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**Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Entrepreneurial Turn:
A Working Introduction ¹**

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Abstract

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, lived from 1860 to 1935 — the same years as did Jane Addams. Gilman was an American, a pioneering sociologist, an influential feminist pragmatist, a peripatetic lecturer, a prolific author, and a friend of Addams. Although Gilman died in 1935, she remains today a provocative sociological presence whose writings continue to make us think, argue, and question our preconceptions. This paper explores the entrepreneurial basis of Gilman's life as a professional sociologist, including her work as an artist, public speaker, and writer. Gilman promoted the core ideas that (1) humanness trumps sexual difference, (2) social logic is superior to individualist logic, (3) social evolution requires thoughtful planning, (4) social equity and fair play must hold in all things, (5) the past must not blindly restrict the future, (6) children must be well cared for, (7) beauty is not a luxury, and (8) greed, war, and waste are

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anti-social. Writing in the *American Journal of Sociology* and *The Forerunner* (the latter was a sociological journal that Gilman wrote and published from 1909 to 1916), Gilman espoused her mature sociological analyses of (1) the systemic relationships between family, home and society, (2) men and marriage, (3) motherhood, and (4) the relationships between children and parents. These analyses arose in the context of Gilman's vocational self-definition and entrepreneurial self-promotion as a female sociologist working outside the formal academy. Although vulnerable to misinterpretation and intellectual hijacking, Gilman provides an exciting and inherently entrepreneurial model that deserves recognition and further exploration.

Introduction

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, lived from 1860 to 1935 — the same years as did Jane Addams. Gilman was an American, a pioneering sociologist, an influential feminist pragmatist, a peripatetic lecturer, and a prolific author. Although Gilman died in 1935, she remains today a provocative sociological presence whose writings continue to make us think, argue, and question our preconceptions, especially with regard to the vital social institutions of family and marriage. As a woman and an intellectual who contributed to the foundations and the subsequent rise of American sociology, Gilman — like Addams — did so without the routinely more secure and stable economic employment enjoyed by most of her male colleagues in the academic university world.

To earn her living, Gilman became innovative and entrepreneurial. Gilman made sociology *per se* a paying proposition in her personal life and, *at the same time*, vigorously promoted an economically cooperative sociological vision wherein creative communal action is

central to establishing egalitarian, liberating and peaceful societies for *all* men, *all* women, and *all* children. In this way, Gilman became a social and sociological entrepreneur at both private and public levels. For younger social scientists who want to make a social difference, who want to meet and talk to people in everyday walks of life, who chafe under the strictures of agency regulations or the constraints of academic politics, Gilman provides, literally, a *working* model of another way to *be* a sociologist.

The subtitle of my presentation: “A Working Introduction to Gilman’s Views of Families, Marriages, and Children,” plays on the multifaceted notion of “work”: my aim is to briefly outline Gilman’s “work,” that is, her body of writings and ideas, while keeping firmly in mind that the generation and promulgation of these ideas was also her “work” in the day-to-day sense of earning a living. Gilman was entrepreneurial in both senses of “work.”

I add here a further gloss on the phrase, “a working introduction,” in noting the recent publication of my new English and Italian editions of selected essays by Gilman on the topic of families, marriages, and children (Hill, 2011a, b). Hence, this presentation, i.e., my “work” today, also provides a passing introduction to my personal entrepreneurial effort to bring Gilman’s “work” to wider audiences in the 21st century. Please understand that we could keep on compounding these concatenations of “work” — the American sociologist Erving Goffman (1974) referred in *Frame Analysis* to this type of nearly limitless wordplay as “keying” — but we would incur the serious risk of moving too far from the initial *frame* toward an ever distant outer *rim*, as Goffman put it. Let us return to my central topic: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and her entrepreneurial persona, Gilman as an alternative model of how to *be* a sociologist — a sociologist who was concurrently a friend and colleague of Jane Addams.

