in 1891.* It is shown that the climatic and social conditions of America tend to make more acute the distinction between the drinking and the non-drinking classes. When from the consumption of the lighter beverages the former pleasure is no longer obtainable the one class resorts to stronger drinks, the other to new varieties of food. The economic tendencies favor that class which makes the best use of the natural resources and is thus able to make the higher bids for land and for labor. Thus in the economic conflict between the drinking and the abstaining classes the latter have an advantage of which they may not always be conscious, but which is nevertheless the most powerful factor in the whole temperance reform.

Is there anything corresponding to this in the movement for the improvement of the industrial position of woman? Does the current political economy adequately recognize the economic function that woman performs? The brief reference that has been made to four big problems of the present day is not intended to be exhaustive, but to introduce a somewhat fuller discussion of these two questions. It would seem that we are on the brink of significant changes in political economy. I wish first to examine the past attitude of economics toward the position of woman in the industrial society and then to consider what modifications are involved in the impending changes.

There are but two great fields of economic activity—consumption and production. Every act of which economics takes cognizance is an act of consumption or an act of production. Production is the creation of utilities. Consumption is their destruction in such manner as to secure the intended satisfaction. That department of economics which deals with production considers how wealth is brought into existence, how the number of

* Economic Basis of Prohibition. *Annals of the American Academy*, Vol II, p. 59. July, 1891.

useful things is increased. Consumption considers how these useful things, this wealth is enjoyed. Textbooks recognize two additional departments of economic inquiry—distribution and exchange. But every act of exchange is also an act of production and there can hardly be said to be such a thing as an act of distribution. The merchant and also his customer, the seller and buyer alike in every ordinary exchange of products are producers of wealth. There is here a separate field of inquiry in the series of questions that arise out of the motive for the exchanges. We may ask why products exchange as they do. We may inquire why men subjectively estimate them as they do. The exchange of products forms thus a distinct field of economic investigation, but there is no act of exchange that is not also an act of production. Neither is any one engaged in a distinct process which we may properly term distribution. All that we can say is that wealth is produced and that somehow when wealth is produced it is also distributed. There is no building or street in which we may observe distribution taking place. It is a process which is involved in the very process of production. Like exchange it is a separate field of inquiry, but it is not a separate field of industrial activity. We may inquire why, when production is complete and products thrown out, they go here, rather than there. We may investigate the forces which are operative in determining the objective values of commodities, in fixing market prices and in dividing wealth among individuals, but we shall look in vain to find any man or set of men who are authorized to arrange such distribution. The buzzing of the immense machine of trade and industry in all its parts is the noise of production and its products include all valuable things. Look as closely as we may we shall find only these two forms of economic activity among men: the production of wealth, *i. e.*, the making of useful things; and the consumption of wealth, *i. e.*, the using of these things.

It is evident therefore that if we are to take up the study of wealth we must direct our attention either to production or to consumption. It is not strange that the first of these processes has first attracted attention. Productive activities are more obvious, more easily classified, and when they assume large proportions less common-place. But it is nevertheless surprising that production has so completely engrossed the attention of econom-

ists that consumption has been almost entirely ignored. The fact has been partially concealed by the division of the discussion into the three great departments of production, exchange, distribution. When this division has disappeared it is revealed that writers have been engaged solely with such inquiries as these: How may the utilities be made as great as possible? How may the distribution of our national wealth be modified? How may the factories be kept going? How may the circulating medium be made most effective? How may transportation and the system of wholesale and retail trade be perfected? How may wealth be so distributed as to keep the capital fund intact and laborers sufficiently well fed and sheltered to enable them to continue efficient producers? Economists have seemed to care very much about adding to the wealth fund, but they have seldom inquired whether the wealth thus produced is consumed in accordance with sound principles of economics—whether the right things are called for from producers—whether there are any principles of consumption governing these matters at all. Consumption is subordinated in importance to production, and that, when we consider it, is one of the strangest and most unnatural inversions that the history of any science has ever disclosed.

Economics, the writers have defined as the science of wealth. They have made under that head a detailed study of machinery, of patents, of division, of labor, of currency and banking, and the movements of prices, of transportation, of rent, of profits, of wages. But there are no discussions on home adornment, on architecture, on music and art, on choice of books and of newspapers, on dress, on travel, on food and drink, on marketing and cooking, on social intercourse—in short on the consumption of wealth—on the use of those things which with our money and banking, our machinery and our patents, our business profits and rent and wages we are continually bringing into existence.

