



Profession, Emotion, and Hope: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Origins of the Sociology of Gender

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PRESS

ABSTRACT

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (USA, 1860–1935) is considered one of the most significant feminist social theorists of her time. Despite this, she was excluded from the sociological canon for a long period. In contrast to her male counterparts, she proposed an alternative and pioneering theoretical framework for examining social reality, which placed gender domination at the forefront of sociological analysis. The ‘sexuo-economic relation’ and ‘androcentric culture’ are crucial concepts for understanding gender and social relations. This article presents a synthesis and review of the main pioneering contributions to the sociological analysis of gender. Gilman’s sociological thought challenges the androcentric and sexist nature of social science. She develops a theoretical framework for analysing gender domination on the basis of observations of inequality in everyday life. Gilman also implements an alternative model of sociological practice that is linked to social reform, outreach and social pedagogy to promote women’s emancipation and gender equality.

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KEYWORDS:

sociology; feminism; social theory; women in science; androcentrism; gender analysis

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Jiménez-Rodrigo, María Luisa. 2024. “Profession, Emotion, and Hope: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Origins of the Sociology of Gender.” *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 27(2): 200–216. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.432>

Charlotte Perkins Gilman is one of the most significant and influential feminist and social theorists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Allen 2009; Coot 1987; Degler 1956; Lengermann & Niebrugge 1998). However, like many other female figures from her time, she was disregarded and omitted from the sociological canon (Deegan 1988, 2003; Holzhauser 2021; Keith 1991; Lengermann & Niebrugge 1998). In fact, she has mostly been acknowledged as a novelist and poet (Hill & Deegan 2004). However, the recovery of her sociological work has demonstrated her exceptional ability as a social theorist, on a par with the esteemed scholars of her era (Lengermann & Niebrugge 1998). Although Gilman is now considered a ‘classic’ in some sociological theory textbooks (Allan 2005; Appelrouth & Edles 2020; Ritzer 2008), she continues to be an unknown in many teaching guides and research programmes, both in sociology and in gender and women’s studies.

Despite some aspects of her work, such as those related to social evolutionism or essentialist cultural feminism, being now outdated, her theoretical and conceptual framework for gender analysis in social relations remains fully valid. This article examines Gilman’s principal theoretical contributions to feminist sociological analysis, emphasising her innovating and groundbreaking role. To this end, this paper is based on a bibliographic review of the life and key works of the author, with a particular focus on *Women and Economics* (1898) which presents her sociological theory in a structured manner. In a pioneering way, Gilman introduced issues related to women’s experiences into social analysis, which had not been explored until then, incorporating gender relations of domination as a central analytical axis. She also anticipates feminist concepts and schemes of analysis that would be developed many decades later. Furthermore, she produced a substantial and varied corpus of literature and fiction with the aim of democratising sociological reflection and raising awareness of women’s emancipation. Therefore, we could say that her work combines the systematic development of the sociological profession, the emotion linked to artistic expression, and the hope for a future of equality and freedom for women and men.

SOME NOTES ON THE LIFE AND WORK OF CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was born in 1860 in Connecticut, USA, into a wealthy family that had declined due to her father’s abandonment of her during her childhood. This situation led to a financially precarious family state, but it did not prevent Gilman from socializing in the most distinguished social and intellectual circles (Lengermann & Niebrugge 1998). The conflict between her career aspirations and societal expectations of women’s traditional roles had a profound impact on both her personal and professional life. Indeed, she asserted that her efforts to reconcile with the domesticity and motherhood that were imposed upon her during her first marriage precipitated a series of severe nervous breakdowns (Gilman 1935).

After her divorce and move to California in 1888, Gilman entered a period of independence, during which she wrote productively and actively participated in social and academic events (Scharnhorst 1985), particularly those associated with women’s groups (Keith 1991). She organised the California Women’s Congress in 1894 and 1895, and collaborated with Jane Addams and the Hull House in Chicago. In 1896, she represented at the International Socialist and Labour Congress in London and met

Beatrice Webb and George Bernard Shaw (Hill & Deegan 2004; Keith 1991). In 1900, she remarried and relocated to New York City, where she maintained her professional involvement and achieved success as a renowned writer and speaker. In 1934, Gilman, ill with cancer, returned to California, where she ended her life (Keith 1991).

