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From Feminism to Egoism

A part from Max Stirner's Dialectical Egoism

John F Welsh

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Marsden discovered that the "guild doctrine" of ragamuffinism appears in the struggle for women's equality. The early advocates for suffragism and feminism argue that "women should create a guild monopoly of their sex, and utilize it to force a partnership between themselves and men. Guilds for men. Marriage for women."

Marsden criticizes unequal power relations in marriage and fights against the cultural prescription that demands marriage for women. She ridicules the notions that women should view themselves as a guild and that marriage should be viewed as an absolute element of the emancipation of women.

The feminist argument suggests that the "guild for women" entails a similar form of embargoism that would marginalize unmarried women, ostracize and fine unmarried men, and promote the interests of married women through the power of the vote. For the suffragists, the vote was the practical tool that would be used to impose "purity and morals" in society through advocacy for the elimination of prostitution and venereal disease.

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Men will be persecuted through a “steadily rising scale” of charges, partner’s maintenance, children’s maintenance, even being refused admission to their own homes if they succumb to vice and indolence. Women will also seek complete control of sexual relations within marriage and a legal claim upon men’s incomes. The meaning of feminist promises to enforce cultural expectations for marriage is that punishments for philandering males, financial disincentives for single men, and humiliations for single women will ensure marriage as a safe and cheap way out of the threats of the feminist embargo. Marsden concludes that “for guild-women the guild-monopoly of their sex will have become absolute – a quite natural development of the guild-monopoly theory.”

For Marsden, it is contradictory to argue that the emancipation of women can be achieved through their submission to marriage and the state. The replacement of a male-dominated monopoly by a governmental monopoly is not a path to liberation .

Marsden’s relationship to both the activism and philosophy of suffragism and incipient feminism was complex and contentious from the outset .

While she was a lifelong advocate for women, it is also true that she was a relentless critic of suffragism and feminism, especially during her tenure as editor of *The Freewoman*, *The New Freewoman*, and *The Egoist* from 1911 to 1914. Her dissidence from modernity led her to adopt a strident form of egoism that, in her view, replaced or supplanted feminist philosophy.

The suffrage movement in Great Britain achieved the apex of its notoriety and public support before World War I, primarily through the agitation, civil disobedience, and political theater of the Women’s Political and Social Union. The period from 1908 to 1914 provided the WPSU with a particularly good opportunity to build the organization and the movement.

Based on her initial work in the WPSU, Marsden was viewed by the leadership, Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, as an extremely talented and passionate fighter for women's liberation. The leadership of the WPSU intended to cultivate Marsden's talents in public speaking and organization to build membership and raise funds for the organization. The expectation was that she would support the organization's plan for growth, following directives from the WPSU leadership. But Marsden always expressed a "theatrical genius for spectacular antagonism," using rhetoric and street theater to draw attention to women's issues by provoking authorities.

Her "organizational" and "fundraising" activities tended to become forms of street theater that dramatized her evolving, aggressive concept of feminist individualism. She was arrested several times, spent time in jail, participated in a hunger strike, and was brutally forcefed, enduring lifelong injuries as a result. She was always more of a fighter and provocateur than a disciplined functionary, a fact that increasingly annoyed the WPSU leadership. The problem she experienced in her political activism can be summarized by saying that the Pankhursts wanted "to turn an anarchist into a bureaucrat," a transformation that Marsden resisted on a visceral level.

By 1909, Marsden read Stirner and Nietzsche and was interested in developing a deeper understanding of Stirner's critique of ideology and social movements. In politics, she demonstrated a clear preference for independent, direct action, rather than what she saw as the plodding, authoritarian, and collectivist inaction of a cumbersome organization. She had little regard for the strategic plans and the hierarchical decision making of the suffragist establishment. Consequently, Marsden was increasingly viewed by the WPSU leadership as a liability and a "loose cannon."

Her resignation from the Women's Social and Political Union in 1911 was due in roughly equal measures to her disagreements with the tactics of the WPSU, philosophic dif-

ferences with the political goals of suffragism, and a refusal to submit her organization and fundraising activities for prior approval from the Pankhursts and their associates. With the founding of *The Freewoman* in 1911, Marsden's career as a political activist was substantially over and her career as a writer, editor, and radical public intellectual began.