If political economy is the science of wealth, it is as much concerned with the way in which wealth is consumed as with the way in which it is produced. If, as some are already preferring to call it, political economy be the science of human wants, then it is even more fundamentally concerned with the consumption than with the production of wealth. The most profoundly significant of the impending changes in economics is this very trans-

fer of the centre of discussion from the one field to the other. Economists are beginning to study certain phases of consumption, and there is a disposition to place this division of the subject alongside of production as the co-ordinate field of economic inquiry. If acquisition is the idea which in the past history of economics has been all but unduly emphasized, expenditure is the idea which the future of the science will place beside it.

It is this change which involves a revolution in the attitude of the science toward the economic function of woman. For if it falls to man chiefly to direct the general course of production, consumption is the field which belongs pre-eminently to woman. If the factory has been the centre of the economics which has had to do with production, the home will displace the factory as the centre of interest in a system which gives due prominence to enjoyment and use. I would not be misunderstood. It is not true that man alone is a producer. Not only has the field of industry and of professional life been occupied and honorably so by woman, but also in the home itself woman may be said in the strictest sense to be a producer of wealth. The work of cook and chambermaid is production. The direction of the home establishment is production. A steak is worth more broiled and placed on the table than it is in the butcher's tray. We recognize that if it is a question of paying for it in an eating house; so should we also recognize it in our own dining rooms. Rugs and carpets are worth more after they are swept and cleaned. We recognize that at house-cleaning time if we pay a man to carry them away for a beating; so should we also recognize it when with far greater labor they are kept bright and clean by the daily use of the broom.

Nevertheless there is a propriety in assigning the field of production to man since the grosser forms of production, those things which in fact have most attracted the attention of economists have been mainly carried on by the labor of man. Production on a large scale has been in his hands. Manufacturing establishments, canals, railways, the trades, so also the industries which have to do with the mechanism of exchange, banks and clearing houses—these have all been manipulated by men. To woman has fallen the task of directing how the wealth brought into the house shall be used, whether much or little shall be made of it, and what kind of wealth shall be brought. In the current theories, the im-

portance of this latter function has been absurdly underestimated. With a clearer recognition of its true relation to the whole subject of wealth there must result an increased respect on the part of economists for the industrial functions which woman performs. Incidentally there may also result an increased interest on the part of women in the study of economics, since such a recognition would imply scientific discussion of subjects in which they are in the nature of the case interested.

The true object of the science of economics is the investigation of the essential conditions of industrial and social prosperity. Some writers have restricted its scope to the field of exchange and have defined it as the science of value; but in the hands of its greatest masters economics has been a theory of prosperity rather than of value. The new emphasis on consumption is a new recognition of this older and more fruitful conception.

There are three ways in which prosperity may be increased: We may choose more wisely what things we shall produce; we may produce more efficiently; we may consume more economically. The wiser choice and the more economical use alike fall within the range of what in economics is called consumption or demand. Choice and use are related more closely than would appear at first sight and their relation is somewhat more complicated. It is more complicated than it would be if no specific article were produced before it had been ordered by the one who is to consume it. We do frequently order shoes, clothes or houses in this way; but our ordinary plan is for the consumer to choose from a stock already produced. Nevertheless, choice logically precedes production. The only result of the adoption of our present plan is that choice or, as the technical word is, demand, modifies production gradually instead of suddenly. If an article is no longer chosen by consumers it is no longer produced. The production takes place in view of the anticipated choice. Production follows in rough conformity the course of demand. It even follows the vagaries of fashion no less faithfully than the steadier undulations of normal demand. It never anticipates choice very far. It takes few real risks.

Thus choice is able to affect general prosperity because it precedes and modifies production and this modification may be of a kind that will lead to a fuller utilization of natural resources or

the exact opposite. Frequently there is more than one commodity that would satisfy a given want. In such cases the selection of a particular one would nearly always enable the productive resources to be more fully utilized than the selection of any of the others. The selection of that one by consumers would directly promote general prosperity, while the choice of others would retard it. We desire, for instance, fuel in our homes for cooking and for warmth. If all people use wood to supply that desire there arises a very heavy demand for wood. Lands which produce the fuel demanded become very valuable. Producers of wood receive a high price for their commodity and are benefited, but consumers limited by their own action in choosing this one variety of fuel only suffer distinct loss. If now some consumers choose, instead of wood, bituminous coal, the general prosperity is thereby increased. The desire for heat is met as before; but a new resource is drawn upon. If previously there was a monopoly of wood lands the value of the monopoly has greatly declined and society has reaped the advantage. The modification in consumption has not only added to the social resources, but has brought about a more advantageous distribution of wealth. If, later, anthracite coal, and natural gas, and various kinds of oil are added to the list of available fuels a new advantage is gained and prosperity promoted at every step.