Her body of work is notably extensive and diverse, encompassing essays and analyses of sociology, economics and urban planning, as well as newspaper articles, novels, short stories, songs and poems. Her most meaningful sociological contribution is *Women and Economics* (1898), a seminal work that advances a comprehensive theory of gender stratification and male domination in industrial society. Other significant sociological works include *The Concerning Children* (1903a), *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (1903b), *Human Work* (1904), *Our Androcentric Culture or the Man-Made World* (1911) and *His Religion and Hers* (1923). Gilman was a reputable sociologist, having published in distinguished academic journals such as the *American Journal of Sociology* and the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*. She also actively attended scientific meetings of the American Sociological Society (Keith 1991).

Despite the impact of her work on the general public and her recognition as a sociologist and feminist in the intellectual and activist circles of her time (Hill & Deegan 2004), Gilman ultimately became absent from the academic records of sociological theory (Deegan 1991; Lengermann & Niebrugge 1998). According to Lengermann and Niebrugge (1998), the exclusion of women from the sociological canon was due to a dual politics. On one hand, there was a ‘politics of gender’ that displayed a strong anti-feminist and anti-women bias, leading to the dismissal and discrediting of female authority in a male-centric academic world. The second process is a result of the ‘politics of knowledge’ that determined the epistemological criteria of the discipline, as well as the social role of the (male) sociologist based on scientific rigour, evaluative neutrality and formal abstraction. In this sense, adopting a stance divergent from the intellectual ideal delegitimized the efforts of numerous women (as well as some men) who engaged in a sociology that championed social injustices. Similarly to other pioneering women sociologists – such as Harriet Martineau, Beatrice Webb and Jane Addams – Gilman developed a significant portion of her sociological work outside the formal academy. This approach provided an alternative model of sociological practice that was closely intertwined with social reform (Hill & Deegan 2004; Lemert 2000; Lengermann & Niebrugge 1998).

Two additional circumstances specifically influenced Gilman’s exclusion from the sociological canon. First, the link between her sociological theory and social evolutionism, a theory which lost its credibility in the early twentieth century and was viewed as a pseudo-science. Secondly, her feminist approach was perceived in the context of her era as a moral argument rather than as a valid scientific methodology for social analysis (Palmeri 2003). Moreover, women’s experiences, the subjects on which she focussed all her thinking, were considered irrelevant to the institutionalised sociology of the time (Lengermann & Niebrugge 1998).

THE FEMINIST SOCIOLOGY OF CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN

Gilman considered herself a social scientist and feminist theorist. Doing social science and feminist theory were the same task, so it is difficult to separate the contributions in both fields (Palmeri 2003). Her thought draws on different theoretical

sources. A fundamental theoretical perspective was social evolutionism, which was a prominent framework among early sociologists (see, for example, Herbert Spencer or Edward Westermarck). But unlike Spencer’s liberal evolutionism, Gilman took a reformist perspective to analyse and denounce the situation of women in the context of industrial society. A key idea of reformist evolutionism, and taken up by Gilman, is that acquired cultural traits could be transmitted and inherited from generation to generation as an adaptive mechanism. In this way, the evolution of human consciousness gave human beings the capacity to construct and modify their social environment and thus to steer the direction of their evolution towards social prosperity (Hausman 1998).

In connection with evolutionary approaches, Gilman develops her theses close to cultural and pragmatic feminism. Of particular influence on Gilman was the gynocentric theory of Lester F. Ward, whose thesis was that women, as producers of life and as a result of social evolution, are the original human type on which all species depend for their development (McKenna 2012). As a result of the evolutionary process, women would specialise in certain capacities, values and ideas. This is known as the Doctrine of Separate Spheres (Deegan 1987). According to this approach, women would be shaped as a superior group, naturally peaceful, cooperative, caring and civilised, as opposed to men, naturally competitive and destructive. Therefore, the role of women in their maternal and caring facet would be key to social development. This is evident in both her sociological work, most notably *Women and Economics* (Gilman [1898] 1998), and her poetry and fiction (Gilman 1914, 1915). In one of her most celebrated poems, “To the Indifferent Women” (Gilman 1914), the following verse is presented:

Yet you are mothers! And a mother’s care
Is the first step towards friendly human life.
Life where all nations in untroubled peace
Unite to raise the standard of the world
And make the happiness we seek in homes
Spread everywhere in strong and fruitful love.

Despite her evolutionary and cultural feminist approaches, which have subsequently been the subject of significant criticism, it is fair to acknowledge her role in establishing the foundations of feminist sociology (Lemert 2000; Lengermann & Niebrugge 1998; Palmeri 2003). Their pioneering contributions can be summarised in four key points that can guide current sociological analysis of gender relations (Table 1).