Marsden's analysis and commentary on suffragism and feminism was dispersed throughout all three of her journals. While she took considerable delight in ridiculing the leadership of the WPSU and attacking the broader suffragist and feminist movements, Marsden's struggle with the issues pertaining to women's liberation propelled her to articulate an egoist position on culture and politics. Her egoism undoubtedly evolved from her reading of Stirner, but it acquired a form, content, and rhythm in her encounters with the theory and movement of suffragism and feminism.

She provided a critique of the suffragist concept of freedom, the centralist tendencies of social movements, and the notion that persons can be liberated by the state, all of which reflect the application of Stirner's concepts to social movements. Toward the end of her tenure as editor of *The Egoist* in June 1914, she reflected on the emerging frustration within the suffrage movement, specifically within the WPSU, with the "interminable reiteration and threadbare arguments" of a cause that had been thrust upon new generation of women as an urgent issue.

Marsden doubts that suffragism approached anything remotely urgent in large part because its advocates were only "nominally" concerned with suffrage and the challenges women face in everyday life.

What was called the suffrage movement was more concerned with institutionalizing and maintaining the hierarchy within the WPSU, which meant discrediting the political opponents of the Pankhurst family and its associates. Marsden argues that political movements typically lose their passion and

this transformation because collective action addresses only the form, not the content nor the intent of liberation.

The intention or the will comes from within the woman. The freewoman rejects the “protection” offered by marriage and the protection promised by the suffragist movement and the state. She must “produce within herself strength sufficient” to provide for herself and her children. She must acquire property by working, earning money, and adopting all of the incentives that propel “strenuous effort” by men – wealth, power, titles, and public honor- so that she need not solicit maintenance from any man, movement, or government.

Feminist doctrine, therefore, is beset with many difficulties for women since it means a complete break the servitude of the past and cannot offer women the same guarantees of security, prosperity, and comfort. While egoist liberation is possible to the woman who asserts power and acquires property, Marsden does not expect such a transformation any time soon since her brand of feminism will not likely be accepted by “ordinary women who do not already bear in themselves the stamp of the individual.”

She estimates, somewhat optimistically, that “our interpretation of the doctrine has merely to be stated clearly to be frankly rejected by, at least, three women in every four.”

direction over time, and create “mournful and monotonous” rituals that reify the memories and myths about the contributions of the leaders to the “cause.” The adherents, who seek participation in the movement initially to get help with problems they face in everyday life, are eventually reduced to the status of “claimants” who are encouraged to confuse solutions to their grievances with the hierarchy’s “rhetoric of freedom.” Claimants are the low-level units in the cause who make claims that they must receive “rights” in order to be “free.”

For Marsden, social and political “claims are reproaches of the powerless: whines for protection.

All the suffragists’ ‘claims’ are of this order.”³⁰ Whines for protection are nothing less than appeals to powerful others, particularly the movement’s leadership and the state, to relieve the individual of responsibility, power, and property. The whine is the discourse of the ragamuffin. Marsden’s goal in writing about the fixed ideas of political movements is to disentangle the claims for rights and protection from “the center of power: the self. One has the freedom if one has the power, and the measure of power is one’s own concern.” The collectivization of grievances is the institutionalization of ragamuffinism. The article “Bondwomen” in the initial issue of *The Freewoman* November 1911 outlined the philosophic direction Marsden planned for the journal. It also provided her an opportunity to differentiate her position from that of the WPSU.³¹ “Bondwomen” is a grand critique of the status of women in society that counterposes the concept of the “bondwoman” with the “freewoman,” arguing that suffragism and feminism are inadequate paths to freedom since they only reproduce ragamuffinism in a new form.

This theme was reiterated in several articles that appeared in *The Freewoman* and *The New Freewoman*. Her articles and commentary in *The Egoist* more forcefully express the notion that the matters concerning the servile condition of women have a broader meaning. That is, the goal of philosophy is not

the liberation of women, but the self-liberation of the individual. It is overcoming ragamuffinism in all of its forms .

Her initial foray into the philosophy of liberation in *The Free-woman* still provides strong indications of Marsden's developing egoism and the influence of Stirner, although it contains terminology that he certainly avoided.

