

## August Bebel, *Women under Socialism* (1879)

### Abstract

---

August Bebel (1840–1913), the son of a low-ranking Prussian officer and a wood-turner by trade, became the most iconic Social Democrat in Imperial Germany. In 1866, together with Wilhelm Liebknecht, he founded the Saxon People's Party, as well as what later became known as the Eisenach wing of Social Democracy, which united with the Lassallean wing at the Gotha party congress of 1875. Bebel was chairman of the renamed Social Democratic Party (SPD) [*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*] (1892–1913) and by far its most important parliamentary spokesman and strategist. He was first elected to the Reichstag of the North German Confederation in February 1867 by a Saxon constituency, and he served in that house, with short interruptions (including a jail term for treason in 1872–75), until his death in 1913. He was also a member of the lower house of Saxony's state parliament from 1881 to 1891.

In 1879, Bebel published *Die Frau und der Sozialismus* [*Women under Socialism*]. The book's publication defied Bismarck's Anti-Socialist Law, which had been passed the previous year. It was officially banned in a decree issued on March 24, 1879. Circulated through the SPD's underground network of agents, clubs, and publishers, and then revised and expanded in the course of numerous new editions, it became socialism's most widely read book up to the turn of the century. In it, Bebel argues that working-class women were discriminated against in two ways: as workers and as women. Like all members of the proletariat, women were economically dependent upon the capitalist class, but they were doubly disadvantaged in that they were also dependent upon men of their own class. Bebel insists that the liberation of women is possible only through resolution of the "social question."

### Source

---

This chapter can be condensed into a few words. It contains only the conclusions that arise from what has been said so far about the position of women in future society, conclusions that the reader may easily draw for himself at this point.

The woman of future society is socially and economically independent; she is no longer subject to even a vestige of dominion and exploitation; she is free, the peer of man, mistress of her lot. Her education is the same as that of man, with such exceptions as the difference of sex and biological function demand. Living under natural conditions, she is able to unfold and exercise her mental powers and faculties. For her occupation, she chooses those fields that correspond with her wishes, inclinations, and natural abilities, and she works under the same conditions as man. Even if she is engaged as a practical working woman in some field or another, she may be an educator, teacher, or nurse in the second part of her day; she may practice some type of art or cultivate some branch of science in the third part; and she may fill some administrative function in the fourth. She joins in studies, completes chores, enjoys pleasures and social intercourse with either her sisters or with men—as she pleases or as occasion serves.

In choosing love, she is, like man, free and unhampered. She woos or is wooed and seals the bond out of no consideration other than her own inclination. This bond is a private contract, celebrated without the intervention of any functionary—just as marriage was a private contract until well into the Middle Ages. Socialism creates nothing new here: it merely restores, at a higher level of civilization and under new social forms, *that which prevailed at a more primitive social stage before private property began to rule society*.

Under the proviso that he inflict injury or disadvantage upon none, the individual shall oversee the

---

satisfaction of his own instincts. *The satisfaction of the sexual instinct is as much a private concern as the satisfaction of any other natural instinct.* No one is accountable to others in this matter, and no unsolicited judge may interfere. How I shall eat, how I shall drink, how I shall sleep, how I shall clothe myself is my private affair—as is my intercourse with persons of the opposite sex. Intelligence and culture, perfect individual freedom—qualities that become normal through the education and the conditions of future society—will guard every individual against the commission of acts that will redound to his own injury. The men and women of future society will have a much higher degree of self-discipline and self-knowledge than those of the present. The simple fact that all bashful prudery and affectations of secrecy regarding natural matters will have vanished is a guarantee of a more natural intercourse between the sexes than that which prevails today. If incompatibility, disenchantment, or repulsion sets in between two persons who have come together, then morality commands that the unnatural, and therefore immoral, bond be dissolved. And seeing that all the circumstances and conditions that have hitherto condemned large numbers of women to celibacy and prostitution will have vanished, man will no longer be dominant. On the other hand, the completely altered social conditions will have removed the numerous inconveniences that affect married life today, often preventing its favorable unfolding, or even rendering it wholly impossible.

The constrictions, contradictions, and unnatural aspects of the present position of woman are being increasingly recognized in wide social circles. The sentiment finds lively utterance in the literature on the Social Question as well as in works of fiction—often, it must be confessed, in the wrong manner. That the present form of marriage corresponds ever less with its purpose is no longer denied by any thinking person; therefore, it is not surprising that the people who find it natural to want freedom of choice in love and the ability to freely dissolve the marital bond are precisely the same ones who fail to draw the necessary conclusions, in other areas of life, that our present social system must be changed. They believe that freedom of sexual intercourse may be asserted only by the privileged classes. In a polemic against Fanny Lewald's [\[1\]](#) efforts on behalf of the emancipation of woman, Mathilde Reichhardt-Stromberg expresses herself as follows:

