
Why Nineteenth-Century
Feminists Did Not Support
“Birth Control”
and Twentieth-Century
Feminists Do:
Feminism, Reproduction,
and the Family

The question of *changes* in feminist attitudes toward reproductive control has been understandably neglected in the face of today's beleaguered but relatively unified feminist position in support of women's reproductive rights. Still, changes in the feminist position over time and conflicts within the feminist tradition are important. This historical overview provides some insights into the contemporary controversy over reproductive rights and the more inclusive controversy over the family norms our society should have.

In this essay I narrate a complex historical story very briefly,¹ offering only the minimum of information required to answer the title question in a rudimentary way. In addition, the narrative sheds light on several related issues: (1) the relation between technology and social change, as exemplified in the development of birth-control technology; (2) the poverty of generalizations about the family that do not specifically focus on the sex/gender system;² (3) certain political and ideological contradictions within the feminist tradition; and (4) some sources of the revival of the right-wing, particularly the Moral Majority, in the United States.

No existing social theory, religious or materialist, has satisfactorily explained why and how societies regulate reproduction as they do. This lack of explanation is even more odd when one bears in mind that all

societies regulate reproduction, and there are many differences among these sets of social rules.

One reason for the absence of satisfactory theorizing is that human reproduction involves a relation between two sexes and therefore two genders. No social theory prior to modern feminism tried to use gender as a fundamental category of social analysis. To some extent, this blind spot has been reinforced in the last century, despite the existence of feminist theory as a new vision. In the nineteenth century, Marxism began to remove the blinders and examine the material origins and perpetuation of male supremacy; more recently, the dominant Marxism became vulgarized into a productionist determinism that once again ignored the gender system.

The popularity of technological explanations, and technological determinism, further reinforced the blinders. By technological determinism I mean the view that inventions, the product of human inventiveness, shape basic social alternatives. In the field of birth control this view has constructed the following picture: Once there were no effective means of birth control, and therefore the birthrate was controlled only by natural variables such as women's health and physiological fertility, or people's sexual drive; the development of contraception in this century has revolutionized the birthrate, family size, and women's life options. These changes, of course, were conditioned by other technological advances that reduced mortality rates.³ This technological explanation is wrong, however. Technological changes have been influential, but in themselves they do not provide an explanation for the history and continuity of the birth-control controversy.

Neither will so-called family-history explanations, which usually employ the assumptions of "modernization theory." This approach to birth control argues that urbanization and industrialization created an economic preference for smaller families along with a character structure more secular and more oriented to pleasure.⁴ Ignoring class and sexual conflicts within these "modernizing" societies, the modernization theorists cannot explain the controversy about reproductive control.

And this controversy badly needs explanation. The abortion struggle today is in part an updated version of a birth-control struggle at least 150 years old. No issue of women's liberation has ever been as hotly contested; no conflict in industrial society, with the exception of the social relations of labor itself, has been as bitter; and there may be no social issue that is more passionately debated.

Let me introduce a brief historical summary. Between earliest recorded history, and even as far back as some prehistoric archeological evidence, until the 1870s, there were no significant technological advances in birth control whatever. All the basic forms of birth control—abortions,

douches, condoms, and devices to cover the cervix—are ancient. The social regulation of the use of these techniques changed in various historical eras and places in the context of power relations and economic needs. By and large, birth control was uncontroversial and widely practiced in preagricultural societies; by contrast, in peasant societies large families were an asset, continuing high infant mortality necessitated many pregnancies, and birth control was suppressed.

Let us proceed now to the early-nineteenth-century United States. At that time there were two developments: (1) a falling birthrate and an increased use of birth control and (2) the first political movements for reproductive control. At this time, urbanization and industrialization began to create living conditions in which large families were no longer economical. In 1810 the birthrate in the United States started to fall and has been falling ever since. In the early nineteenth century, in a society with a strong element of prudery, it was difficult to get evidence of private use of contraception, and at first puzzled observers thought that there was a physiological decline in fertility! But by the 1840s new evidence appeared: a rise in abortions.⁵ The demand for birth control had outstripped the availability of contraceptive techniques. Moreover, the average abortion client was no longer a single girl in trouble but a married woman who already had children.

