
Cultural Changes: Bicycles, Bloomers, and the New Woman by Eugene V. Debs

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The New Woman.

We hear much nowadays about the "new woman." The theme is an inviting one. It breathes of a "good time coming," when woman shall be at least the equal of man. And the Lord knows this is not claiming much for her. For, as millions of men are slaves, so millions of women are the slaves of slaves. In respect to woman, man has not risen above animal creation. He is the stronger and therefore rules; and woman only has what he has seen fit to "allow" her. Conceal it as we may the haggard fact stands forth that men have by virtue of superior strength kept women in bondage. Of course I totally dismiss dresses and diamonds and dainties. I discuss the inherent, inalienable right to "liberty and the pursuit of happiness." In our country, the ballot makes the sovereign. Withhold it and slavery follows. Men have with instinctive fealty to their sex assumed and exercised all authority, and woman's sphere has been limited to meek submission.

The "new woman," I am persuaded, will take her place side by side with man in the great struggle for social, economic, and intellectual emancipation. She will no longer be disenfranchised by her sex. She will have an equal chance from the start and will invade every domain in which brains and pluck and energy compete for the world's prizes. She will scorn to be the petted plaything of society. She will be no more masculine nor less "modest" than now. She will more than ever grace and beautify the home by the witchery and magic of a woman's love. She will go out by herself when she chooses to do so, and her release from the guardianship we now force upon her will be

all the protection she will require. She will marry, not to escape the vulgar gossip of a soulless society, but to please herself; and love born of moral and intellectual equality will be the only consideration. She will command the homage of man and hand in hand they will travel life's journey together.

My mother is advanced in years, but I am proud to believe her to be the best type of "new woman." My wife and sisters have all the crowning glories of the "new woman." In our family there is no superiority of sex. There is no authority and none is needed. The home under the sweet and tender influences of the "new woman" will be radiant with love and joy.

The Bicycle.

The mission of the bicycle is greatly underrated. Human ingenuity, in evolving the bicycle, has given man a mighty boon. It is to play a great part in the world's affairs. It is to liberate millions from the thralldom of foul atmosphere, squalid and filthy apartments, and all the multiplicity of debauching and demoralizing conditions that make the lives of workingmen and women in manufacturing and commercial centers a continuous curse. It is to be an important factor in depopulating cities and building up the country.

It will be a mighty leveler upward and downward. The bicycle will attack the fabulous value of city real estate, distribute population, lower rent, close up the tenement den, and extinguish the sweatshop hell. It will free the inhabitants of cities from the fetid odors their overcrowded conditions generate and pour a perpetual flood of fresh air upon the race. As a matter of course working people will have them and the man who trudges to his daily toil will be an object for a relief commission.

The limits of an interview will admit only the merest glimpse of the possibilities of the bicycle. The great health-giving advantages of fresh air and exercise, will by the fiat of the bicycle, be the heritage of the race. The bicycle, not the medical profession, will triumph over disease. The wheel is on the trail of Consumption and will overtake and vanquish the remorseless destroyer. Men and women and children will all ride the bicycle and the enrapturing panorama of nature will no longer be forbidden glories to most of the race.

Of course, the bicycle is yet in embryo. The wheel of the future will revolve to suit man's fancy and the variety, design, and capacity

will be practically without limit. And when monopoly and special privilege are abolished, the bicycle may be purchased for a song and will be within the reach of all. The world will yet revolve on wheels.

Bloomers.

The “Bloomer Question” should be solved by the sex that wears them in a way to suit themselves. Men of sense will hail with satisfaction any change in the woman’s dress in which health and comfort shall be in harmonious alliance with elegance and style. Women know a thousand times better than men what they should wear and I regard it as presumptuous and impertinent for men to meddle in such affairs. If men wanted to wear bloomers they would wear them, nor would they ask the consent or consult the views or desires of women. It should be understood that women are the equals, not the wards of men, and in their own affairs they have the right to suit themselves.

For myself, I confess to a liking for bloomers. They seem cool and comfortable and there is something about the air of the girl who wears them that reminds me of the Declaration of Independence. They are immodest only to the immodest. I have immense admiration for women who have the audacity to fly in the face of antiquated “forms” and “usages.” With iconoclastic courage they shock the prudes of both sexes and pave the way of higher elevations and loftier attainments. Mrs. Annie Jenness Miller¹ is one of the really great women of the century.

Eugene V. Debs.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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¹ **Annie Jenness Miller** (1859-19XX) was an author, magazine editor, and prominent public speaker on the topic of women’s clothing reform. Her name is most closely associated with the development of non-restrictive undergarments. Miller’s pioneering magazine was the New York monthly, *Dress*.