VOLUNTARY MOTHERHOOD; THE BEGINNINGS OF FEMINIST BIRTH CONTROL IDEAS IN THE UNITED STATES

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Voluntary motherhood was the first general name for a feminist birth control demand in the United States in the late nineteenth century.* It represented an initial response of feminists to their understanding that involuntary motherhood and child-raising were important parts of woman's oppression. In this paper, I would like to trace the content and general development of "voluntary-motherhood" ideas and to situate them in the development of the American birth-control movement.

The feminists who advocated voluntary motherhood were of three general types: suffragists; people active in such moral reform movements as temperance and social purity, in church auxiliaries, and in women's professional and service organizations (such as Sorosis); and members of small, usually anarchist, Free Love groups. The Free Lovers played a classically vanguard role in the development of birth-control ideas. Free Love groups were always small and sectarian, and they were usually male-dominated, despite their extreme ideological feminism. They never coalesced into a movement. On the contrary, they were the remnants of a dying tradition of utopian socialist and radical protestant religious dissent. The Free Lovers, whose very self-definition was built around a commitment to iconoclasm and to isolation from the masses, were precisely the group that could offer intellectual leadership in formulating the shocking arguments that birth control in the nineteenth century required.[1]

*The word "feminist" must be underscored. Since the early nineteenth century, there had been developing a body of population-control writings, which recommended the use of birth-control techniques to curb nationwide or worldwide populations; usually called neo-Malthusians, these writers were not concerned with the control of births as a means by which women could gain control over their own lives, except, very occasionally, as an auxiliary argument. And of course birth control practices date back to the most ancient societies on record.

The suffragists and moral reformers, concerned to win mass support, were increasingly committed to social respectability. As a result, they did not generally advance very far beyond prevalent standards of propriety in discussing sexual matters publicly. Indeed, as the century progressed the social gap between them and the Free Lovers grew, for the second and third generations of suffragists were more concerned with respectability than the first. In the 1860s and 1870s the great feminist theoreticians had been much closer to the Free Lovers, and at least one of these early giants, Victoria Woodhull, was for several years a member of both the suffrage and the Free Love camps. But even respectability did not completely stifle the mental processes of the feminists, and many of them said in private writings—in letters and diaries—what they were unwilling to utter in public.

The similar views of Free Lovers and suffragists on the question of voluntary motherhood did not bridge the considerable political distance between the groups, but did show that their analyses of the social meaning of reproduction for the women were converging. The sources of that convergence, the common grounds of their feminism, were their similar experiences in the changing conditions of nineteenth-century America. Both groups were composed of educated, middle-class Yankees responding to severe threats to the stability, if not dominance, of their class position. Both groups were disturbed by the consequences of rapid industrialization—the emergence of great capitalists in a clearly defined financial oligarchy, and the increased immigration which threatened the dignity and economic security of the middle-class Yankee. Free Lovers and suffragists, as feminists, looked forward to a decline in patriarchal power within the family, but worried, too, about the possible desintegration of the family and the loosening of sexual morality. They saw reproduction in the context of these larger social changes, and in a movement for women's emancipation; and they saw that movement as an answer to some of these large social problems. They hoped that giving political power to women would help to reinforce the family, to make the government more just and the economy less monopolistic. In all these attitudes there was something traditional as well as something progressive; the concept of voluntary motherhood reflected this duality.

Since we all bring a twentieth-century understanding to our concept of birth control, it may be best to make it clear at once that neither Free Lovers nor suffragists approved of contraceptive devices. Ezra Heywood, patriarch and martyr, thought "artificial" methods "unnatural, injurious, or offensive."[2] Tennessee Claflin wrote that the "washes, teas, tonics and various sorts of appliances known to the initiated" were a "standing reproach upon, and a permanent indictment against, American women. . . . No woman should ever hold sexual relations with any man from the possible consequences of which she might desire to escape."[3] *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly* editorialized: "The means they (women) resort to for . . . prevention is sufficient to disgust every natural man. . . ."[4]

On a rhetorical level, the main objection to contraception * was that it was "unnatural", and the arguments reflected a romantic yearning for the "natural," rather pastorally conceived, that was typical of many nineteenth-century reform movements. More basic, however, particularly in women's arguments against contraception, was an underlying fear of the promiscuity that it could permit. The fear of promiscuity was associated less with fear for one's virtue than with fear of other women—the perhaps mythical "fallen" women—who might threaten a husband's fidelity.

To our twentieth-century minds a principle of voluntary motherhood that rejects the practice of contraception seems so theoretical as to have little real impact. What gave the concept substance was that it was accompanied by another, potentially explosive, conceptual change: the reacceptance of female sexuality. As with birth control, the most open advocates of female sexuality were the Free Lovers, not the suffragists; nevertheless both groups based their ideas on the traditional grounds of the "natural." Free Lovers argued, for example, that celibacy was unnatural and dangerous—for men and women alike. "Pen cannot record, nor lips express, the enervating, debauching effect of celibate life upon young men and women. . . ."[5] Asserting the existence, legitimacy and worthiness of female sexual drive was one of the Free Lovers' most important contributions to sexual reform; it was a logical correlate of their argument from the "natural" and of their appeal for the integration of body and soul.

Women's rights advocates, too, began to demand recognition of female sexuality. Isabella Beecher Hooker wrote to her daughter: "Multitudes of women in all the ages who have scarce known what sexual desire is—being wholly absorbed in the passion of maternity, have sacrificed themselves to the beloved husbands as unto God—and yet these men, full of their human passion and defending it as righteous & God-sent lose all confidence in womanhood when a woman here and there betrays her similar nature & gives herself soul & body to the man she adores."[6] Alice Stockham, a Spiritualist Free Lover and feminist physician, lauded sexual desire in men and women as "the prophecy of attainment." She urged that couples avoid reaching sexual "satiety" with each other, in order to keep their sexual desire constantly alive, for she considered desire pleasant and healthful.[7] Elizabeth Cady Stanton, commenting in her diary in 1883 on the Whitman poem, "There is a Woman Waiting for Me," wrote: "he speaks as if the female must be forced to the creative act, apparently ignorant of the fact that a healthy woman has as much passion as a man, that she needs nothing stronger than the law of attraction to draw her to the male."[8] Still, she loved Whitman, and largely because of that openness about sex that made him the Free Lovers' favorite poet.