“If you (Fanny Lewald) claim the complete equality of woman with man in social and political life, then George Sand must also be right in her struggles for emancipation, which aim at nothing more than what man has long possessed without any dispute. *Indeed, there is no reasonable ground for admitting the head and not the heart of woman to this equality, to give and to take as freely as man.* On the contrary, if woman has by nature the right, and, consequently, also the duty—for we should not bury the talent bestowed upon us—of exerting her brain tissue to the utmost in the race with the intellectual titans of the opposite sex, then she must also have precisely the same right *to preserve her equilibrium by quickening the circulation of her heart's blood in whatever way seems good to her.* For all of us have read, without the slightest moral indignation, about Goethe—to take the greatest as our first example—and how he wasted the warmth of his heart and the enthusiasm of his great soul, time and again, on different women. Reasonable people regard this as perfectly natural on account of the very greatness of his soul and the difficulty of satisfying it. Only the narrow-minded moralist stops to condemn his conduct. Why, then, deride the “great souls” among women! [...] Let us suppose that the whole female sex consisted of great souls like George Sand, that every woman were a Lucretia Floriani, whose children were all children of love, raised with true motherly affection and devotion, as well as intelligence and good sense. What would become of the world? *There can be no doubt that it could continue to exist and progress, just as it does now; it might even feel exceptionally comfortable.*”

But why should that privilege exist only for the “great souls” and not for those who are not “great souls”? If Goethe and George Sand (to choose these two among the many who act and have acted like them) were able to live according to the inclinations of their own hearts—and if whole libraries have been published about Goethe's love affairs and if these, in turn, have been devoured by his male and female admirers in rapt ecstasy—then why condemn others for doing that which is the subject of ecstatic

---

admiration when done by Goethe or George Sand?

Indeed, such freedom in choosing love is impossible in bourgeois society—the evidence presented thus far culminates in this observation. But place the whole community under social conditions similar to those enjoyed by the material and intellectual elite, and you will have the opportunity for equal rights and freedom for all. In “Jacques,” George Sand depicts a husband who judges his wife’s adulterous relationship with these words: “No human being can command love; and none is guilty if he feels it or goes without it. What degrades the woman is the lie: what constitutes her adultery is not the hour that she grants to her lover, *but the night that she spends with her husband thereafter.*” On account of this view of the matter, Jacques feels obliged to give way to his romantic rival, Borel, and he proceeds to philosophize: “Borel, in my place, would have quietly beaten his wife, and perhaps would not have blushed to receive her, however debased by his blows and kisses, into his bed immediately thereafter. There are men who cut the throat of an unfaithful wife without ceremony, in the fashion of the Orientals, because they consider her to be legal property. Others fight with their rival, kill him or drive him away, and afterwards seek the kisses of the woman they pretend to love, who then shrinks from them with horror or gives herself up in despair. In cases of conjugal love, this is the most common way of acting, and I say that the love of hogs is less vile and gross than that of these men.” Commenting on these passages, Brandes observes: “These truths, which are considered elemental within our *educated* classes, were ‘sophisms that cried to heaven’ only fifty years ago.”<sup>[2]</sup> To this day, however, the “propertied and cultured world” dare not openly avow the principles of George Sand, although, in point of fact, it lives by them in the main. As in morality and religion, the bourgeois class is also hypocritical in marriage.

Today, thousands of people who cannot compare with Goethe and George Sand are doing exactly what they did, without losing the least bit of social esteem. All that is needed is a respectable position, the rest comes naturally. Nevertheless, judged from the standpoint of bourgeois morality, the liberties of Goethe and George Sand are improper since they violate society’s moral laws and contradict the nature of our social state. Compulsory marriage is the normal form of marriage within bourgeois society: it is the only “moral” union of the sexes: any other sexual union is immoral. It has been proven beyond refute that bourgeois marriage is the result of bourgeois property relations. Closely related to private ownership and the right of succession, these marriages are forged to acquire “legitimate” children as heirs. Under the pressure of social conditions, marriage is even forced upon those who have nothing to bequeath. It becomes a social law, the violation of which the State punishes by imprisoning for a term of years the men or women who live in adultery and have been divorced.

In socialist society there is nothing to bequeath, unless domestic equipment and personal inventory can be regarded as inheritance; thus the current form of marriage is redundant. The question of inheritance is thereby solved, and Socialism need not concern itself with abolishing the same. No right of inheritance can arise where there is no private property. Accordingly, woman is free, and her children, if she has any, do not impair her freedom: they can only enhance her pleasure in life. Nurses, teachers, female friends, and the maturing female youth—all these are ready to offer help to the mother when she needs it.