Jane Addams and Alternative Models of Sociological Work

In placing Jane Addams at the center of this Conference, the organizers establish an important precedent, that of celebrating an outstanding sociologist who, like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, worked fundamentally as an intellectual *outside* the university academy and, perhaps more importantly, showed us how to be sociologists without becoming perversely or invidiously patriarchal. Mary Jo Deegan's (1988, 2002a) studies of Jane Addams place Addams instrumentally in the forefront of a reconstituted historical understanding of sociology as a social, disciplinary and personal project. At the same time, Deegan helps us recognize that Addams worked cooperatively with myriad other sociologists, male and female. The many sociologist residents of Hull-House, together with an extensive external network of like-minded sociologists in and outside of the university world—formed an interconnected constellation of alternative models of sociological work among which Addams' star was only relatively brighter than the others. In addition to Addams *per se*, there are literally dozens upon dozens of intriguing and creative alternative life-models for sociology as a vocation. In *Women in Sociology: A Bio-bibliographical Sourcebook*, Deegan (1991) identified over 150 women who merit our close attention, and this only scratched the surface. More recently, for example, Deegan (2002) explicates the extraordinary work of Fannie Barrier Williams, a previously unknown African-American sociologist from Chicago who lived from 1893 to 1918 and worked primarily as a journalist. Deegan and Wahl's (2003) introduction to the little-known work and life of Ellen Gates Starr, the artistic and increasingly religious co-founder, with Jane Addams, of Hull-House in Chicago, provides yet another model. Indeed, we have many, many names to celebrate as models and from which to draw courage, inspiration, and ideas. Suffice it to say here

that Charlotte Perkins Gilman—who was very much a friend and admirer of Jane Addams—was one of many such stars in this large, alternative and sometimes entrepreneurial panoply of sociologists.

Methodological Issues

Several methodological issues surround the search for alternative models of sociological practice such as those embodied by Addams and Gilman. As we look to our disciplinary past for instructive exemplars, we quickly leave the realm of survey questionnaires, interviews and direct observation. Indeed, if we take seriously Anthony Giddens' (1985) important suggestion that the temporal scope of sociological investigation begins with the Industrial Revolution onward, we immediately recognize that the ever-lengthening temporal span for which we have disciplinary responsibility becomes increasingly inaccessible via the empirical research techniques so commonly and widely used by far too many of my American colleagues. Obviously, would-be informants from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are neither able to answer survey questionnaires nor respond to our requests for interviews. We can no longer directly observe Gilman in action. As a result, we are dependent on trace evidence found in newspapers, magazines, books, public records, private collections, and formal archives. Elsewhere (Hill, 1993, 2000, 2001a, b, 2003, 2005a, b), I have outlined much of the logic and specific procedures entailed in conducting and explicating library and archival research. In sum, the empirical foundations of the discussion at hand necessarily rely in large part on archival research and the subsequent analysis and interpretation of trace data found in libraries and archives.

Vulnerability and the Historical Record

An outstanding feature of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's (1935) work and life is that she practiced the sociological discipline in the status of what might today be called an "independent scholar." Her work is well documented (Hill, 1980; Scharnhorst, 1985; Allen, 1988; Mayering, 1989; Karpinski, 1992; Knight, 1994, Hill, 1996; Deegan, 1997; Deegan and Podeschi, 2001; Avril, 2008; Knight and Tuttle, 2009). Gilman held no permanent academic post, yet she was great friends with several leading American sociologists (including Jane Addams, Lester Frank Ward and Edward A. Ross), was an active member of the American Sociological Society, and published in the *American Journal of Sociology*. Gilman produced sociological ideas without benefit of professorial appointment, without tenure, without health insurance, without an employer-provided retirement account, and without formal organizational funding or support. For those of us who labor in the academic interstices, Gilman is an intriguing, inspiring and tenacious role model, but first I am obliged to say a few words about the vulnerabilities of all such models.

It is difficult (perhaps impossible?) to name living academic sociologists whose influence on popular thinking comes anywhere near the level achieved by Gilman during her era. Gilman, like Addams and several other pioneering female sociologists, including England's extraordinary Harriet Martineau (Hill, 1989a, 2004; Hill and Hoecker-Drysdale, 2001; Deegan, 2008), enjoyed widespread intellectual recognition and social efficacy during her lifetime. It is hard to think that such models can simply vanish from our collective consciousness. However, the eclipse and displacement of these women in the 1920s, in what Deegan (1991) aptly calls "the dark era of

patriarchal ascendancy” in professional sociology, is an object lesson that we ignore at our peril *if* our collective goals today include efficacious, democratic social change.

