

The Future Of Power

Nikola Tesla and the buzz of female empowerment.

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Nikola Tesla changed the world with his genius, and often wowed inquiring minds with his thoughts on the future of power.

Only this time it was not electrical, it was about the feminine mystique and the order of the hive.

“The modern woman, who anticipates in merely superficial phenomena the advancement of her sex, is but a surface symptom of something deeper and more potent fermenting in the bosom of the race.”

So said visionary scientist Nikola Tesla. Tesla, the mercurial genius who gave us electricity, radio and lit up the sky with man-made lightning, shared his thought on the future. The enigmatic inventor foretold the wonders of our present-day world. Women had just gained the right to vote when he spoke to the inevitable success of the modern women’s movement.

According to Tesla, you need not do more than examine the life of bees.

The queen her army of workers would rule the hive.

Tesla shared his thoughts with Collier’s in a 1926 article, *When Woman is Boss*:

“The acquisition of new fields of endeavor by women, their gradual usurpation of leadership, will dull and finally dissipate feminine sensibilities, will choke the maternal instinct, so that marriage and motherhood may become abhorrent and human civilization draw closer and closer to the perfect civilization of the bee.”

“People do use bees and the hive and the colony as a screen to project human ideas and human values,” said Dr. Lisa Moore author of *Buzz*, which talks about urban

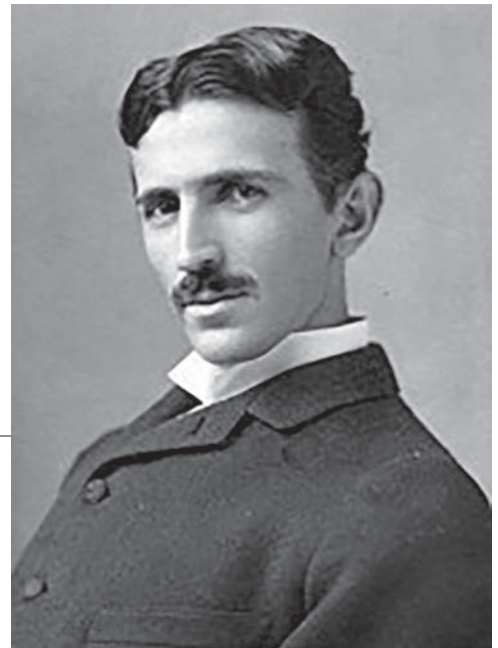
beekeeping in New York and the sociology of the hive. “Because it is a female dominated domestic social insect people then often the make proto-feminist arguments about it.”

“Whenever you see a social insect like bees or ants the work that collaboratively it does liken itself to a human society. You see for instance Marks or Einstein or – Tesla – find a lot of traction in writing about and watching and observing bees because they believe it to be a microcosm of human societies where there is collective labor and a shared goal.”

Tesla changed our world. It was actually his innovation, not Edison’s that paved the way for the electrification of America. The quintessential futurist, before the notion of a computer or an iPhone was even contemplated, Tesla envisioned the concept of a world-wide-web, with us logging onto a smartphone, sending an email to coworkers and Facetiming a loved one.

“When wireless is perfectly applied the whole earth will be converted into a huge brain, which in fact it is, all things being particles of a real and rhythmic whole. We shall be able to communicate with one another instantly, irrespective of distance. Not only this, but through television and telephony we shall see and hear one another as perfectly as though we were face to face, despite intervening distances of thousands of miles; and the instruments through which we shall be able to do his will be amazingly simple compared with our present telephone. A man will be able to carry one in his vest pocket.”

During a time when society was almost entirely patriarchal, Tesla likewise foresaw a reification of gender roles. The intuitive engineer



Nikola Tesla

predicted the glass ceiling would be shattered decades before it was even so conceived. He predicted that the status of women would change before the word feminism had even become part of the English lexicon.

“The female mind has demonstrated a capacity for all the mental acquirements and achievements of men, and as generations ensue that capacity will be expanded; the average woman will be as well educated as the average man, and then better educated, for the dormant faculties of her brain will be stimulated to an activity that will be all the more intense and powerful because of centuries of repose. Woman will ignore precedent and startle civilization with their progress.”

Tesla saw the harbinger of a gynocentric society in which women would become an essential component of the industrial economy. The female intellect would displace the conventional patriarchy that had heretofore been taken for granted.

“It is clear to any trained observer, and even to the sociologically untrained, that a new attitude toward sex discrimination has come over the world through the centuries, receiving an abrupt stimulus just before and after the World War.”