1.	Challenging androcentric and sexist biases that can influence social science.
2.	Theoretical framework that places gender at the centre of the analysis of social relations: - Gender as a structuring axis of social life. - Focus on gender relations of domination. - Interrelation between economic structure and androcentric culture.
3.	Method for analysing gender relations: - Critical examination of myths and beliefs that justify the subordination of women. - Identify the social and gendered conditions behind individual experiences.

Table 1 Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s feminist keys to sociological analysis of gender relations.

(Contd.)

- Search for empirical evidence of gender inequalities:
 - Comparative method for analysing gender relations:
 - Systematic comparison of women's and men's experiences and situations.
 - Comparison of gender-related differences across diverse contexts and times.
 - Analysis of the social patterns in everyday life.

4. Alternative model of sociological practice linked to social reform:

- Social project for women's emancipation. Three ways:
 - Knowledge.
 - Education and socialisation.
 - Reorganisation of domestic, care and sociability spaces.
 - Sociological divulgation and feminist pedagogy.
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CHALLENGING ANDROCENTRIC AND SEXIST BIASES THAT CAN INFLUENCE SOCIAL SCIENCE

Gilman's work is situated in the so-called golden age of women in sociology (1890–1920) (Deegan 1991), which corresponds to the academic recognition and institutionalisation of sociology as a scientific discipline. Gilman develops a unique and distinct vision with respect to the theoretical frameworks of the 'founding fathers' of the discipline (mainly, Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber) by placing the subordinate status of women at the centre of her analysis (Lengermann & Niebrugge 1998). Women and gender relations have never been a major topic of reflection for classical male sociologists, who were more focussed on analysing the changes brought about by industrial society in the public sphere of politics and the labour market, strongly masculinised spaces, ignoring their relations with domestic life (Abbott & Wallace 2005; Millman & Kanter 1987).

Gilman exposes the androcentric and sexist biases of classical sociological thought (Palmeri 2003) and introduces issues that have been previously underestimated, such as gender inequalities in the division of labour, domestic work and child-rearing, motherhood, sexuality, mental health and women's social, economic and political participation. Therefore, Gilman also highlights another major sexist bias in classical sociological thought: the assumption and reproduction of sexual and gender dualism, which confines women to the realm of nature, instincts and feelings, and men to the realm of society, civilisation and reason (Millman & Kanter 1987). In contrast to this idea, Gilman stresses the socially constructed character of 'sexual difference' and how this ('excessive') sexual differentiation is at the basis of gender relations of domination (Gilman [1898] 1998, 7). However, the influence of social evolutionism and cultural feminism will lead Gilman to emphasise a supposed adaptive superiority of feminine qualities, leading to essentialist inconsistencies, later criticised. In any case, the questioning of the naturalisation of sexual difference is a crucial element in Gilman's analysis and guides all subsequent feminist work in her search for the social conditions that explain gender differences and inequalities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK THAT PLACES GENDER AT THE CENTRE OF THE ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL RELATIONS

In contrast to the androcentric and sexist way of understanding social reality characteristic of classical sociological thought, Gilman offers an alternative theoretical framework for analysing social relations from a unique point of view by incorporating

gender relations as a central axis. Her objective is to elaborate a general social theory, as evidenced in *Women and Economics*, which sets forth a comprehensive programme of feminist sociological analysis. This approach brings her closer to the pretensions of classical sociologists (Lengermann & Niebrugge 1998). Her emphasis on the need for a powerful theoretical framework for analysing gender relations also makes Gilman an extraordinary author concerning other contemporary women sociologists who focussed their social analysis on everyday empirical work and social intervention (Lengermann & Niebrugge 1998).

Gender as a structuring axis of social life

Gilman situates gender as a central axis of social organisation and as an explanatory category of social inequalities, even more relevant than social class, which would be subordinated to gender analysis. Although Gilman does not use the term gender (coined in the 1970s), she did advance it as an analytical category to understand and interpret the social relations between women and men in different social contexts, such as the family, employment or education. She anticipates the conceptual distinction between ‘sex’, as the biological differences between women and men, and ‘gender’, as a matter of culture that refers to the social classification into ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ (Oakley [1972] 2015). To clarify the impact of the social on gender relations, Gilman differentiates between ‘primary sexual distinctions’ and ‘secondary sexual distinctions’:

The primary sex-distinctions in our race as in others consist merely in the essential organs and functions of reproduction. The secondary distinctions, and this is where we are to look for our largest excess—consist in all those differences in organ and function, in look and action, in habit, manner, method, occupation, behavior, which distinguish men from women [...] With the human race, whose chief activities are social, the initial tendency to sex-distinction is carried out in many varied functions. We have differentiated our industries, our responsibilities, our very virtues, along sex lines. (Gilman [1898] 1998, 40–42)

Gilman stresses the “excessive” nature of secondary distinctions as a fundamental cause of gender relations of domination. The most relevant part of her argument for gender analysis is that this ‘excessive sex-distinction’ is not natural, but rather a social product that is transmitted in the process of socialisation:

One of the first things we force upon the child’s dawning consciousness is the fact that he is a boy or that she is a girl, and that, therefore, each must regard everything from a different point of view. They must be dressed differently, not on account of their personal needs, which are exactly similar at this period, but so that neither they, nor any one beholding them, may for a moment forget the distinction of sex. (Gilman [1898] 1998, 54)

This approach contrasts with the dualistic and essentialised explanations of the feminine and masculine of other sociologists of the time, such as Émile Durkheim or George Simmel, which confined women to the realm of nature, instincts and feelings, and men to the realm of society, civilisation and reason (Lehmann 1994; Vromen 1987). For Gilman, all these qualities are intrinsically ‘human’ qualities. However, during social evolution, gender differentiation has occurred, which has resulted in clear disadvantages for women and advantages for men.

Focus on gender relations of domination

Another important idea highlighted by Gilman is that gender differences are neither neutral nor symmetrical, but give rise to relations of domination by men over women. At the heart of Gilman's analysis is the examination of gender relations of domination, which is a crucial element of feminist analysis that deals with power relations (Scott 1986). The basis of this unequal distribution of power is to be found in the economy and the sexual division of labour. For Gilman, the "excessive sex-distinction" has negative effects on women's full development because it denies women's human capacities to develop economic activities that promote their own subsistence in favour of capacities defined as 'feminine'. Consequently, this deprives women of the opportunities for economic, social and life development that men enjoy (Gilman [1898] 1998, 37).

Interrelation between economic structure and androcentric culture

In her theoretical framework, gender relations of domination are underpinned by two social forces that feed back on each other: the 'sexuo-economic relation' and the 'androcentric culture' (Gilman [1898] 1998). This scheme can be seen as a precursor of approaches of multidimensional feminist analysis developed much later (e.g. Harding 1986; Risman 2004) where it tries to combine different levels and elements (structural, cultural and subjective) of gender relations.

The concept of the 'sexuo-economic relation' is fundamentally concerned with the gender inequalities that are embedded within the economic structure. In particular, it focusses on the sexual division of labour and the ways in which women have been historically excluded from economic activities. This is the key to gender domination, as it determines women's economic dependence on men, forcing them to exchange their domestic and sexual labour for male economic protection:

We are the only animal species in which the female depends on the male for food, the only animal species in which the sex-relation is also an economic relation. With us an entire sex lives in a relation of economic dependence upon the other sex, and the economic relation is combined with the sex-relation. The economic status of the human female is relative to the sex-relation. (Gilman [1898] 1998, 5)

Marriage and the family are configured as an exploitative structure that distorts human relationships that should be based on affection, not on interest or dependence. The 'sexuo-economic relation' places men in a position of superiority and advantage, not only in relation to women, but also in terms of their possibilities for personal and social development. While the patriarchal division of labour enables men to become a 'fully human being', women are limited to their 'feminine' capacities (Gilman [1898] 1998, 158).

This situation of dependency ends up distorting family and social relations, generating unhappiness for women, and by extension, for their children. Women's unhappiness is accentuated by the lack of social and economic recognition of domestic work. She offers an analysis of domestic work in an economic and social key, a precursor of later feminist developments on domestic exploitation (for example, see the work of Christine Delphy 1974). According to Gilman:

The women who do the most work get the least money, and the women who have the most money do the least work. Their labor is neither given nor taken as a factor in economic exchange. It is held to be their duty as women to do this work; and their economic status bears no relation to their domestic labors, unless an inverse one. Moreover, if they were thus fairly paid, given what they earned, and no more, all women working in this way would be reduced to the economic status of the house servant. (Gilman [1898] 1998, 15–16)

In connection with the marxist tradition, Gilman recognises the centrality of work as a source of personal fulfilment and sociability, and thus this denial of opportunities has a clear negative effect on women's self-realisation and mental health. She criticises the mystique of motherhood and domesticity, defined in terms of the sex-economic relationship, and in which she considers the family and the home as a source of subjugation, since women are forced to specialise exclusively in the care of their children to obtain economic security. This situation can lead to the development of 'pathological', 'abnormal' and 'unhealthy' forms of motherhood. These pathological forms of motherhood are also the product of tensions between the traditional conventions of motherhood and women's professional aspirations (Gilman [1898] 1998, 181).