Female sociologists, generally, (and some male sociologists, specifically), who advocate and provide the intellectual bases so necessary to democratic social change, whose ideas threaten the privileged members of the status quo, are inherently vulnerable to marginalization, dismissal, derision and evaporation into thin air. Addams, Gilman, Martineau and many, many others of like mind and courageous action have given us a strong but vulnerable collective heritage that requires constant nurture and protracted protection. We must be on our guard lest they once again become marginalized or high jacked.

These women and their ideas are particularly vulnerable today to intellectual hijacking, often by groups with political agendas that Addams and her colleagues would clearly find anathema. Such hijackings can occur in both negative and positive directions, but remain hijackings all the same. For example, there are those in the gay and lesbian rights movement who promote Addams and her female colleagues at Hull-House as role models of exuberant lesbianism. The search for such role models is laudable and fully understandable, but the historical record provides no credible evidence that Hull-House was anything remotely like a hot house of unabashed lesbian activity. The politics of this situation are delicate, but if, as I conclude, the lesbian label is little more than wishful thinking, however positive and well-meaning, if it remains undocumented and unchallenged, it makes it much easier for the homophobic mainstream to discredit and dismiss the otherwise progressive and innovative ideas that flowed from Hull-House.

At the same time, there are others who hijack Martineau, Gilman, Addams, and their colleagues for destructive, negative ends. At issue here is the recent spate of academics who

vigorously assert that Martineau, Gilman, and Addams, among others, are invidiously and irredeemably racist. The facts, however, lead me to conclude that Martineau, Gilman, and Addams were thoroughly progressive on racial issues. Arguably, one can find the occasional word or phrase that can today be given a racialized interpretation, but the preponderance of the historical evidence strongly argues otherwise. This too is a politically delicate situation, at least for academics. At issue is the entire ideological apparatus of post-modernism and its destructive consequences for those of us who labor in the empirical and scientific disciplines. Suffice it to say here that hijacking Gilman and Addams as lesbian heroines, on the one hand, or as racist demagogues, on the other, not only does grave disservice to the historical record, but also raises the ever-present spectre that many of the most innovative, thoughtful, and progressive leaders of our disciplinary past, those to whom we frequently look for inspiration and insight, can be too easily dismissed and suddenly marginalized, thus undercutting our own work and programs.

In sum, the fundamental processes that marginalized Gilman and Addams during “the dark era of patriarchal ascendancy” have not disappeared, but constantly re-invent themselves in various forms and guises, be it unfounded accolades of lesbian leadership or destructive charges of racism, classism, elitism, and the like. We must be alert to these processes, and our prescription must always be careful, rigorous, systematic, logical attention to the empirical record, wherever it may lead (Deegan, 2003). And where it leads, more often than not, in my experience, is to the discovery of earnest, dedicated, hard-working, inventive, and progressive thinkers like Gilman, Addams, and their colleagues at Hull-House and elsewhere.

Gilman as Entrepreneur

In presenting Gilman as an entrepreneur, the plain fact is that she required an income. She responded to this situation with perseverance, creativity, and frequently with humor and élan. Her annual income was never great and was always a matter of practical importance. In her archives, one reads, for example, the diary entry where she instructed herself: “Must make \$3,000 this year.” At many other times, she frequently balanced her accounts with little, if any, to spare.

She was not independently wealthy, although she was twice married and this provided a certain economic buffer, especially the marriage in 1900 to her second husband, Houghton Gilman. Nonetheless, Gilman attempted to live by her own credo: a wife should be more than a decorative sponge on her husband. She insisted on “paying her own way,” as much as she could. And in this vein she pursued several creative, albeit modest, income generating projects.