According to the system of ideas then dominant, women, lacking sexual drives, submitted to sexual intercourse (and notice how Beecher Hooker

*Contraception will be used to refer to artificial devices used to prohibit conception during intercourse, while birth control will be used to mean anything, including abstinence, which limits pregnancy.

continued the image of a woman "giving herself", never taking) in order to please their husbands and to conceive children.The ambivalence underlying this view was expressed in the equally prevalent notion that women must be protected from exposure to sexuality lest they "fall" and become depraved, lustful monsters. This ambivalence perhaps came from a subconscious lack of certainty about the reality of the sex-less woman, a construct laid only thinly on top of the conception of woman as highly sexed, even insatiably so, that prevailed up to the eighteenth century. Victorian ambivalence on this question is nowhere more tellingly set forth than in the writings of physicians, who viewed woman's sexual organs as the source of her being, physical and psychological, and blamed most mental derangements on disorders of the reproductive organs.[9] Indeed, they saw it as part of the nature of things, as Rousseau had written, that men were male only part of the time, but women were female always.[10] In a system that deprived women of the opportunity to make extra-familial contributions to culture, it was inevitable that they should be more strongly identified with sex than men were. Indeed, females were frequently called "the sex" in the nineteenth century.

The concept of maternal instinct helped to smooth the contradictory attitudes about woman's sexuality. In many nineteenth-century writings we find the idea that the maternal instinct was the female analog of the male sex instinct; it was as if the two instincts were seated in analogous parts of the brain, or soul. Thus to suggest, as feminists did, that women might have the capacity for sexual impulses of their own automatically tended to weaken the theory of the maternal instinct. In the fearful imaginations of self-appointed protectors of the family and of womanly innocence, the possibility that women might desire sexual contact not for the sake of pregnancy—that they might even desire it at a time when they positively did not want pregnancy—was a wedge in the door to denying that women had any special maternal instinct at all.

Most of the feminists did not want to open that door either. Indeed, it was common for nineteenth-century women's-rights advocates to use the presumed "special motherly nature" and "sexual purity" of women as arguments for increasing their freedom and status. It is no wonder that many of them chose to speak their subversive thoughts about the sexual nature of women privately, or at least softly. Even among the more outspoken Free Lovers, there was a certain amount of hedging. Lois Waisbrooker and Dora Forster, writing for a Free Love journal in the 1890s, argued that while men and women both had an "amative" instinct, it was much stronger in men; and that women—only women—also had a reproductive, or "generative" instinct. "I suppose it must be universally conceded that men make the better lovers," Forster wrote. She thought that it might be possible that "the jealousy and tyranny of men have operated to suppress amativeness in women, by constantly sweeping strongly sexual women from the paths of life into infamy and sterility and death," but she thought also that the suppression, if it existed, had been permanently inculcated in woman's character.[11]

Modern birth control ideas rest on a full acceptance, at least quantitatively, of female sexuality. Modern contraception is designed to permit sexual intercourse

as often as desired without the risk of pregnancy. Despite the protestations of sex counsellors that there are no norms for the frequency of intercourse, in the popular view there are such norms. Most people in the mid-twentieth century think that "normal" couples have intercourse several times a week. By twentieth-century standards, then, the Free Lovers' rejection of artificial contraception and "unnatural" sex seems to preclude the possibility of birth control at all. Nineteenth-century sexual reformers, however, had different sexual norms. They did not seek to make an infinite number of sterile sexual encounters possible. They wanted to make it possible for women to avoid pregnancy if they badly needed to do so for physical or psychological reasons, but they did not believe that it was essential for such women to engage freely in sexual intercourse.

In short, for birth control, they recommended periodic or permanent abstinence. The proponents of voluntary motherhood had in mind two distinct contexts for abstinence. One was the mutual decision of a couple. This could mean continued celibacy, or it could mean following a form of the rhythm method. Unfortunately all the nineteenth-century writers miscalculated women's fertility cycle. (It was not until the 1920s that the ovulation cycle was correctly plotted, and until the 1930s it was not widely understood among American doctors.)[12] Ezra Heywood, for example, recommended avoiding intercourse from 6 to 8 days before menstruation until 10 to 12 days after it. Careful use of the calendar could also provide control over the sex of a child, Heywood believed: conception in the first half of the menstrual cycle would produce girls, in the second half, boys.[13] These misconceptions functioned, conveniently, to make practicable Heywood's and others' ideas that celibacy and contraceptive devices should *both* be avoided.

Some of the Free Lovers also endorsed male continence, a system practiced and advocated by the Oneida community, in which the male avoids climax entirely.[14] (There were other aspects of the Oneida system that antagonized the Free Lovers, notably the authoritarian quality of John Humphrey Noyes's leadership.)[15] Dr. Stockham developed her own theory of continence called "Karezza," in which the female as well as the male was to avoid climax. Karezza and male continence were whole sexual systems, not just methods of birth control. Their advocates expected the self-control involved to build character and spiritual qualities, while honoring, refining and dignifying the sexual functions; and Karezza was reputed to be a cure for sterility as well, since its continued use was thought to build up the resources of fertility in the body.[16]

Idealizing sexual self-control was characteristic of the Free Love point of view. It was derived mainly from the thought of the utopian communitarians of the early nineteenth century,[17] but Ezra Heywood elaborated the theory. Beginning with the assumption that people's "natural" instincts, left untrammeled, would automatically create a harmonious, peaceful society—an assumption certainly derived from liberal philosophical faith in the innate goodness of man—Heywood applied it to sexuality, arguing that the natural sexual instinct was innately moderated, self-regulating. He did not imagine, as did Freud, a powerful, simple libido that could be checked only by an equally

powerful moral and rational will. Heywood's theory implicitly contradicted Freud's description of inner struggle and constant tension between the drives of the id and the goals of the super-ego; Heywood denied the social necessity of sublimation.