For example, Marsden uses the terms "spirit" and "spiritual" frequently to signify the woman passion and intentionality, and not in either a religious or Hegelian sense. Nevertheless, even her early articles reveal Stirner's concepts and the dialectical method that Marsden would use consistently in her articles and editorials in all three journals. Her method begins with a stark, dramatic, and controversial statement about her topic. She follows this with a more analytical, thoughtful discussion that is intended to reveal the dialectical development of the issue. Antagonisms appear at the beginning of the essay and persist until a resolution appears at the end. Antagonisms between concepts or social forces are resolved in the direction of egoism, or the notion that the individual must draw on his or her own will and resources to assert power or acquire property.

Thus, the antagonism between the traditional "servile condition" of women and the suffrage movement reveals that suffragism produces only another form of "bondwomen."

The conflict between traditional servility and suffragism is supplanted by egoism as the higher presupposition.

"Bondwomen" differ from "freewomen" by a fundamental distinction: they are not autonomous individuals; they do not have a will, spirit, or intent of their own. There is nothing that establishes them as unique, independent individuals. "They are complements merely. By habit of thought, by form of activity, and largely by preference, they round off the personality of some other individual, rather than cultivate their own."

Historically, "bondwomen" defines the status and working practice of women. Using the concepts of master and servant,

separated from the act. The rhetoric of women's movements and labor movements that attempt to legitimate organizational hierarchies and the division of thought and action through appeals to "women's freedom" or "worker's freedom" are banalities and misstatements that only encourage women and workers to "pursue their own shadow." The "cause" is also mere atmosphere since the reference pretends to delimit or conceptualize an infinite number of actions, words, artifacts, persons, and relationships into a unified and integrated entity that has a "separate existence." The "cause" is discourse and memory that has meaning attributed to it by observers who are usually external to the action. The "cause" exists to provide solace and protection in a place

among those who "lost the instinct for action" can "amuse themselves by words." Although all the claimants may be "fascinated by the jargon," where individuals are taken in by the rhetoric, there are "consequences disastrous in the highest degree to themselves."

In the initial issue of *The Egoist*, Marsden is thoroughly an insurrectionist. She is no longer a reformist nor a revolutionary. She adopts Stirner's concept of egoist insurrection and, at times, suggests that the insurrection of many freewomen can produce a social transformation . In contrast to the bondwomen, who trade one form of subordination for another since they become mere claimants subordinate to the cause, the movement, and the state, the freewomen "feel within us the stirrings of new powers and growing strength," intending to constitute a "higher development in the evolution of the human race and human achievement." Freewomenes chew protection in favor of "strenuous effort" to shoulder their own responsibilities.

"They bear no grudge and claim no exception because of the greater burdens nature has made theirs. They accept them willingly, because of their added opportunity and power." Political actions, such as the vote, will lend only a "small quota" to

rier. The “breakthrough” is a single act of “getting free.” It is a definite, specific action that has a limited timeframe, a beginning, an end, and a duration that can be known. Once the act occurs, it is complete. It does not entail an independent existence on its own account; it does not become an objective, external condition.

It does not occupy any space; it only occurs in time. Any “separate existence” of the act is only “atmosphere” existing in the discourse and memories of external observers. Everyday life is a process of “overcoming specific resistances” to the trajectory of individual behavior. Breaking through the barriers is “an individual affair which must be operated in one’s own person.” Only one person who is really concerned about the freeing of the individual is the person who wears, feels, and resents the shackles.

The shackles must be broken by the person. If they are released by an external agent, they will eventually reappear at the caprice of a powerful, more determined other. As used by the suffragists, or the agents of any political movement, “freedom” is the atmosphere attributed to actions that have been “worked up” or reified to serve organizational interests. The atmosphere, the reified actions, is the “vicious exploitation of the normal activity of working oneself free of difficulties.”

The efforts by social movements such as suffragism and socialism to define themselves in terms of freedom is to attempt to give meaning to a static, inert quality of the external world. It is a futile attempt to modify action, or to reduce human behavior to the landscape or atmosphere. The act of freeing is a quality of time, not space, in which the terminus is the motive that prompts the person’s struggle. It is meaningless to establish a movement, a cause, or an organization that seeks to establish “freedom” as though it is a condition or a quality of space.