The central entrepreneurial basis of Gilman’s life as a professional sociologist includes her work as an artist, public speaker, and writer. She promoted the core ideas that (1) humanness trumps sexual difference, (2) social logic is superior to individualist logic, (3) social evolution requires thoughtful planning, (4) social equity and fair play must hold in all things, (5) the past must not blindly restrict the future, (6) children must be well cared for, (7) beauty is not a luxury, and (8) greed, war, and waste are anti-social. Many of these ideas are present in her earliest efforts to earn a living.

Trading Cards

Gilman was a formally trained artist, having studied at what is now the Rhode Island School of Design. The idea that “beauty is not a luxury” shows itself in Gilman’s first significant attempt to earn money: creating designs for trade cards: small, colorful premiums that were given to purchases of various products, notably soap. Gilman designed a series of cards for the Kendal soap company and the Welcome soap company. Of note here is Gilman’s early visual focus on gender roles, family, and the relationships between the genders. To find online examples of Gilman’s art work, consult *Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, 1860-1935. Papers, 1846-1961: A Finding Aid* (1972).

Gilman’s First Book

Gilman’s first book, published in 1888, furthered her interest in the arts and the introduction of things beautiful into the home. The book, *Gems of Art for the Home and Fireside*, is a large format collection of etchings of various selected paintings, for which Gilman wrote the accompanying commentary. The present obscurity of this work results in part from it having been published under the surname of Charlotte’s first husband, as “Mrs. Charles Walter Stetson.” For discussion of the intellectual, historical, and other consequences of women’s name changes due to marriage and divorce, see Deegan (1998) and Gilman (2011a). Denise Knight (2001) suggests that this book, largely unknown until ten years ago, and of which there are very few known copies, tells us little about Gilman, but Knight understandably writes from the perspective of literary analysis, not sociology. Gilman’s social project, however, is clearly— if

briefly—stated in the book’s introduction. She wrote: “The art instinct, so universally existent in humanity, is one of the most potent factors in civilization.” “Art in public,” she continued, “is good, great buildings, fine statues, galleries of paintings, but art in the home is the most strong and lasting influence. It lifts and brightens life to the worn mother and hard-working father; it adds a constant charm to social intercourse, and, *most important of all*, it helps to give our children health and pleasure — a broad intelligent appreciation of beauty everywhere.” Here again are Gilman’s primary themes: the home, the family, and children. The commercial success, if any, of this work is currently unknown.

Lectures and Public Speaking

Public speaking, for which she was regularly but not handsomely paid, provided Gilman with an important source of income. Her lectures on sociological topics were heard by thousands of paying listeners throughout the United States and in many countries in Europe, to which she made several visits. Gilman kept detailed lists of her lectures, and the fees received. The negotiations involved in setting fees and choosing projects is particularly well illustrated in her decision to give a series of lectures for the Chautauqua movement in 1904.

In March, 1904, George Edgar Vincent, an early sociologist at the University of Chicago,³ wrote to Gilman asking her to give a series lectures during the summer, noting, “We have long wanted you at Chautauqua.”⁴ The Chautauqua social movement in the United States

³ For details on Vincent, including his relationship to Jane Addams, see Mary Jo Deegan, *Jane Addams and the Men of the Chicago School, 1892-1918*, pp. 92-98.

⁴ Vincent to Gilman, 29 March 1904. Harvard University, Schlesinger Library on the History

was a major, widespread adult education initiative that regularly featured well-known public intellectuals, many of whom were sociologists. In making an invitation to Gilman, Vincent added:

As you probably know, our fees are very meagre. I can offer you only \$125 for the five lectures out of which you would be expected to meet your own expenses. You probably know our work [for the Chatauquas] is of a purely educational character with no element of personal or private profit.

Gilman accepted, but not without probing for higher fees. In reply, Vincent remarked:

I am sorry to say that my offer is the best that I can make. Chautauqua is not a money making enterprise. All of our lecturers come to us at much lower fees than they receive elsewhere. We are very glad that we may count up on you. The topics you suggest are most attractive and we gladly accept them.⁵

The exchange between Gilman and Vincent draws attention to the economic dimension embedded in non-profit social programs like Chautauqua. To make Chautauqua attractive to the

of Women in America, Charlotte Perkins Gilman Papers, 1846-1961; General Correspondence; Chronological; 1900-1905.