On one level Heywood's theory may seem inadequate as a psychology, since it cannot explain such phenomena as repression and the strengthening of self-control with maturity. It may, however, have a deeper accuracy. It argues that society and its attendant repressions have distorted the animal's natural self-regulating mechanism, and have thereby created excessive and obsessive sexual drives. It offers a social explanation for the phenomena that Freud described in psychological terms, and thus holds out the hope that they can be changed.

Essentially similar to Wilhelm Reich's theory of "sex-economy," the Heywood theory of self-regulation went beyond Reich's in providing a weapon against one of the ideological bastions of male supremacy. Self-regulation as a goal was directed against the prevalent attitude that male lust was an uncontrollable urge, an attitude that functioned as a justification for rape specifically and for male sexual irresponsibility generally. We have to get away from the tradition of "man's necessities and woman's obedience to them," Stockham wrote.[18] The idea that men's desires are irrepressible is merely the other face of the idea that women's desires are non-existent. Together, the two created a circle that enclosed woman, making it her exclusive responsibility to say No, and making pregnancy her God-imposed burden if she didn't, while denying her both artificial contraception and the personal and social strength to rebel against male sexual demands.

Heywood developed his theory of natural sexual self-regulation in answer to the common anti-Free Love argument that the removal of social regulation of sexuality would lead to unhealthy promiscuity: ". . . in the distorted popular view, Free Love tends to unrestrained licentiousness, to open the flood gates of passion and remove all barriers in its desolating course; but it means just the opposite; it means the *utilization of animalism,* and the triumph of Reason, Knowledge, and Continence."[19] He applied the theory of self-regulation to the problem of birth control only as an afterthought, perhaps when women's concerns with that problem reached him. Ideally, he trusted, the amount of sexual intercourse that men and women desired would be exactly commensurate with the number of children that were wanted. Since sexual repression had had the boomerang effect of intensifying our sexual drives far beyond "natural" levels, effective birth control now would require the development of the inner self-control to contain and repress sexual urges. But in time he expected that sexual moderation would come about naturally.

Heywood's analysis, published in the mid-1870s, was concerned primarily with excessive sex drives in men. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, one of the leading theoreticians of the suffrage movement, reinterpreted that analysis two decades later to emphasize its effects on women. The economic dependence of woman on man, in Gilman's analysis, made her sexual attractiveness necessary not only for winning a mate, but as a means of getting a livelihood too. This is the case

with no other animal. In the human female it had produced "excessive modification to sex," emphasizing weak qualities characterized by humans as "feminine." She made an analogy to the milk cow, bred to produce far more milk than she would need for her calves. But Gilman agreed completely with Heywood about the effects of exaggerated sex distinction on the male; it produced excessive sex energy and excessive indulgence to an extent debilitating to the whole species. Like Heywood she also belived that the path of progressive social evolution moved toward monogamy and toward reducing the promiscuous sex instinct.[20]

A second context for abstinence, in addition to mutual self-regulation by a couple, was the right of the wife unilaterally to refuse her husband. This idea is at the heart of voluntary motherhood. It was a key substantive demand in the mid-nineteenth century when both law and practice made sexual submission to her husband a woman's duty.[21] A woman's right to refuse is clearly the fundamental condition of birth control—and of her independence and personal integrity.

In their crusade for this right of refusal the voices of Free Lovers and suffragists were in unison. Ezra Heywood demanded "Woman's Natural Right to ownership and control over her own body-self—a right inseparable from Woman's intelligent existence. . . ."[22] Paulina Wright Davis, at the National Woman Suffrage Association in 1871, attacked the law "which makes obligatory the rendering of marital rights and compulsory maternity." When, as a result of her statement she was accused of being a Free Lover, she responded by accepting the description.[23] Isabella Beecher Hooker wrote her daughter in 1869 advising her to avoid pregnancy until "you are prepared in body and soul to receive and cherish the little one. . . ."[24] In 1873 she gave similar advice to women generally, in her book *Womanhood*.[25] Elizabeth Cady Stanton had characteristically used the same phrase as Heywood: woman owning her own body. Once asked by a magazine what she meant by it, she replied: ". . . womanhood is the primal fact, wifehood and motherhood its incidents . . . must the heyday of her existence be wholly devoted to the one animal function of bearing children? Shall there be no limit to this but woman's capacity to endure the fearful strain on her life?"[26]

The insistence on women's right to refuse often took the form of attacks on men for their lusts and their violence in attempting to satisfy them. In their complaints against the unequal marriage laws, chief or at least loudest among them was the charge that they legalized rape.[27] Victoria Woodhull raged, "I will tell the world, so long as I have a tongue and the strength to move it, of all the infernal misery hidden behind this horrible thing called marriage, though the Young Men's Christian Association sentence me to prison a year for every word. I have seen horrors beside which stone walls and iron bars are heaven. . . ."[28] Angela Heywood attacked men incessantly and bitterly; if one were to ignore the accuracy of her charges, she could well seem ill-tempered. "Man so lost to himself and woman as to invoke legal *violence* in these sacred nearings, *should*

have solemn meeting with, and look serious at his own penis until he is able to be lord and master of it, rather than it should longer rule, lord and master, of him and of the victims he deflowers."[29] Suffragists spoke more delicately, but not less bitterly. Feminists organized social purity organizations and campaigns, their attacks on prostitution based on a critique of the double standard, for which their proposed remedy was that men conform to the standards required of women.[30]

A variant of this concern was a campaign against "sexual abuses"—a Victorian euphemism for deviant sexual practices, or simply excessive sexual demands, not necessarily violence or prostitution. The Free Lovers, particularly, turned to this cause, because it gave them an opportunity to attack marriage. The "sexual abuses" question was one of the most frequent subjects of correspondence in Free Love periodicals. For example, a letter from Mrs. Theresa Hughes of Pittsburgh described:

> . . . a girl of sixteen, full of life and health when she became a wife . . . . She was a slave in every sense of the word, mentally and sexually, never was she free from his brutal outrages, morning, noon and night, up almost to the very hour her baby was born, and before she was again strong enough to move about . . . Often did her experience last an hour or two, and one night she will never forget, the outrage lasted exactly four hours.[31]

Or from Lucinda Chandler, well-known moral reformer:

> This useless sense gratification has demoralized generation after generation, till monstrosities of disorder are common. Moral education, and healthful training will be requisite for some generations, even after we have equitable economics, and free access to Nature's gifts. The young man of whom I knew who threatened his bride of a week with a sharp knife in his hand, to compel her to perform the office of 'sucker,' would no doubt have had the same disposition though no soul on the planet had a want unsatisfied or lacked a natural right.[32]

From an anonymous woman in Los Angeles:

> I am nearly wrecked and ruined by . . . nightly intercourse, which is often repeated in the morning. This and nothing else was the cause of my miscarriage . . . he went to work like a man a-mowing, and instead of a pleasure as it might have been, it was most intense torture. . . .[33]

Clearly these remarks reflect a level of hostility toward sex. The observation that many feminists hated sex has been made by several historians,[34] but they have usually failed to perceive that feminists' hostility and fear of it came from the fact that they were women, not that they were feminists. Women in the nineteenth century were, of course, trained to repress their own sexual feelings, to view sex as a duty. But they also resented what they experienced, which was not an abstraction, but a particular, historical kind of sexual encounter—intercourse dominated by and defined by the male in conformity with his desires and in disregard of what might bring pleasure to a woman. (That this might have resulted more from male ignorance than malevolence could not change women's experiences.) Furthermore, sexual intercourse brought physical danger. Pregnancy, child-birth and abortions were risky, painful and isolating ex-

periences in the nineteenth century; venereal diseases were frequently communicated to women by their husbands. Elmina Slenker, a Free Lover and novelist, wrote, "I'm getting a host of stories (truths) about women so starved sexually as to use their dogs for relief, and finally I have come to the belief that a CLEAN dog is better than a drinking, tobacco-smelling, venerally diseased man!"[35]

"Sex-hating" women were not just misinformed, or priggish, or neurotic. They were often responding rationally to their material reality. Denied the possibility of recognizing and expressing their own sexual needs, denied even the knowledge of sexual possibilities other than those dictated by the rhythms of male orgasm, they had only two choices: passive and usually pleasureless submission, with high risk of undesirable consequences, or rebellious refusal. In that context abstinence to ensure voluntary motherhood was a most significant feminist demand.

What is remarkable is that some women recognized that it was not sex per se, but only their husbands' style of making love, that repelled them. One of the women noted above who complained about her treatment went on to say: "I am undeveloped sexually, never having desires in that direction; still, with a husband who had any love or kind feelings for me and one less selfish it *might* have been different, but he cared nothing for the torture to *me* as long as *he* was gratified."[36]

Elmina Slenker herself, the toughest and crustiest of all these "sex-haters," dared to explore and take seriously her own longings, thereby revealing herself to be a sex-lover in disguise. As the editor of the *Water-Cure Journal,* and a regular contributor to *Free Love Journal,*[37] she expounded a theory of "Dianaism, or Non-procreative Love," sometimes called "Diana-love and Alpha-abstinence." It meant free sexual contact of all sorts except intercourse.

> We want the sexes to love more than they do; we want them to love openly, frankly, earnestly; to enjoy the caress, the embrace, the glance, the voice, the presence & the very step of the beloved. We oppose no form or act of love between any man & woman. Fill the world as full of genuine sex love as you can . . . but forbear to rush in where generations yet unborn may suffer for your unthinking, uncaring, unheeding actions.[38]

Comparing this to the more usual physical means of avoiding conception—*coitus interruptus* and male continence—reveals how radical it was. In modern history, awareness of the possibilities of nongenital sex, and of forms of genital sex beyond standard "missionary-position" intercourse has been a recent, post-Freudian, even post-Masters and Johnson phenomenon. The definition of sex as heterosexual intercourse has been one of the oldest and most universal cultural norms. Slenker's alienation from existing sexual possibilities led her to explore alternatives with a bravery and a freedom from religious and psychological taboos extraordinary for a nineteenth-century Quaker reformer.

In the nineteenth century, neither Free Lovers nor suffragists ever relinquished their hostility to contraception. But among the Free Lovers, free speech was always an overriding concern, and for that reason Ezra Heywood

agreed to publish some advertisements for a vaginal syringe, an instrument the use of which for contraception he personally deplored, or so he continued to assure his readers. Those advertisements led to Heywood's prosecution for obscenity, and he defended himself with characteristic flair by making his position more radical than ever before. Contraception was moral, he argued, when it was used by women as the only means of defending their rights, including the right to voluntary motherhood. Although "artificial means of preventing conception are not generally patronized by Free Lovers," he wrote, reserving for his own followers the highest moral ground, still he recognized that not all women were lucky enough to have Free Lovers for their sex partners.[39]

> Since Comstockism makes male will, passion and power absolute to *impose* conception, I stand with women to resent it. The man who would legislate to choke a woman's vagina with semen, who would force a woman to retain his seed, bear children when her own reason and conscience oppose it, would waylay her, seize her by the throat and rape her person.[40]

Angela Heywood enthusiastically pushed this new political line.

