“The Meaning of Woman Suffrage”
Miss Mabel Lee, Barnard College
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Note: I located Mabel Lee’s article in the American Baptist Historical Society archives, but it is accessible in the Chinese Student Monthly. As a student at Barnard College in 1914, Mabel Lee was part of a generation that advocated for the right for women to vote. Here she explains that woman suffrage (or feminism) is a natural (evolutionary) consequence of applying democracy to women, and not a novel concept. As such, it represents progress in civilization and can contribute to the reconstruction of China. Her references to eugenics and an open espousal of Marx reveals that such ideas that were relatively well-accepted at the time. — Tim Tseng (Nov. 26, 2013)

I once heard Professor Kirchway of Columbia say that although scientists are always telling us that in the midst of life we are in death, we are not as apt to realize it as much as that while in the midst of life we are in the woman suffrage question. And it is a fact that no matter where we go we cannot escape hearing about woman suffrage. Yet there is hardly a question more misunderstood or that has more misconceptions. So manifold are its misconceptions that it has come to be a by-word suitable for every occasion. For instance, if when in company one should wish to scramble out of an embarrassing situation, or his more fortunate brother should wish to be considered witty, all that either would have to do would be to mention woman suffrage, and they may be sure of laughter and merriment in response.

The reason for this is that the idea of woman suffrage at first stood for something abnormal, strange and extraordinary, and so has finally become the word for anything ridiculous. The idea that women should ever wish to have or be anything more than their primitive mothers appears at first thought to be indeed tragic enough to be comic; but if we sit down and really think it over, throwing aside all sentimentalism, we find that it is nothing more than a wider application of our ideas of justice and equality. We all believe in the idea of democracy; woman suffrage or the feminist movement (of which woman suffrage is a fourth part) is the application of democracy to women.

Let us briefly consider the field and scope of democracy so as to trace its application to the feminist movement.

The fundamental principle of democracy is equality of opportunity, as distinguished from equality of compensation. It means an equal chance for every man to show what his merits are. To my mind, I conceive it as fourfold, i.e., having four stages to its development, like four waves, one rolling into another. They are: first, moral, religious or spiritual; second, legal; third, political; and, fourth, economic. European history is the realization of the progress of democracy in this progression. [p 526]

The first or spiritual stage is represented by the early Christian movement. Christ himself made the democratic statement that slaves had as much as princes in the
sight of God. Therefore we get equality or spiritual privileges with primitive Christianity.

The second or legal stage is the fight for equality before the law, and is worked out principally in England, also somewhat in Germany. It began with the fight for the Magna Charta and, we might say, is still going on. Thus with this wave we have an extension of the equality of opportunity in claiming for man equal rights before the law.

The third of political stage is that for the equal right to choose the rulers for making laws, and is summed up in the statement of Thomas Jefferson, “Just government depends on the consent of the governed.” It is the fundament idea of American democracy and is well expressed in the Declaration of Independence. And this idea of political equality is being worked out in this country in spite of the interruptions of the negro question, etc.

The fourth or economic stage stands for economic equality or full reward of labor, and is commonly known as socialism. With the introduction of machinery since the industrial revolution, there has been created a class of owners of the instruments of production who do not have to work, but make a profit just because they are owners. Thus this class does not work and yet gains the same reward or profit that the poor laborer gets only through the “sweat of his brow.” This fourth movement of democracy, therefore, protests against this economic inequality and advocates government ownership of these instruments of production. Were this condition to prevail, there would be none to gain the reward who has not labored. This phase of democracy has but recently appeared and has developed most rapidly in Germany.

There are great documents giving proof of these stages in the development of democracy. For the spiritual, we have the Sermon on the Mount; for the legal, the Magna Charta or Bill of Rights; for the political, mainly the United States’ Declaration of Independence (for, although the idea was derived from France through such writers as Rousseau and others, the United States was the first nation to stand for the ideal); for the economic, the Communist Manifesto by Engels and Marx.

Thus we have seen that democracy is fourfold and of four stages of development. The opponents of democracy in every stage have always used the misrepresentation that the democrats [p 527] want to level the whole thing from good to mediocrity. But the real democratic idea is to have a really natural aristocracy by giving equality of opportunity in order to let every man prove his merits.

And in the feministic movement these opportunities are again applying the same misrepresentation by saying that the feminists wish to make women like men; whereas the feminists want nothing more than the equality of opportunity for women to prove their merits and what they are best suited to do. This is a purely scientific attitude, for we can never determine anything until it has been tried. For instance, it was not so long ago that even Western people thought that woman was
not capable of being taught even the three R’s. The very thought of a woman knowing how to read or write made them hold up their hands in “holy horror,” for it would “entirely unsex the women.” But when woman proved that she could go through elementary school, then these same persons said that she could not go through a secondary school --- “it was too much for women and they could never be taught such difficult subjects.” Again woman proved herself capable, and these people then said that she could not go through college. It is only a short time since she gained the victory of admission to college, and there are still many schools too conservative to open their doors for her instruction. At present there is still the cry that though woman has gone so far, she can go no further, that she cannot succeed in the professions. But this again is being refuted by the success of pioneers of today.

The idea of feminism is to give unto woman what man has successively gained in the different stages. It is the application to her the fourfold idea of democracy.