In her autobiography (Gilman [1935] 1991) and acclaimed story *The Yellow Wallpaper* (Gilman 1892), she recounts her experience of patriarchal motherhood. She argues that this experience is subject to relations of male domination and biomedical control, and cannot be positive or satisfying for women, resulting in profound emotional suffering. These approaches have become pivotal to the contemporary feminist critique of health processes and the medicalisation of women's discomfort as mechanisms of gender oppression (Oakley 1997). Gilman's reflection represents pioneering contributions to the social analysis of women's health, examining the relationships between gender inequalities and the physical and mental state of women (Annandale 2015). Thus, it could be argued that Gilman diagnosed almost eight decades earlier 'the problem that has no name', expressed by Betty Friedan (1963) about the malaise experienced by American women in the 1960s as a result of frustration and conflict between family and professional roles.

The economic dependence on women is not a result of their sex, but rather a consequence of an 'androcentric culture' within a patriarchal system that uses 'false concepts' to justify the sexual division of labour and the economic marginalisation of women (Gilman 1904). In *Women and Economics*, she addresses the effect of sexist prejudices and beliefs on women's experiences of their separation from economic activity and their subordinate role in marriage and the domestic sphere. Particularly interesting are her arguments about the false beliefs surrounding motherhood, the maternal instinct or the sacrifice of mothers, where she underlines their socially constructed character. In *Our Androcentric Culture*, she accurately describes androcentric practices that derive from the definition of the human from the masculine experience:

It seeks to show that what we have all this time called 'human nature' and deprecated, was in great part only male nature, and good enough in its place; that what we have called 'masculine' and admired as such, was in large part human, and should be applied to both sexes: that what

we have called 'feminine' and condemned, was also largely human and applicable to both. Our androcentric culture is so shown to have been, and still to be, a masculine culture in excess, and therefore undesirable. (Gilman, 1911, online)

The problem with these different cultural attributions of the feminine and the masculine is that they place women in a situation of subordination and dependence on men. This highlights another significant aspect of feminism, the concept of female 'otherness' (Beauvoir 1953), which is constructed in relation to the masculine, considered the norm or, as Gilman describes it, the 'human prototype':

Our whole scheme of things rests on the same tacit assumption; man is the human prototype, woman a sort of subordinate, merely sexual accompaniment and helper in making persons. She has occupied the place of a proposition in relation to man. She has always been regarded as above him or below him, before him or behind him, next to him, a wholly relative existence. (Gilman 1911, online)

METHOD FOR ANALYSING GENDER RELATIONS

Gilman's method of social reality analysis is based on ideas that have subsequently been defined as key not only to sociological work, but also to feminist analysis. We could summarise her method for analysing gender relations in the following tasks: (1) critical examination of the myths and beliefs ('false concepts') that justify female subordination; (2) searching for the social conditions ('general causes') behind individual experiences; and (3) importance of empirical evidence to show and argue gender inequalities.

Critical examination of myths and beliefs that justify the subordination of women

According to Gilman, the first step in feminist social analysis is to question the false beliefs and prejudices that legitimise gender inequalities; that is, the 'excessive sex distinction'. She invites us to rethink the obvious and to be suspicious of what is taken for granted and considered common and 'natural', simply by the sheer weight of tradition:

We have, so far, lived and suffered and died in a man-made world. So general, so unbroken, has been this condition, that to mention it arouses no more remark than the statement of a natural law. We have taken it for granted, since the dawn of civilization, that "mankind" meant men-kind, and the world was theirs. (Gilman 1911, online)

In this way, Gilman anticipates a central maxim of sociological work by questioning common sense and preconceptions (Berger 1963). This approach is also crucial for feminism, which aims to identify and dismantle gender myths and biases that have traditionally been used to present inequalities between women and men as natural, permanent, and immutable.