> Is it "proper", "polite", for men, real *he* men, to go to Washington to say, by penal law, fines and imprisonment, whether woman may continue her natural right to wash, rinse, or wipe out her own vaginal body opening—as well legislate when she may blow her nose, dry her eyes, or nurse her babe. . . .Whatever she may have been pleased to receive, from man's own, is his gift and her property. Women do not like rape, and have a right to resist its results.[41]

Her outspokenness, vulgarity in the ears of most of her contemporaries, came from a substantive, not merely a stylistic, sexual radicalism. Not even the heavy taboos and revulsion against abortion stopped her: "To cut a child up in woman, procure abortion. is a most fearful, tragic deed; but *even that* does not call for man's arbitrary jurisdiction over woman's womb."[42]

It is unclear whether Heywood, in this passage, was actually arguing for legalized abortion; if she was, she was alone among all nineteenth-century sexual reformers in saying it. Other feminists and Free Lovers condemned abortion, and argued that the necessity of stopping its widespread practice was a key reason for instituting voluntary motherhood by other means. The difference on the abortion question between sexual radicals and sexual conservatives was in their analysis of its causes and remedies. While doctors and preachers were sermonizing on the sinfulness of women who had abortions,[43] the radicals pronounced abortion itself an undeserved punishment, and a woman who had one a helpless victim. Woodhull and Claflin wrote about Madame Restell's notorious abortion "factory" in New York City without moralism, arguing that only voluntary conception would put it out of business.[44] Elizabeth Cady Stanton also sympathized with women who had abortions, and used the abortion problem as an example of women's victimization by laws made without their consent.[45]

Despite stylistic differences, which stemmed from differences in goals, nineteenth-century American Free Love and women's rights advocates shared the same basic attitudes toward birth control: they opposed contraception and

abortion, but endorsed voluntary motherhood achieved through periodic abstinence; they believed that women should always have the right to decide when to bear a child: and they believed that women and men both had natural sex drives and that it was not wrong to indulge those drives without the intention of conceiving children. The two groups also shared the same appraisal of the social and political significance of birth control. Most of them were favorably inclined toward neo-Malthusian reasoning (at least until the 1890s, when the prevailing concern shifted to the problem of under-population rather than over-population).[46] They were also interested, increasingly, in controlling conception for eugenic purposes.[47] They were hostile to the hypocrisy of the sexual double standard and, beyond that, shared a general sense that men had become become over-sexed and that sex had been transformed into something disagreeably violent.

But above all their commitment to voluntary motherhood expressed their larger commitment to women's rights. Elizabeth Cady Stanton thought voluntary motherhood so central that on her lecture tours in 1871 she held separate afternoon meetings for *women only* (a completely unfamiliar practice at the time) and talked about "the gospel of fewer children & a healthy, happy maternity."[48] "What radical thoughts I then and there put into their heads & as they feel untrammelled, these thoughts are permanently lodged there! That is all I ask."[49] Only Ezra Heywood had gone so far as to defend a particular contraceptive device—the syringe. But the principle of woman's right to choose the number of children she would bear and when was accepted in the most conservative sections of the women's rights movement. At the First Congress of the Association for the Advancement of Women in 1873, a whole session was devoted to the theme "Enlightened Motherhood," which had voluntary motherhood as part of its meaning.[50]

The general conviction of the feminist community that women had a right to choose when to conceive a child was so strong by the end of the nineteenth century that it seems odd that they were unable to overcome their scruples against artificial contraception. The basis for the reluctance lies in their awareness that a consequence of effective contraception would be the separation of sexuality from reproduction. A state of things that permitted sexual intercourse to take place normally, even frequently, without the risk of pregnancy, inevitably seemed to nineteenth-century middle-class women as an attack on the family, as they understood the family. In the mid-Victorian sexual system, men normally conducted their sexual philandering with prostitutes; accordingly prostitution, far from being a threat to the family system, was a part of it and an important support of it. This was the common view of the time, paralleled by the belief that prostitutes knew of effective birth-control techniques. This seemed only fitting, for contraception in the 1870s was associated with sexual immorality. It did not seem, even to the most sexually liberal, that contraception could be legitimized to any extent, even for the purposes of family planning for married couples, without licensing extra-marital sex. The fact that contraception was not morally acceptable to respectable women was, from a woman's point of view, a guarantee that those women would not be a threat to her own marriage.

The fact that sexual intercourse often leads to conception was also a guarantee that men would marry in the first place. In the nineteenth century women needed marriage far more than men. Lacking economic independence, women needed husbands to support them, or at least to free them from a usually more humiliating economic dependence on fathers. Especially in the cities, where women were often isolated from communities, deprived of the economic and psychological support of networks of relatives, friends and neighbors, the prospect of dissolving the cement of nuclear families was frightening. In many cases children, and the prospect of children, provided that cement. Man's responsibilities for children were an important pressure for marital stability. Women, especially middle-class women, were also dependent on their children to provide them with meaningful work. The belief that motherhood was a woman's fulfillment had a material basis: parenthood was often the only creative and challenging activity in a woman's life, a key part of her self-esteem.

Legal, efficient birth control would have increased men's freedom to indulge in extra-marital sex without greatly increasing women's freedom to do so. The pressures enforcing chastity and marital fidelity on middle-class women were not only fear of illegitimate conception but a powerful combination of economic, social and psychological factors, including economic dependence, fear of rejection by husband and social support networks, internalized taboos and, hardly the least important, a socially conditioned lack of interest in sex that may have approached functional frigidity. The double standard of the Victorian sexual and family system, which had made men's sexual freedom irresponsible and oppressive to women, left most feminists convinced that increasing, rather than releasing, the taboos against extra-marital sex was in their interest, and they threw their support behind social-purity campaigns.

In short, we must forget the twentieth-century association of birth control with a trend toward sexual freedom. The voluntary motherhood propaganda of the 1870s was associated with a push toward a more restrictive, or at least a more rigidly enforced, sexual morality. Achieving voluntary motherhood by a method that would have encouraged sexual license was absolutely contrary to the felt interests of the very group that formed the main social basis for the cause—middle-class women. Separating these women from the early-twentieth-century feminists, with their interest in sexual freedom, were nearly four decades of significant social and economic changes and a general weakening of the ideology of the Lady. The ideal of the Free Lovers—responsible, open sexual encounters between equal partners—was impossible in the 1870s because men and women were not equal. A man was a man whether faithful to his wife or not. But women's sexual activities divided them into two categories—wife or prostitute. These categories were not mere ideas, but were enforced in reality by severe social and economic sanctions. The fact that so many, indeed most, Free Lovers in practice led faithful, monogamous, legally-married lives is not insignificant in this regard. It suggests that they instinctively understood that Free Love was an ideal not be realized in that time.