Tesla’s notions of women’s and innate abilities and the changes that would incur as a result of their communal engagement were indeed prophetic and ahead of their time. However, his attitude toward gender

was by no means enlightened. He still idealized women in much the same way as a largely patriarchal society did, as delicate Victorian maidens or maternal caretakers. In fact, he bemoaned what he deemed the inevitable shift in gender politics.

The Croatian native believed that the intellectual capability and industriousness of women would result in a change in traditional gender roles that women had hitherto been expected to fill. Yet, he saw the inevitability of woman entering the workplace and becoming an integral element of the industrial economy as a disruption to the natural social order.

He had mixed feelings on the fermenting changes he saw as an outgrowth of first-wave feminism and women's suffrage. Somehow his outlook almost amounted to an internal debate between Gloria Steinem and Phyllis Schlafly on the Equal Rights Amendment, less than a decade after the nineteenth amendment was ratified.

"While he may have some progressive ideas," said Dr. Moore, "I think it's still riddled with inconsistencies and ambivalences, because it was a time of great social change and perhaps, he was trying to sort out women becoming capable of voting and therefore having a political voice."

Tesla had earlier pontificated about the mixed emotions he felt about women's place in society in a 1924 article entitled: *Mr. Tesla Explains Why He Will Never Marry*.

"Woman's determined competition with man in the business world is breaking down some of the best traditions--things which have proved the moving factors in the world's slow but substantial progress."

"The tendency of women to push aside man, supplanting the old spirit of cooperation with him in all the affairs of life, is very disappointing

to me. The world has experienced many tragedies, but to my mind the greatest tragedy of all is the present economic condition wherein women strive against men, and in many cases actually succeed in usurping their places in the professions and in industry."

"This growing tendency of women to overshadow the masculine is a sign of a deteriorating civilization."

"In place of the soft voiced, gentle woman of my reverent worship, has come the woman who thinks that her chief success in life lies in making herself as much as possible like man--in dress, voice and actions, in sports and achievements of every kind"

He used the hive and the notion of the queen bee to underscore his views. Tesla saw an analogy between the changing social mores, with

– the ideas that humans have had about the hive – reflect prevailing views about the body politic. In other words, bee politics have been invented to justify human ones."

"Our civilization will sink to a state like that which is found among the bees – a state wherein the male is ruthlessly killed off."

"In this matriarchal empire which will be established the female rules. As the female predominates, the males are at her mercy. The male is considered important only as a factor in the general scheme of the continuity of life."

"What [Tesla] is talking about is changing gender roles how they are threatening to men, explained Dr. Moore, a Professor at SUNY Purchase in New York "almost a crisis in masculinity and often when they talk

about a crisis in masculinity, they bring up bees. They see bees as a female-dominated society because bees are so miraculous and amazing, I think it is also fascinating to people who are men but also threatening."

Tesla the man espoused the antiquated notion of the fair Victorian

maiden whose purity and delicateness made her almost untouchable, while Tesla the scientist saw the societal changes at hand, and women's ability to make a genuine intellectual contribution and used the dynamics of the beehive articulate his feelings about the society he foresaw.

"Tesla's quotes say some very interesting things about him; his preoccupations or insecurities," explained Dr. Moore, "His own personal beliefs demonstrate something about his own heterosexual anxieties that women being seen as a distraction makes it seem like it's almost women's fault – maybe they can be equals intellectually, but they are also other things . . ."

Tesla's ideas are both prescient and apocryphal at once:



women summoning their agency and the gender roles of the hive. While at the same time he averred the abilities of women he saw it as an anathema to the natural social order.

"That he used the social structure of bees to demonstrate his prognostications is not at all surprising." *The Hive*, by Bee Wilson explains: "Studying bees is a way of studying ourselves.... Bees are nothing like men, and yet human beings have always seen their own hopes and fears played out in the life of the beehive."

The Economist adds: "The author's proposition is that humans have always viewed the beehive as a miniature universe with order and purpose – and have looked to the hive to make sense of human society

Despite his foresight, neither the waning society Tesla romanticized nor the one he prognosticated and foreboded at once are accurate representations of gender. Tesla was a confirmed bachelor and essentially lived an ascetic and chaste life sans romance. From afar he mischaracterized women as docile and angelic, best suited for maternal domesticity. Women, by finding their place in the public sphere and asserting their intellectual and professional agency are not abandoning their maternal instincts and dominating at the expense of men.

He saw the changing social structure as women competing with and trying to outdo men. Though he recognized their ability and saw this as a distinct possibility, Tesla saw the concept of a matrilineal society as social upheaval, with women abrogating their best qualities at the expense of both sexes.

Tesla cited the concept of the bee colony's highly organized social structure, centered around the queen with female workers evolving and dutifully taking on different roles and more complex responsibilities, as well as the drone, sans stinger performing his one evolutionary function, to copulate, sacrificing his short life in the process.