In Christianity woman was not given an equality of privileges because of the ascetic idea that she was the tempter of man. But, on the other hand, its doctrine of sympathy for the weak gave her greater respect. And so the compromise of the two ideas has led to the conception that the wife and mother are to be respected.

In legal rights, even in this country, woman still has some difficulties, as in cases of divorce and ownership of children; yet she may be said to have almost all the legal rights.

The third or political phase of feminism is the question of woman suffrage – the giving of political privileges to woman. Therefore, suffrage is only one fourth of the system of feminism. It is interesting to note that the English militants of today are [p 528] using exactly the same arguments as that of the American Revolution, i.e., if we have no legal means, then we will use illegal means.

The fourth or economic application to woman is that there should be no discrimination in industry because of her sex.

Let us now turn to make a comparison of the importance of these four movements in the application of democracy for woman. We find the legal phase the least important, because it is already won. The political is the most immediately pressing demand and is the most conspicuous, because it is in the forefront. The spiritual or cultural – the movement for freedom of women to any kind of spiritual self-expression, for freedom from conventionalities (to dress as she likes and to study what she likes) – may not seem the most important now, but it will be in the end. Undoubtedly the economic is the most basic, because without it we cannot have the spiritual.

The history of this economic phase divides itself into three stages or conceptions. First, there is the old conception that woman, single or married, should remain at home. Then there comes the industrial revolution, taking the industry out of the
home and consequently taking the woman out with it. In order to meet this new condition, there next arises a second conception, that woman must choose from the two prerogatives of either getting married or going out to business, and that as soon as a woman gets married she must leave her profession and stay at home. The second conception is the one we are living under, but there is a third conception on its way which says that woman whether married or not should have economic freedom.

Therefore, the following shall be arguments in favor of economic independence for women. I have divided them under five heads, namely, those for the interest of the race, the interest of the community, the interest of woman herself, the interest of the husband, and the interest of the child.

**For the Interest of the Race**

Using the argument of President Jordan of Leland Stanford University for universal peace – war is one of the worst things for any race, because the bravest are drained off and killed while the cowards are left to be fathers of the coming generation – we may say that for the interest of eugenics, woman should not be forced to choose between marriage and profession, because then the able professional woman will lead a life of celibacy while the other is left for the mother of the race. [p 529]

**For the Interest of the Community**

Since the industrial revolution, less and less of occupation is being felt in the home for the mind and body of women. The kindergarten has gone out of the home; industry has gone out with the incoming of the age of machinery, and the care of children is being more and more recognized as a matter for experts, i.e., just because she is the mother doesn't any longer mean that she is most capable to arrange her child's diet, discipline, etc. Thus one half of the people is left almost idle; and the increasing cost of living is due to the fact that women of the higher and middle classes are becoming parasites.

**For the Interest of Woman Herself**

In the present condition of things, woman is distinctly inferior to man intellectually. This is caused by the lack of having their minds trained in some profession. If man had no systematized work and went idly about the house, except for petty chores, he, too, would be intellectually inferior: Therefore, it is to the interest of woman intellectually to have a profession.

**For the Interest of the Husband**

The ideal marriage state is a life of comradeship; but there can be no real comradeship unless the two parties are intellectually congenial, and this can only result from giving professions to woman. Under the old system, after marriage the
man continues to develop mentally, while the woman stands still, and the result is that after two or three years the husband feels the lack of companionship at home and rushes to his club or other congenial society at every opportunity. His wife has lost her interest and knowledge of his outside world and has ceased to be his intellectual comrade. Moreover, life would be more ideal if women should not be made to marry for mercenary purposes; and there would be more courtesy between men and women if they both can be self-supporting.

**For the Interest of the Child**

Although it must be admitted that a child loses something in not having the mother beside it to supply all its physical needs, nevertheless this is overbalanced by having mothers who are intellectual companions. After all, the real need and beauty of maternal affection consists in being always at hand for sympathy and confidence, and not in the performance of petty chores. Besides, if a mother has some intellectual interest to occupy her for a part of the day, she is much fresher to take care of her children than if she stays in the house and is nagged by them the whole day long. [p 530]

There have been several solutions presented for bringing about this condition of economic independence for women; as, for instance, the one for an extension of the school to the most primary work, even to include crèches, and the other for new regulations and hours in the industries for women; but I shall not take the time and space of going into them, as conditions in China are different from those of western countries and will require different solutions.

The writer wishes merely to present true feminism as it is, giving a review of its history, aims and development; and to show that it is nothing more than the extension of democracy or social justice and equality of opportunities to women. The position of woman is in an unwholesome transitional stage at present in the western countries, as testified by the conditions in England and the work for the divorce courts in the United States. The building up of western civilization has, as it were, left every other beam loose in its construction by leaving out its women, and now there naturally has to be a time of difficult and careful readjustment before the structure can be made solid.

As students and patriots of China in this her period of reconstruction, this problem is worthy of our interest and consideration. With the introduction of machinery and Western methods in our country, we cannot keep the women ignorant. Are we going to build a solid structure or are we going to leave every other beam loose for later readjustment in spite of the lesson herein presented?

I cannot too strongly impress upon the reader the importance of this consideration, for the feministic movement is not one for privileges to women, but one for the
requirement of women to be worthy citizens and contribute their share to the steady progress of our country towards prosperity and national greatness. [p 531]