As voluntary motherhood was an ideology intended to encourage sexual purity, so it was also a pro-motherhood ideology. Far from debunking

motherhood, the voluntary motherhood advocates consistently continued the traditional Victorian mystification and sentimentalization of the mother. It is true that at the end of the nineteenth century an increasing number of feminists and elite women—that is, still a relatively small group—were choosing not to marry or become mothers. That was primarily because of their increasing interest in professional work, and the difficulty of doing such work as a wife and mother, given the normal uncooperativeness of husbands and the lack of social provisions for child care. Voluntary motherhood advocates shared the general belief that mothers of young children ought not to work outside their homes but should make mothering their full-time occupation. Suffragists argued both to make professions open to women and to ennoble the task of mothering; they argued for increased rights and opportunities for women *because* they were mothers.

The Free Lovers were equally pro-motherhood; they only wanted to separate motherhood from legal marriage.[51] They devised pro-motherhood arguments to bolster their case against marriage. Mismated couples, held together by marriage laws, made bad parents and produced inferior offspring, Free Lovers said.[52] In 1870 *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly* editorialized, "Our marital system is the greatest obstacle to the regeneration of the race."[53]

This concern with eugenics was characteristic of nearly all feminists of the late nineteenth century. At the time eugenics was mainly seen as an implication of evolutionary theory and was picked up by many social reformers to buttress their arguments that improvement of the human condition was possible. Eugenics had not yet become a movement in itself. Feminists used eugenics arguments as if they instinctively felt that arguments based solely on women's rights had not enough power to conquer conservative and religious scruples about reproduction. So they combined eugenics and feminism to produce evocative, romantic visions of perfect motherhood. "Where boundless love prevails. . .," *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly* wrote, "the mother who produces an inferior child will be dishonored and unhappy . . . and she who produces superior children will feel proportionately pleased. When woman attains this position, she will consider superior offspring a necessity and be apt to procreate only with superior men."[54] Free Lovers and suffragists alike used the cult of motherhood to argue for making motherhood voluntary. Involuntary motherhood, wrote Harriet Stanton Blatch, daughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and a prominent suffragist, is a prostitution of the maternal instinct.[55] Free Lover Rachel Campbell cried out that motherhood was being "ground to dust under the misrule of masculine ignorance and superstition."[56]

Not only was motherhood considered an exalted, sacred profession, and a profession exclusively woman's reponsibility, but for a woman to avoid it was to choose a distinctly less noble path. In arguing for the enlargement of woman's sphere, feminists envisaged combining motherhood with other activities, not rejecting motherhood. Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin wrote:

> Tis true that the special and distinctive feature of woman is that of bearing children, and that upon the exercise of her function in this regard the perpetuity of race depends. It is also true that those who pass through life failing in this special feature of

> their mission cannot be said to have lived to the best purposes of woman's life. But while maternity should always be considered the most holy of all the functions woman is capable of, it should not be lost sight of in devotion to this, that there are as various spheres of usefulness outside of this for woman as there are for man outside of the marriage relation.[57]

Birth control was not intended to open the possibility of childlessness, but merely to give women leverage to win more recognition and dignity. Dora Forster, a Free Lover, saw in the fears of underpopulation a weapon of blackmail for women:

> I hope the scarcity of children will go on until maternity is honored at least as much as the trials and hardships of soldiers campaigning in wartime. It will then be worth while to supply the nation with a sufficiency of children . . . every civilized nation, having lost the power to enslave woman as mother, will be compelled to recognize her voluntary exercise of that function as by far the most important service of any class of citizens.[58]

"Oh, women of the world, arise in your strength and demand that all which stands in the path of true motherhood shall be removed from your path," wrote Lois Waisbrooker, a Free Love novelist and moral reformer.[59] Helen Gardener based a plea for women's education entirely on the argument that society needed educated mothers to produce able sons (not children, sons).

> Harvard and Yale, not to mention Columbia, may continue to put a protective tariff on the brains of young men: but so long as they must get those brains from the proscribed sex, just so long will male brains remain an 'infant industry' and continue to need this protection. Stupid mothers never did and stupid mothers never will, furnish this world with brilliant sons.[60]

Clinging to the cult of motherhood was part of a broader conservatism shared by Free Lovers and suffragists—acceptance of traditional sex roles. Even the Free Lovers rejected only one factor—legal marriage—of the many that defined woman's place in the family. They did not challenge conventional conceptions of woman's passivity and limited sphere of concern.[61] In their struggles for equality the women's-rights advocates never suggested that men should share responsibility for child-raising, housekeeping, nursing, cooking. When Victoria Woodhull in the 1870s and Charlotte Perkins Gilman in the early 1900s suggested socialized child care, they assumed that only women would do the work.[62] Most feminists wanted economic independence for women, but most, too, were reluctant to recommend achieving this by turning women loose and helpless into the economic world to compete with men.[63] This attitude was conditioned by an attitude hostile to the egoistic spirit of capitalism; but the attitude was not transformed into a political position and usually appeared as a description of women's weakness, rather than an attack on the system. Failing to distinguish, or even to indicate awareness of a possible distinction between women's conditioned passivity and their equally conditioned distaste for competition and open aggression, these feminists also followed the standard Victorian rationalization of sex roles, the idea that women were morally superior. Thus the timidity and self-effacement that were the marks of women's powerlessness were made into innate virtues. Angela Heywood, for example,

praised women's greater ability for self-control, and, in an attribution no doubt intended to jar and titillate the reader, branded men inferior on account of their lack of sexual temperance.[64] Men's refusal to accept women as human beings she identified, similarly, as a mark of men's incapacity: ". . . man has not yet achieved himself to realize and meet a PERSON in woman. . . ."[65] In idealistic, abstract terms, no doubt such male behavior is an incapacity. Yet that conceit failed to remark on the power and privilege over women that the supposed "incapacity" gave men.