Identify the social and gendered conditions behind individual experiences

The second key idea of her method is to look at the ‘general causes’ to understand their effects on individual experiences. Gilman thus emphasises the impact of social conditions, and in particular, of gender (understood both in its structural dimension as the ‘sexuo-economic relation’ and in its symbolic dimension as ‘androcentric culture’) on economic and social organisation, as well as the practices and wellbeing of individuals:

Social phenomena have been going on about us since we began to be human; they are as familiar as physical or physiological phenomena, but even less understood. Yet the interaction of social forces and social conditions form increasingly prominent factors in human life.

(Gilman 1904, online)

Gilman notes a fundamental principle of sociological thought: to move from the individual to the social explanations. As Charles Wright Mills (1959) later proposed with his concept of the ‘sociological imagination’, we are encouraged to link public issues with private problems, connecting biography, society and history. This connection between the social and the individual is also crucial for feminism, as it allows us to investigate the social and gendered conditions that shape inequalities between women and men (Hanisch 2000). This is an inescapable step towards the denaturalisation of sexual difference. In this investigation of gender inequalities, Gilman emphasises the importance of examining the connection between economic and structural factors that contribute to the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities between genders (‘sexuo-economic relation’) and the cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity (‘androcentric culture’) that put women at a disadvantage.

Search for empirical evidence of gender inequalities

In addition to having an interpretative theoretical framework of gender relations, it is necessary to support our arguments with empirical evidence. Gilman stresses the fundamentally empirical character of sociology, which has to support its claims with evidence and data. Gilman’s empirical examination of gender relations is based on two fundamental procedures.

The first procedure is conducting a comparative analysis, which Gilman approaches from three perspectives: (1) systematic and cross-cutting comparison of the situations and experiences of women and men; (2) comparison between humans and other animal species; this perspective is lined to her fascination with social evolutionism and aims to distinguish between social and natural/biological sexual differences; and (3) socio-historical analysis of the differences between women and men, contrasting them across various societies and cultures, both temporally and spatially.

The second procedure of Gilman’s empirical analysis draws on the close study of the social patterns in everyday life. She observes everyday dynamics to inform her analysis of gender relations of domination. As an example, Gilman (2002) examines the gender variability in forms of dress in different periods, societies and social classes to highlight the weight of relations of domination in women’s uncomfortable, irrational and even unhealthy patterns of dress designed to please men and find husbands. Here, Gilman can be seen as a precursor of the ‘doing gender’ approach,

later developed and widely used in the sociology of gender for investigating how the gender order is constructed, reproduced and maintained through everyday social interactions (West & Zimmerman 1987).

ALTERNATIVE MODEL OF SOCIOLOGICAL PRACTICE LINKED TO SOCIAL REFORM

Gilman developed an alternative model of sociological practice deeply connected to social reform, rather than focussing solely on a theoretical plane of work. This connects with her female sociologist contemporaries (notably Jane Addams and the women sociologists of Chicago School, and Beatrice Potter Webb) who defined the work of social analysis with the improvement of the living conditions of women, children and vulnerable groups (Deegan 1991, 2017).

Social project for women's emancipation

Gilman's work, in addition to offering a gendered model of analysis of social relations, proposes a reformist project of female emancipation. For Gilman, the only and main solution to the problem of gender domination is women's economic independence. She states this in *Women and Economics* ([1898] 1998, 151): 'Under it all, the crux of the whole matter, goes on the one great change, that of the economic relation'. Gilman also emphasises the centrality of work as a fundamental aspect of being human and a source of personal fulfilment and sociability. This movement of female emancipation, defined by her as the most important sociological change, benefits not only women, but also men – who will be freed from the sexual pressures of marriage – and society as a whole by promoting social welfare and its democratic development (Gilman [1898] 1998). Consistent with her gynocentric evolutionary approach, the definition of the economic woman cannot be separated from her status as a mother. Thus, she tries to articulate a project that allows women to be mothers and to live motherhood to the full, at the same time as they fulfil themselves professionally.

To reach the goal of female independence, Gilman proposes three central paths of social transformation: knowledge, education and socialisation and reform of the home and of child-rearing and care procedures.

Firstly, Gilman highlights the path of knowledge as a tool for dismantling prejudices and false arguments. Only social analysis makes it possible to make the leap from individual experiences to social ('general') causes. She emphasises that gender domination is a socially produced problem, not a natural one, and is therefore socially contestable and modifiable if the causes of this situation are identified and addressed. However, this problem has received little attention due to the prevalence of 'false concepts' and customs. The analysis aims to understand social reality for social transformation and women's emancipation. By identifying the causes of gender inequality, we can work towards eliminating it.