It is possible that there will be men in the future who will say, as did *Alexander von Humboldt*: “I am not made to be a family father. Moreover, I consider marriage a sin, and the begetting of children a crime.” What of it? The power of natural instincts will restore the equilibrium. We are alarmed neither by Humboldt’s hostility to marriage nor by the philosophic pessimism of Schopenhauer, Mainländer, or v. Hartmann, who present humanity with the prospect of self-destruction in the “ideal State.” In this matter we agree with Fr. Ratzel, who justly says:

*“Man must no longer look upon himself as an exception to the laws of Nature; he should rather begin at last to ascertain the law that underlies his own actions and thoughts, and to endeavor to live his life according to the laws of Nature. He will conclude that he should establish his coexistence with his equals, that is, his family and the State, not according to the precepts of distant centuries, but according to the rational*

---

*principles of natural insight. Politics, morals, principles of justice—all of which are presently fed from all possible sources—will be determined according to the laws of Nature alone. An existence worthy of human beings, dreamed of for thousands of years, will finally become reality.”*

That day is *fast approaching*. Over the course of thousands of years, human society has traversed all the various phases of development only to arrive where it started from in the beginning—communistic property and complete equality and fraternity, but no longer among congeners alone, *but for the whole human race*. Herein lies its great progress. What bourgeois society has vainly striven for, and where it fails, and is bound to fail—the restoration of freedom, equality and fraternity among men—Socialism will accomplish. Bourgeois society could only establish the theory; here, as in so many other areas of life, practice was at odds with theory. It is for Socialism to unite theory and practice.

Although man returns to the starting point in his development, this happens on an infinitely higher level of civilization than that on which he started. Primitive society held property in common in the gens, in the clan, but only in the rawest form and at the most undeveloped stage. It is true that the process of development that occurred since then reduced common property to a small and insignificant vestige, broke up the gentes, and finally atomized the whole of society; at the same time, however, in its various stages, this process of development also mightily increased the productivity of that society and the diversity of its requirements, and it created nations and great States out of the gentes and tribes, although again it produced a condition that stood in violent contradiction with social requirements. The task of the future is to end that contradiction by the broad retransformation of property and productive powers into collective property.

Society reclaims what was once its own, but, in accordance with the newly created conditions of life, it allows people of walks of life to exist at the *highest* cultural level; that means that *society guarantees to all that which under more primitive circumstances was the privilege of individuals or individual classes only*. Now *woman* again fills the *active* role that once was hers in primitive society—she is not man’s mistress, but rather his equal.

“The end of state/governmental development resembles the beginning of human existence. The original equality returns. The maternal-material existence starts and rounds off the cycle of human affairs,” writes Bachofen in his work “Das Mutterrecht.” Likewise, Morgen writes:

“Since the advent of civilization, the outgrowth of property has been so immense, its forms so diversified, its uses so expansive, and its *management so skillfully carried out in the interests of its owners that it has become an unmanageable power vis-à-vis the people*. The human mind stands bewildered in the presence of its own creation. The time will come, however, when human intelligence will assume control over property, when it will define the State’s relationship to the property that it protects and also determine the obligations and limits of the rights of its owners. *The interests of society are paramount to individual interests, and the two must be brought into just and harmonious relationship*. The mere hunt for riches is not the final destiny of mankind, if progress is to be the law of the future as it has been of the past. The time since the dawning of civilization is but a tiny fragment of the lifetime of man, and yet another tiny fragment of that yet to come. *The dissolution of society threatens to become the endpoint of a historical course whose end goal is property, since such a course contains the very seeds of its own self-destruction*.

*Democracy in government, brotherhood in society, equality in rights and privileges, and universal education, will initiate the next—and higher—level of society toward which experience, intelligence, and knowledge are steadily tending.*

*It will be a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality, and fraternity of the ancient gentes.”*<sup>[3]</sup>

---

Thus we see how men of different viewpoints arrive at identical conclusions on the basis of their scientific investigations. The complete emancipation of woman, and her equality with man is one of the final goals of our social development, whose realization no power on earth can prevent; yet this realization is possible only by a social change that will abolish the rule of man over man—hence also of capitalists over workers. Only then will the human race reach its highest development. The “Golden Age” that has been dreamt of for thousands of years, and for which man has been longing, will come at last. *Class rule will have reached its end for all time, and, along with it, the rule of man over woman.*

## NOTES

[1] “Frauenrecht und Frauenpflicht. Eine Antwort auf Fanny Lewalds Briefe: Für und wider die Frauen,” 2nd edition. Bonn, 1871.

[2] George Brandes, *Die Literatur des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*, 5th volume. Leipzig: Veit & Co., 1883.

[3] Morgan’s “Ancient Society.”

Source of English translation: August Bebel, “Woman in the Future,” in *Women Under Socialism*, introduction by Lewis A. Coser, translated by Daniel de Leon, from the 33rd German edition. New York: Schocken, 1975, pp. 343–49. Original translation edited by GHI staff.

Source of original German text: August Bebel, “Die Frau in der Zukunft,” in *Die Frau und der Sozialismus*, 1st ed. February 1879. Berlin [GDR]: J. H. W. Dietz Verlag Nachf., 1979, pp. 381–86. A 1923 edition is available online at:

<https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/view/bsb11128578?page=,1>

Recommended Citation: August Bebel, *Women under Socialism* (1879), published in: German History in Documents and Images,

<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-1763>> [July 09, 2025].