This process is especially obvious in regard to articles of diet because of the fact that the economic principle is reinforced by physiological considerations. The variety in consumption utilizes existing resources more fully and the variety in diet enables the systematic demand for food to be more easily met. When the diet is so varied as to include the various classes of food needed by the system fewer pounds of fuel are required. But in general it is true that every new article demanded to supply an existing desire calls on some reserve fund in nature and may directly promote the general well-being. If we wear only cotton dress we fail to get any benefit from lands which are suitable for sheep pasture, but not for cotton raising and from the resources which might be devoted to the production of silk. The principle holds good in travel, in literature, in music, in art. The greatest enjoyment is obtained when demand is such as to call forth the most varied talents and acquirements. In every field it is true that the choice

of pleasures may be such as to promote prosperity or it may be, and too often is, such as to limit pleasure to the lowest minimum which it is possible for the productive powers to provide.

That the prosperity of society may be promoted, secondly, by a more efficient employment of the productive forces is a fact so generally recognized that no reference to it would be necessary except to make it clear that in emphasizing the importance of consumption I have no intention of underestimating the importance of efficient production.

But thirdly, we may look for a radical improvement in general economic conditions from a wiser use of the wealth which we have chosen to produce. The degree of enjoyment which may be obtained from a given amount of wealth depends mainly upon two things: the subjective condition of the consumer determining his capacity for enjoyment; and secondly, the relations that may be established among the various articles which enter into the consumption—the combinations which the consumer is able to make—the harmony which he may be able to establish in the various departments of his consumption. The social progress of the race exhibits a tendency toward diversity, toward variety in consumption; but also another tendency toward greater harmony within these separate parts, and a greater harmony between these parts in their union to form that whole complex which we call human existence. There is nothing incompatible either in economics or in general biology in these two tendencies toward greater diversity and greater harmony. A more distinct co-ordination may preside over a continued differentiation. This is a law of biological development, and it is the law of the stand and of living. Yet these are not to be regarded as blind tendencies operating independently of man's economic activity. Harmonious groups are found to yield greater pleasure, and thus they displace the older and cruder groups. Half instinctively, half consciously the reign of harmony is extended until it tends to cover the whole field of consumption.

Professor Patten* has suggested the word complement for any such group of commodities, of which the combined utility is greater than the sum of the utilities of the separate parts. The

* "Economic Causes of Moral Progress." *Annals*, Vol. III, p. 134. September, 1892.

reason for the increase of utility is that the parts form a synthesis by entering into harmonious combination with each other. The pleasure derived from the consumption of the complement is greater than the total pleasure which could be obtained from the consumption in isolation of its separate parts. The classic illustration is of a dinner, in which the pleasure derived from the meal, with its courses served in proper order, the condiments applied to the dishes for which they were intended, the dressing and gravies put where they belong, the whole served in the manner which the diner finds most pleasing and enlivened, it may be with social intercourse—the pleasure in short from a dinner with all that the word implies is greater far than could be obtained from the same quantities of food sundered from each other, each consumed for its own sake. Many commodities, like salt, which have positive utility when taken in combination, are found to have a decidedly negative utility when taken in isolation. It is not possible to ascertain the utility of the complement dinner by adding the separate utilities of the items of which it is composed, but only by considering the amount of pleasure which the dinner actually gives.

There is another more complex complement into the composition of which the complement dinner enters as one and not the least, nor yet the greatest element. Food and a house or a part of a house; house furnishing, the presence of kindred and certain associated enjoyments we are wont to designate collectively as home. I have not fully enumerated its elements. Poets have long been struggling to convey in verse an adequate idea of the content of the word home, and they have not failed, though they have not agreed. The tendency to exalt some one element of the complex whole, to make it stand for the entire conception is not an exceptional and unusual tendency, but is to be met with in every act of economic judgment. The pleasure is a unit, but the commodity which confers it is complex. The consumer must distribute the credit for the pleasure experienced among the different individual elements which have together conferred the pleasure. In the case of the dinner we are apt to ascribe the agreeable result of the whole mainly to some new or favorite dish which may not have occupied a very prominent place, so far as its quantity or its separate utility is concerned, but which is rec-

ognized as completing the combination and adding materially to the utility of the whole.