The path of knowledge allows us, in the face of the weight of tradition, to learn about alternative forms of social organisation to satisfy, for example, the social needs for care. Gilman thus raises a central issue for the discipline of sociology's social utility in providing humanistic, democratic and socially just responses to social problems (Burawoy 2021). Gilman stresses the importance of the transfer of sociological knowledge for the improvement of public policies, and in particular, for the development of social practices that contribute to gender equality (Risman 2006).

The second way for women's emancipation is education and socialisation as an engine of change for the transformation of the economic bases of gender dependency relations. For Gilman, differential socialisation processes are key to reproducing – or reversing – gender inequalities. She points out the need to recognise the 'common humanity' underlying women and men, without distinction, foreseeing the need for new models now called coeducational. On the contrary, Gilman emphasises the importance of education as a factor in the erosion of gender inequalities, as it allows for the improvement of women's economic position through their participation in the labour sphere.

The third approach focusses on restructuring household spaces, care and socialisation strategies. Gilman stresses that female autonomy has a significant impact on economic life, but most importantly, on family relationships. Furthermore, her most groundbreaking contributions are in the redesign of the home and social relationships, where she proposes a gender relations revolution (Lengermann & Niebrugge 1998). In the final chapters of *Women and Economics*, and specifically in *The Home*, Gilman presents her proposals for reforming the home and family relations. These proposals cover a wide range of aspects, including the design of housing and city spaces, the provision of community care, leisure, health and cultural services. Gilman raises a model of collective care, which neutralises individualism and the 'sexual/animal' nature of upbringing. She questions the traditional figure of the single mother, who is exclusively responsible for caring for her children, and instead suggests innovative alternatives such as nursery schools, community kitchens and residences (Gilman [1898] 1998, 1904).

Sociological divulgation and feminist pedagogy

In addition to his academic writings, Gilman developed a whole body of work in social pedagogy and outreach. In connection with her aim of social reform through education, she considered it essential to bring analysis and social criticism to the population in general, and to women in particular. She, like other classic women sociologists such as Harriet Martineau (Hill & Deegan 2004), cultivated didactic literature to make sociology relevant and intelligible in everyday life through novels, poems and songs. This idea of bringing sociological reflection to a diversity of publics and audiences, beyond academic circles, corresponds to a very present purpose in feminist research in terms of open, responsible, inclusive and socially impactful science (Benschop & Brouns 2003).

Gilman had a prolific career as a writer of poetry and fiction, as well as an extensive collection of correspondence, diaries and her autobiography (Hill & Deegan 2004). Moreover, she launched a periodical magazine for the wide public, *The Forerunner*, written and edited entirely by her between 1909 and 1916, in which she serialised her stories, poems, book reviews, critical essays and social analyses on a variety of subjects (Lane 1990). This magazine was part of an ambitious personal project of sociological pedagogy that sought, through a popular, more entertaining and accessible format, to reach the non-specialist public (and, in particular, women) (Lemert 2000). In her stories, she extends her social analysis of gender inequalities to the narrative field, where she tackles different problems that affected, and still affect, women as a consequence of their subordinate role and sexist and patriarchal frameworks.

In her most famous novel, *Herland* (1915), Gilman challenges patriarchal society by presenting a utopian society composed exclusively of women and girls, where all social organisation revolves around motherhood. The arrival of three male explorers triggers

a conflict between the patriarchal and sexist notions held by the male visitors and the alternative matriarchal system. This system is based on the dissolution of gender roles, the elimination of the main causes of women's oppression (marriage and the sexist separation of labour), the exaltation of feminine values such as motherhood and the collective organization of child-rearing and care. This novel is a masterful example of the use of utopia as a powerful feminist tool to question traditional gender roles and revise conventional ideas about family and motherhood (Hausman 1998; Hill 1980; Stimpson 1991).

In *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), her most acclaimed short story, Gilman deals with patriarchal controls on motherhood experienced as traumatic and pathological. Inspired by her own experience, she tells how her protagonist is prescribed a medical ban on writing and the elimination of all intellectual work to cure her nervous breakdowns, accentuated by her recent motherhood. The protagonist is confined to a room in a country house, where she experiences escalating delusions due to a disturbing yellow wallpaper. The story highlights in a terrifying way the consequences of the biomedical control of motherhood and the medicalisation of female unhappiness as a mental illness (Oakley 1997).