Freedom is action and can only exist in time. There can be no fight for freedom because it is not an object. It cannot be

Marsden argues that women as a category have demonstrated in the past little but the attributes of the “servant,” while the qualities of the “master,” such as imposing law, setting standards, establishing rights and duties, acquiring property, have been relegated to men. Women have been the “followers, believers, the law-abiding, the moral, the conventionally admiring” whose virtues are those of a subordinate class. Women have served as functionaries and servants. They live by the “borrowed precepts” issued by men. Societal hierarchies ensure that some men must be servants, but all women are servants and all the masters are men. What fundamentally characterizes women is their servile condition.

The ultimate goal of the struggle for women’s freedom is mastery or self ownership.

Self-ownership is impossible without the ownership of something external to oneself. In order for women to own themselves, they must own material property.

Without property persons are forced to sell themselves or their labor power to others who can exchange labor power for either wages or gifts in kind necessary to survival.

Outside of economic relationships, persons without power must barter what they have for the desiderata they seek from the world and from others. The person who lacks property cannot be his or her own master, cannot own self, cannot be autonomous, and cannot have an independent will. The person who lacks property must become a “hired man,” selling labor power or bartering personal resources for material survival, comfort, and security. The dialectic of powerlessness and propertylessness makes it possible to understand women’s struggles in modernizing societies. She says that women on the whole own little or no property. Consequently, the process of bartering themselves begins immediately and occurs almost automatically on a daily basis.

The key to liberation is breaking this process by asserting power and acquiring property, overcoming ragamuffinism.

Marsden is not interested in detailing the history of the oppression of women, she wants to understand its modern manifestations and to provoke rebellion against it. In order to do so, she says it is important to acknowledge that women bear responsibility for both their oppression and their liberation. Oppression and liberation have both an internal and external component. Women will never be free of their bondage unless they understand how they have contributed to it. The reason why men have been historically successful in “crushing” women down is because women were “down in themselves – i.e., weaker in mind.” Those who are pushed to the lower rungs of the social hierarchy are inferior, in part, because they believe themselves to be inferior.

To change the status of women, women must change how they view themselves. “When change takes place in the thing itself- i.e., when it becomes equal or superior – by the nature of its own being it rises.” In modernity, the servile condition of women is manifest in their “protected” status; they are “protected” by men, culture, and the state. The protected status helps explain the contradictory and “stupefying influence of security and irresponsibility” which “soothes women into a willing acceptance” of their social status. Protection means that security is conferred on women, but they must relinquish their power to earn, think, and assert responsibility for their lives. Political movements and advocacy for women must be assessed from this perspective.

To what extent do suffragism and feminism advocate in theory and practice the overcoming of the “protected status” of women in favor of self-ownership? To what extent do suffragism and feminism advocate for self-ownership and the replacement of bondswomen by freewomen? To what extent do suffragism and feminism promote the acquisition of property and power by women?

The political choice for women is to either “sink back” into the historical status of propertylessness and powerlessness, or

to “stand recognized as ‘master’ among other ‘masters.’” Marsden is not convinced that suffragism and feminism are viable paths to liberation. The “cult of suffragism” begins from a premise that conceptualizes an inferior and subordinate status for women. It “takes its stand upon the weakness and dejectedness of the conditions of women.” It says, “Are women not weak?

Are women not crushed down? Are women not in need of protection?

Therefore, give them the means where with they may be protected.” For suffragism and the feminism of early the early twentieth century, the conferral of “the means wherewith they may be protected” equates with acquiring the vote and participation in the making of law that protects women. It is the conferral of “courtesy rights,” or the political fulfillment of a humanitarian belief that women should have “rights” in order to be protected from the more egregious consequences of servitude. It is not, in itself, the overcoming of servitude. Rights are conferred by the state as a modernist courtesy to women. The basic element of suffragist ideology is that women’s freedom is achieved through women participating in the making of law that is oriented to the protection of women, hardly a break from ragamuffinism.

Marsden also believed that the theory and strategy of suffragism was flawed because it was based on a concept of freedom that she rejected. Freedom to the egoist is an act, it is not a condition, nor a state of being.

The concept of “freedom” presumes a condition in which persons experience what is inherent in the condition and not in their activity. But this is a contradiction because there is no condition in which freedom is experienced by inert objects; there is only the activity of freeing oneself. The act of freeing oneself may acquire an “atmosphere” in which meanings are attributed to actions by an external observer, but the act is fundamentally the notion of a force breaking through a bar-