⁵ Vincent to Gilman, 11 April 1904. Harvard University, Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Charlotte Perkins Gilman Papers, 1846-1961; General Correspondence; Chronological; 1900-1905.

general public, costs were cut to the bone. Public intellectuals like Gilman were expected to accept reduced remuneration, and, significantly, they did so. Jane Addams, for example, attracted huge crowds to Chautauquas held in the Chicago area.

Writing

Gilman became most widely known through her writings, which included poetry, short fiction, novels, non-fiction treatises (notably *Women and Economics*), and various journals, the most important of which, sociologically speaking, was *The Forerunner*, published from 1909-1916. Gilman, owned, published, and wrote the entire contents of each issue of *The Forerunner*, and it included several serialized full-length books, three of which Mary Jo Deegan and I have been privileged to give new life (Deegan and Hill, 1997; Hill and Deegan, 2002, 2004). Gilman's writing provided remuneration, although the amounts realized were not great and subscriptions to *The Forerunner* were never sufficient to make it a self-sustaining enterprise. Directed to a public audience, Gilman's writings in *The Forerunner* espoused her mature sociological analyses of (1) the systemic relationships between family, home and society, (2) men and marriage, (3) motherhood, and (4) the relationships between children and parents.

Novels, Fiction, and Sociology

Gilman was a sociologist who wrote formal works as well as popular fiction that illustrated sociological issues. By turning to fiction, Gilman hoped to promote sociological ideas in a format that would *sell* as well as instruct. Lars Furuland (1990) observed, “. . . without the

observant eye of [novelist] authors we would know infinitely less about psychological responses, attitudes, mentality, habits and conventions in various social strata. This especially applies to the time preceding modern sociology, Gallup polls etc. But also to the period thereafter.” American examples include the Nebraska sociological novelist Mari Sandoz (Hill, 1987, 1989b) and the dozens of novels reviewed in *Sociology and Social Research* from 1925 to 1958 (Hill, 2006). But, Gilman, like Harriet Martineau, goes Furuland one better. Both women specifically used popular fiction to illustrate sociological concepts. Addams also did much the same thing in her literate autobiographies. Gilman, often writing at the intersection of fiction and non-fiction, represents another alternative way of doing sociology, one that was also entrepreneurial and sociological in both conception and execution.

Scandinavian Connections

On the occasion of this special conference in Uppsala, it behooves me, before concluding my remarks, to quickly identify a few of Gilman’s entrepreneurial and intellectual connections to Scandinavia. First, we know that she was invited in 1913 to speak to the National Council of Women of Denmark. I do not know, however, that this became reality, but, at the least, the invitation demonstrates interest by Danish women in Gilman’s ideas.

Second, in *The Forerunner*, Gilman (2011b, c) criticized some aspects of the popular Swedish feminist, Ellen Key. For an introduction to Key, see Nyström-Hamilton (1913). Gilman’s main point of difference with Key was the idea that young children should be cared for and taught by those who were best able to do so, and that this was not necessarily the biological

mother. The contrast between Gilman's and Key's ideas is early explored in Jessie Taft's (1915) Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Chicago.

Third, a Swedish press obtained, posthumously, the rights to publish a Swedish translation of Gilman's best known work, *The Yellow-Wall Paper*. For this, Gilman's daughter was paid the handsome sum of \$20.00.

And last, Polly Wynn Allen (1988) maintains that architectural concepts incorporated in Alva and Gunnar Myrdal's housing proposals derive from ideas originally put forward by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. These notions include such concepts as communal kitchens and common areas. At the best, all I can do here is whet your appetites, and to challenge one of you to someday further document the details of the Gilman–Scandinavia connection.

Conclusion

My hope today is that wider dissemination of Gilman's ideas will lead to substantive, constructive social change. Gilman, like many of her sociological colleagues, including Jane Addams, provides an alternative model of how to *be* a sociologist. Gilman's is not a model designed to make any of us wealthy in a pecuniary sense, but it is nonetheless an intellectually exciting and inherently entrepreneurial model worth preserving and exploring.

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