Gilman also cultivated poetry as another tool for social and feminist outreach and transformation. Many of these poems were published in *The Forerunner*, and others in the compilation *In This Our Work* (1914). It is a didactic poetry that sought, through verse and song, to vindicate women's rights (Knight 1996), addressing issues such as motherhood, domestic work, education, child-rearing and women's suffrage. To illustrate, in her poem "Song for Equal Suffrage" we can read:

Day of hope and day of glory! After slavery and woe,
Comes the dawn of woman's freedom, and the light shall grow and grow
Until every man and woman equal liberty shall know,
In Freedom marching on!

CRITICISMS AND SHADOWS

Gilman's work, as a product of its time, presents today inconsistencies and limitations, particularly concerning evolutionary and feminist cultural approaches. These limitations are also a consequence of her own prejudices, which are shaped by her social position as a white, middle-class woman (Hausman 1998).

One of the primary criticisms is the emphasis on motherhood and the presumed superiority of maternal and feminine qualities as the foundation for social advancement. These arguments imply an essentialisation of sexual difference by inherently and permanently attributing certain characteristics to women and men on the basis of their biology or psychology. This contradicts her emphasis on the socially constructed character of sexual difference. So important is the maternal dimension that it appears intimately linked to her project of female emancipation. Gilman's reform approach is directed towards accommodating motherhood and childbearing within a new scenario of female economic independence (Hausman 1998). This approach exhibits sociocentrism as it concentrates solely on the experiences of white, middle-class women, while undervaluing the circumstances of working women and other racial-ethnic groups (Lengermann & Niebrugge 1998). Moreover, her theory has been criticised as heterosexist for its exclusive focus on reproductive sexuality (Hausman 1998).

The most devastating criticism comes from the shadow of racism that is cast in some of her writings (Au 2019), specifically in the article ‘A suggestion on the Negro problem’ (Gilman 1908), in which she argues for the evolutionary inferiority of the Black race on the basis of certain inherent attributes (Knight 2000). Nevertheless, despite the racist and nativist theoretical drifts of social Darwinism, Gilman took an active stand against slavery and the oppression of Black and other subordinated ethnic groups (Appelrouth & Edles 2020). Gilman’s statements on race can be interpreted as a reflection of the challenges of integrating racial and ethnic differences within the framework of social evolutionism, and also in first-wave feminist theory (Davis 1981). Concurrently, these contradictions advance important dilemmas and challenges for contemporary feminism to address other axes of inequality that are tackled by intersectional approaches.

CONCLUSIONS

Gilman’s work, situated between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, contains inconsistencies that are now outdated, particularly those related to evolutionist and feminist essentialist approaches. However, it is important to acknowledge her pioneering and innovative contributions to social analysis, which laid the foundations for the sociology of gender. At the end of the nineteenth century, she anticipated the significance of gender as a structuring principle of social relations, which cannot be disregarded in any sociological analysis.

Gilman presents a critical and alternative sociology focussed on gender relations, offering frameworks, concepts, procedures and dilemmas that have informed current feminist sociological approaches. She stresses the significance of a multidimensional theoretical framework that clarifies the social conditions affecting gender relations of domination. Moreover, Gilman emphasises the importance of basing our analyses on empirical evidence, which can be obtained through comparative analysis (essential for challenging gender inequalities) and observation of daily life.

Other precursory aspects of feminist analysis relate to its approach to a new model of social science that is connected to social reform and is more open to a diversity of formats and audiences. This breaks with the institutionalised canon of academic knowledge and proposes a more open, pedagogical and transformative model. Above all, it proposes a feminist sociology oriented towards resolving women’s suffering as a consequence of gender inequalities. Furthermore, Gilman’s work reflects contemporary debates on how to articulate gender analysis with other axes of social differentiation and inequality, and highlights the importance of acknowledging personal biases that can affect feminist social analysis.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This work was conducted as part of an advanced teaching innovation project titled “Visibles: Contributions of Women to Sociology through Teaching Practice,” approved by the Unit of Quality, Teaching Innovation and Prospective of the University of Granada, Spain (Project Code: 22–234).

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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*Redescriptions: Political
Thought, Conceptual
History and Feminist
Theory*
DOI: 10.33134/rds.432

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DOI: 10.33134/rds.432

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Jiménez-Rodrigo, María Luisa. 2024. "Profession, Emotion, and Hope: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Origins of the Sociology of Gender." *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 27(2):200–216. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.432>

Submitted: 10 January 2024

Accepted: 22 October 2024

Published: 04 December 2024

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Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Helsinki University Press.