Like many who have studied hive culture closely, Tesla imbued bees with his own notions of human behavior. He avowed the innate abilities of women. He saw women

using their natural intellect to usurp what he saw, as did many, the natural social structure of patriarchal supremacy.

"It is not in the shallow physical imitation of men that women will assert first their equality and later their superiority, but in the awakening of the intellect of women."

"Through countless generations, from the very beginning, the social subservience of women resulted naturally in the partial atrophy or at least the hereditary suspension of mental qualities which we now know the female sex to be endowed with no less than men."

"The significance of this lies in the principle dominating the economy of the bee--the most highly organized and intelligently coordinated system of any form of nonrational animal life--the all-governing supremacy of the instinct for immortality which makes divinity out of motherhood."

Tesla's thoughts and analogy to the life of the hive, in very many ways bear stark similarity to the human characteristics imparted upon bees for centuries. Due to their complex social structure we see the colony as a microcosm of ourselves.

"Man is a purposeful animal," wrote Wilson, "and no sooner had he admired the industriousness of the bees than he felt that he --or even better, his wife --must emulate it in some way."

"Imagination falters at the prospect of human analogy to this mysterious and superbly dedicated civilization of the bee; but when we consider how the human instinct for race perpetuation dominates life in its normal and exaggerated and perverse manifestations, there is ironic justice in the possibility that this instinct, with the continuing intellectual advance of women, may be finally expressed after the manner of the bee, though it will take centuries to break down the habits and customs of peoples that bar the way to such a simply and scientifically ordered civilization."

"The center of all bee life is the queen. She dominates the hive, not through hereditary right, for any egg may be hatched into a reigning queen, but because she is the womb of this insect race."

"He is in what we would call a culture clash -- how does that change the social contract -- and what happens to the nice domesticity that we've all depended on it sort of evaporates and that's scary. I can understand a crisis in masculinity it totally makes sense why he would have those feelings and bees become another way to work that out." explained Dr. Moore.

"I think we are always working out our cultural anxieties and sexuality around gender as human beings and we choose to look to other places to talk about it because it is hard to talk about it with humans and because we

want to know we are right. Whenever you see a social insect like bees or ants the work collaboratively it does liken itself to a human society . . .

“There are the vast, desexualized armies of workers whose sole aim and happiness in life is hard work. It is the perfection of communism, of socialized, cooperative life wherein all things, including the young, are the property and concern of all.”

Dr. Moore added: “Bees have different roles probably based much more on division of labor which is what organizes their hive much more than gender. As human beings, gender is so much more important to us as an organizing principle that we look other species to explain things that are very humanistic about gender, but I don’t think bees really have gender. I think it’s interesting how much cultural work humans do to act as if bees do have gender. It’s just a human category we lay on bees – as humans we need a lot of scaffolding to support our own claims to gender. It demonstrates more about humans than – bees.”

The idea of the maiden whose sole lot in life is as legal or proverbial chattel and merely maternal is

certainly passé, as is the notion of either the Queen Bee usurping men in some way by gaining agency, or that women will lose or have to subdue their maternal instinct to thrive as workers or professionals.

She continued: “Tesla, he was coming up at a time of tremendous shifts in the first wave of feminism and tremendous shifts in women’s rights and women’s access to the public sphere and I can see that being something that he had to sort out and understand. Bees and the colony are metaphorically powerful, because when you can’t talk about human culture it is easy to talk about it in animal culture.”

A paradigmatic cultural shift in gender roles has indeed taken place. No longer does sex or gender define one’s station. Second and third-wave feminism has allowed women, with the power of their intellect, to take their place at the core of our economy. Women’s accomplishments have made Tesla seem somewhat clairvoyant.

In fact, if anything, a good analogy for modern societal norms would be that of emperor penguin. Largely monogamous like humans, both male and female penguins take

a hand in working and caring for their young.

Male penguins don’t suppress their masculinity though they, like female penguins, participate in child-rearing. Moreover, females, during gestation, leave behind their egg and like males, hunt in the deep waters of the ocean for food, while males care for it. Neither males nor female penguins subjugate nor define their roles strictly based on sex. Aptly, the moniker emperor is applied to both males and females.

As did Tesla, humans, as they have throughout history will continue to use the miraculous honey bee and the animal kingdom, to explain the changing world around them.

Tesla, also proved to be if nothing else, clairvoyant.

“We shall be able to witness and hear events – the inauguration of a President, the playing of a world series game, the havoc of an earthquake or the terror of a battle – just as though we were present.

*If you want proof, just go into your ‘vest pocket’ pull out your smartphone and use some wireless power to look it up. **BC***