This omission is characteristic of the cult of motherhood. Indeed, what made it a cult was its one-sided failure to recognize the privileges men received from women's exclusive responsibility for parenthood. The "motherhood" of the feminists' writings was not merely the biological process of gestation and birth, but a package of social, economic and cultural functions. Although many of the nineteenth-century feminists had done substantial analysis of the historical and anthropological origins of woman's social role, they nevertheless agreed with the biological-determinist point of view that women's parental capacities had become implanted at the level of instinct, the famous "maternal instinct." That concept rested on the assumption that the qualities that parenthood requires—capacities for tenderness, self-control and patience, tolerance for tedium and detail, emotional supportiveness, dependability and warmth—were not only instinctive but sex-linked. The concept of the maternal instinct thus also involved a definition of the normal instinctual structure of the male that excluded these capacities, or included them only to an inferior degree; it also carried the implication that women who did not exercise these capacities, presumably through motherhood, remained unfulfilled, untrue to their destinies.

Belief in the maternal instinct reinforced the belief in the necessary spiritual connection for women between sex and reproduction, and limited the development of birth-control ideas. But the limits were set by the entire social context of women's lives, not by the intellectual timidity of their ideas. For women's "control over their own bodies" to lead to a rejection of motherhood as the *primary* vocation and measure of social worth required the existence of alternative vocations and sources of worthiness. The women's rights advocates of the 1870s and 1880s were fighting for those other opportunities, but a significant change had come only to a few privileged women, and most women faced essentially the same options that existed fifty years earlier. Thus voluntary motherhood in this period remained almost exclusively a tool for women to strengthen their positions within conventional marriages and families, not to reject them.

FOOTNOTES

1 There is no space here to compensate for the unfortunate general lack of information about the Free Lovers. The book-in-progress from which this paper is taken includes a fuller discussion of who they were, the content of their ideology and practice. The interested reader may refer to the following major works of the Free Love cause:

R. D. Chapman, *Freelove a Law of Nature* (New York: author 1881).

Tennessee Claflin, *The Ethics of Sexual Equality* (New York: Woodhull & Claflin, 1873).

———, *Virtue, What Is It and What It Isn't; Seduction, What It Is and What It Is Not* (New York: Woodhull & Claflin, 1872).

Ezra Heywood, *Cupid's Yokes: or, The Binding Forces of Conjugal Life* (Princeton, Mass.: Co-operative Publishing Co., n.d., probably 1876).

———, *Uncivil Liberty: An Essay to Show the Injustice and Impolicy of Ruling Woman Without Her Consent* (Princeton, Mass.: Co-operative Publishing Co., 1872).

C. L. James, *The Future Relation of the Sexes* (St. Louis: author, 1872).

Juliet Severance, *Marriage* (Chicago: M. Harman, 1901).

Victoria Claflin Woodhull, *The Scare-Crows of Sexual Slavery* (New York: Woodhull & Claflin, 1874).

———, *A Speech on the Principles of Social Freedom* (New York: Woodhull & Claflin, 1872).

———, *Tried as by Fire; or, the True and the False Socially* (New York: Woodhull & Claflin, 1874).

2 Heywood, *Cupid's Yokes, p. 20.*

3 Claflin, *The Ethics of Sexual Equality,* pp. 9-10.

4 *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly* 1, no. 6 (1870): 5.

5 Heywood, *Cupid's Yokes,* pp. 17-18.

6 Letter to her daughter Alice, 1874, in the Isabella Beecher Hooker Collection. Beecher Stowe Mass. This reference was brought to my attention by Ellen Dubois of SUNY-Buffalo.

7 Alice B. Stockham, M.D., *Karezza, Ethics of Marriage* (Chicago: Alice B. Stockham & Co., 1898), pp. 84, 91-92.

8 Theodore Stanton and Harriot Stanton Blatch, eds., *Elizabeth Cady Stanton as Revealed in Her Letters, Diary and Reminiscences* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1922), 2:210 (Diary, 9-6-1883).

9 Ben Barker-Benfield, "The Spermatic Economy: A Nineteenth Century View of Sexuality," *Feminist Studies* 1, no. 1 (Summer 1972): 53.

10 J.J. Rousseau, *Emile* (New York: Columbia University Teachers College, 1967), p. 132. Rousseau was, after all, a chief author of the Victorian revision of the image of woman.

11 Dora Forster, *Sex Radicalism as Seen by an Emancipated Woman of the New Time* (Chicago: M. Harman, 1905), p. 40.

12 Norman E. Himes, *Medical History of Contraception* (New York: Gamut Press, 1963).

13 Heywood, *Cupid's Yokes,* pp. 19-20, 16.

14 Ibid., pp. 19-20; *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly* 1, no, 18 (September 10, 1870): 5.

15 Heywood, *Cupid's Yoke,* pp. 14-15.

16 Stockham, *Karezza,* pp. 82-83, 53.

17 See for example, *Free Enquirer,* ed. Robert Owen and Frances Wright, (May 22, 1830), pp. 235-236.

18 Stockham, *Karezza,* p. 86.

19 Heywood, *Cupid's Yoke,* p. 19.

20 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), pp. 38-39, 43-44, 42, 47-48, 209.

21 In England, for example, it was not until 1891 that the courts first held against a man who forcibly kidnapped and imprisoned his wife when she left him.

22 Ezra Heywood, *Free Speech: Report of Ezra H. Heywood's Defense before the United States Court, in Boston, April 10, 11, and 12, 1883* (Princeton, Mass.: Co-operative Publishing Co., n.d.), p. 16.

23 Quoted in Nelson Manfred Blake, *The Road to Reno, A History of Divorce in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 108, from the *New York Tribune,* May 12, 1871 and July 20, 1871.

24 Letter of August 29, 1869, in Hooker Collection, Beecher-Stowe Mss. This reference was brought to my attention by Ellen Dubois of SUNY-Buffalo.

25 Isabella Beecker Hooker, *Womanhood: its Sanctities and Fidelities* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1873), p. 26.