In the home it may be the particular homestead, the social environment, the presence of certain features of the natural scenery—a mountain, the sea, the woods, the boundless prairie; or it is the well-stocked library, or the musical studio, or it is the nursery and the school-room and the play-room of the babies, or it is the family altar of worship, or the provident care of the father, or more often than any, interwoven with all other elements and giving a meaning to them all and forming the very keystone in this arch of enjoyment that we call home, is the mother's love for the family and the home she has made them. Any one of these individual sources of enjoyment may assume the prominent place at a given moment but oftenest this one. To woman it is given to add many fold to the enjoyment which the wealth products of industry are able to secure.

This is not a sentimental but a purely economic view of woman's work. Utility, *i. e.*, the power to confer pleasure is an economic concept. The production of wealth is nothing less nor more than the process of adding to the utility the pleasure-giving power of commodities. If now these commodities can be so arranged and grouped for consumption as to make them yield more pleasure than if they are consumed in a haphazard way, then the one who secures that result, performs just as distinctly an economic function as does the one whom we call technically a producer. This function I have called the direction of wealth consumption. It does not devolve entirely upon woman, but it does very largely. It is hers to determine not only what commodities shall be chosen and produced, but also what combinations shall be made, what degree of harmony shall be secured in the consumption of the commodities that have been produced.

I have indicated three methods by which general prosperity may be increased: a better choice, a better production, a better consumption. In comparing the relative importance of the three methods it will be found that there are greater immediate possibilities in the third than in either of the others and that of the two that remain, the first is more important than the second. It is the present duty of the economist to insist upon this, to magnify the office of the wealth expender, to accompany her to the very

threshold of the home that he may point out, with untiring vigilance, its woeful defects, its emptiness caused not so much by lack of income as by lack of knowledge of how to spend wisely. In the rôle of the economist he may not enter to direct just what works of art or what food products should be selected, just what combinations of color would most beautify a particular sitting room, just what arrangement of furniture is best. He may plead the limits of human ability in securing detailed knowledge, but he may assert his right to pass in review the work of minor advisers like the merchant, the decorator and the furnisher. There is no principle of wealth enjoyment higher than the economic. There is no economic function higher than that of determining how wealth shall be used. Even if man remain the chief producer and woman remain the chief factor in determining how wealth shall be used, the economic position of woman will not be considered by those who judge with **discrimination** as inferior to that of man. Both may in their respective positions contribute directly and powerfully to the advancement of general prosperity.

We have temporarily left out of view the case of women who have entered the ranks of producers in the technical sense, and whose just complaint is that their rewards as producers are not commensurate with their services or with the rewards of male producers in the same industries. There are many reform movements on foot of which the object is to mend and ultimately to end these inequalities. Among those especially noteworthy is the far-seeing action of certain of the labor organizations in championing the claims of woman, the movement for more stringent legal protection, the organization of women's clubs, guilds and unions, the preparation of "black lists" and of "white lists." Results by no means insignificant have already been achieved in these directions. What is chiefly significant, however, is that these movements are in accord with the economic tendencies of our time. So far as those tendencies are revealed by a study of the course of consumption they are in the direction of increased variety not only in food, a department which is of the least interest to the body of woman producers, because they do not produce food, but also in the departments of personal and house adornment. The increased variety in these departments of consumption is of the most immediate concern to women pro-

ducers, since it is accompanied by an increased demand for articles which require that delicacy of handling in both manufacture and sale which women are best fitted to give. Increased attention to the refinements of civilization means a relative increase in the demand for woman's labor. More discriminating choice necessitates more discriminating production. With every advance in consumption mere muscular strength is placed at a heavier discount while tact, delicacy of touch, ability in harmonizing colors and in giving a beauty to articles which before served useful purposes without at the same time pleasing the eye by their form, in other words, the qualities in which women are admitted to excel, are placed at a premium. To borrow Bastiat's famous phrase, "that which is not seen," thus operates to the advantage of woman in the economic conflict with her male associates. Those who have at heart a social reform that shall secure industrial emancipation for woman find an unexpected ally in the very economic forces against which they have sometimes felt that they were waging a losing battle. Increased faith in the future, increased confidence in the to-morrow that is seen to be already breaking, must result from the clear recognition of such powerful friends.

EDWARD T. DEVINE.

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