26 Elizabeth Cady Stanton Mss. No. 11, Library of Congress, undated. This reference was brought to my attention by Ellen Dubois of SUNY-Buffalo.

27 See for example, *Lucifer, The Light-Bearer,* ed. Moses Harman (Valley Falls, Kansas: 1894-1907) 18, no. 6 (October 1889): 3.

28 Victoria Woodhull, *The Scare-Crows,* p. 21. Her mention of the YMCA is a reference to the fact that Anthony Comstock, author and chief enforcer for the U.S. Post Office of the anti-obscenity laws, had begun his career in the YMCA.

29 *The Word* (Princeton, Mass.) 20, no. 9 (March 1893): 2-3. Emphasis in original.

30 See for example, the National Purity Congress of 1895, sponsored by the American Purity Alliance.

31 *Lucifer* (April 26, 1890), pp. 1-2.

32 N. a. *The Next Revolution: or Woman's Emancipation from Sex Slavery* (Valley Falls, Kansas: Lucifer Publishing Co., 1890), p. 49.

33 Ibid., pp. 8-9.

34 Linda Gordon et al., "Sexism in American Historical Writing," *Women's Studies* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1972).

35 *Lucifer* 15, no. 2 (September 1886): 3.

36 *The Word* 20 (1892-1893).

37 (Slenker) *Lucifer,* May 23, 1907; *Cyclopedia of American Boigraphy* 8: 488.

38 See for example *Lucifer* 18, no. 8 (December 1889): 3; 18, no. 6 (October 1889): 3; 18, no. 8 (December 1889): 3.

39 Heywood, *Free Speech,* pp. 17, 16.

40 Ibid., pp. 3-6. "Comstockism" also is a reference to Anthony Comstock. Noting the irony that the syringe was called by Comstock's name, Heywood continued: "To name a really good thing 'Comstock' has a sly, sinister, wily look, indicating vicious purpose; in deference to its N.Y. venders, who gave that name, the Publishers of *The Word* inserted an advertisement . . . which will hereafter appear as 'the Vaginal Syringe'; for its intelligent, humane and worthy mission should no longer be libelled by forced association with the pious scamp who thinks Congress gives him legal right of way to and control over every American Woman's Womb." At this trial, Heywood's second, he was acquitted. At his first trial, in 1877, he had been convicted, sentenced to two years, and served six months; at his third, in 1890, he was sentenced to and served two years at hard labor, an ordeal which probably caused his death a year later.

41 *The Word* 10, no. 9 (March 1893): 2-3.

42 Ibid.

43 See for example Horatio Robinson Storer, M.D., *Why Not? A Book for Every Woman* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1868). Note that this was the prize essay in a contest run by the A.M.A. in 1865 for the best anti-abortion tract.

44 Claflin, *Ethics;* Emanie Sachs, *The Terrible Siren, Victoria Woodhull, 1838-1927* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1928), p. 139.

45 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan Anthony, Matilda Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage,* 1:597-598.

46 Heywood, *Cupid's Yokes,* p. 20; see also *American Journal of Eugenics,* ed. M. Harman 1, no. 2 (September 1907); *Lucifer* (February 15, 1906; June 7, 1906; March 28, 1907; and May 11, 1905).

47 I will deal with early feminists' ideas concerning eugenics in my book.

48 Elizabeth Cady Stanton to Martha Wright, June 19, 1871, Stanton Mss. This reference was brought to my attention by Ellen Dubois of SUNY-Buffalo; see also Stanton, *Eight Years After, Reminiscences 1815-1897* (New York: Schoeken, 1971), pp. 262,297.

49 Stanton and Blatch, *Stanton as Revealed in Her Letters,* pp. 132-133.

50 *Papers and Letters,* Association for the Advancement of Women, 1873. The AAW was a conservative group formed in opposition to the Stanton-Anthony tendency. Nevertheless Chandler, a frequent contributor to Free Love journals, spoke here against undesired maternity and the identification of woman with her maternal fuction.

51 *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly* 1, no. 20 (October 1, 1870): 10.

52 Woodhull, *Tried as by Fire,* p. 37; Lillian Harman, *The Regeneration of Society.* Speech before Manhattan Liberal Club, March 31, 1898 (Chicago: Light Bearer Library, 1900).

53 *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly* 1, no. 20 (October 1, 1870): 10.

54 Ibid.

55 Harriot Stanton Blatch, "Voluntary Motherhood," *Transactions,* National Council of Women of 1891, ed. Rachel Foster Avery (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1891), p. 280.

56 Rachel Campbell, *The Prodigal Daughter, or, the Price of Virtue* (Grass Valley, California, 1885), p. 3. An essay read to the New England Free Love League, 1881.

57 *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly* 1, no. 14 (August 13, 1870): 4.

58 In addition to the biography by Sachs mentioned above, see also Johanna Johnston, *Mrs. Satan* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1967), and M. M. Marberry, *Vicky, A Biography of Victoria C. Woodhull* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1967).

59 From an advertisement for her novel, *Perfect Motherhood; Or, Mabel Raymond's Resolve* (New York: Murray Hill, 1890), in *The Next Revolution.*

60 Helen Hamilton Gardener, *Pulpit, Pew and Cradle* (New York: Truth Seeker Library, 1891), p. 22.

61 Even the most outspoken of the Free Lovers had conventional, role-differentiated images of sexual relations. Here is Angela Heywood, for example: "Men must not emasculate themselves for the sake of 'virtue,' they must, they will, recognize manliness and the life element of manliness as the fountain source of good manners. Women and girls demand strong, well-bred generative, vitalizing sex ability. Potency, virility, is the grand basic principle of man, and it holds him clean, sweet and elegant, to the delicacy of his counterpart." From *The Word* 14, no. 2 (June 1885): 3.

62 Woodhull, *The Scare-Crows;* Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Concerning Children.*

63 See for example Blatch, "Voluntary Motherhood," pp. 283-284.

64 *The Word* 20, no. 8 (February 1893): 3.

65 Ibid.