Also from the 1840s there appeared the first American birth-control movement within the women's rights movement, in the form of a demand for "voluntary motherhood." The meaning of that phrase should be evident. It had no antimotherhood implications; in fact, Voluntary Motherhood advocates argued that willing mothers would be better mothers.

In their line of argument we can see that motherhood had broader connotations for them than for us today. A century ago, feminists and nonfeminists alike assumed (at least I have found no exception) that women were naturally those who should not only give birth to children but should also do primary child raising, as well as perform the nurturing functions for the whole society: maintaining friendship networks, cultural institutions, and rituals; creating beautiful environments; and nurturing husbands, relatives, and other women. Their feminism manipulated the cult of domesticity, translating it into what was later called "social house-keeping," spreading the virtues of an idealized home throughout the society.⁶ Thus, in the nineteenth century the overall demand for women's rights was frequently couched in terms of a greater respect for motherhood.

Voluntary Motherhood was a campaign exclusively focused on women. It must be distinguished from two other, separate streams in the historical movement for contraception. The first was neo-Malthusianism, or population control, a plan to ameliorate social problems by reducing the

size of populations on a large scale. This ideology says nothing about women's rights; a satisfactory solution in an overcrowded country might be to sterilize half the women and let the other half have all the children they wanted. Neo-Malthusianism came late to the United States because in this country underpopulation, not overpopulation, was the dominant fear until World War II.

The second movement, eugenics, was really a subcategory of neo-Malthusianism, an effort to apply population control differentially and thus to reduce the size of certain unwanted human "types." Eugenic thought originally was primarily directed at the elimination of idiocy, criminality, and drunkenness, on the misguided theory that such undesirable qualities were hereditary. After the Civil War, however, with social stratification deepening, eugenics took on a different orientation. The upper-class WASP elite of the industrial North became increasingly aware of its own small-family pattern, in contrast to the continuing large-family preferences of immigrants and the rural poor. From as early as the 1860s, the fear of so-called race suicide emerged. In that phrase, race was used ambiguously: to equate the "human race" with WASPs. Out of fears of a loss of political (and social and economic) dominance to an expanding population of "inferiors" grew a plan for reestablishing social stability through differential breeding: The superior should have more children, the inferior fewer. (In the twentieth century blacks and the welfare poor replaced immigrants and sharecroppers as the primary targets of eugenic policies. But that is getting ahead of our story.)

By the end of the century, then, there were three separate reproduction control movements—Voluntary Motherhood, population control, and eugenics. All three were to some extent responses to the fact that birth control *was* being widely used. And all three to some extent required better reproductive-control techniques. Yet on another, crucial dimension there was a sharp difference among them: The eugenicists and population controllers supported the legalization of contraception, but the Voluntary Motherhood advocates opposed it. For birth control, they proposed abstinence—either periodic, based on an incorrect rhythm method, or long-term, allowing for intercourse only when a conception was desired. Their position was the more odd since they were the ones most blamed for the rise in birth-control use. Antifeminists of the mid-nineteenth century, just as today, charged feminism with destroying motherhood and the family and encouraging sexual licentiousness. In a way, their opponents were (and are) right, and the feminists wrong. Despite their denials, the feminists, by raising women's self-respect and aspirations, did lend implicit support to birth-control use.

Furthermore, the backlash was able, in the nineteenth century, to ride its antifeminist rhetoric to several important victories. First, a physicians' campaign to outlaw abortion got most states to legislate against it for

the first time; before this, abortion in the early months was legal. Second, in the mid-nineteenth century, the Catholic church also banned abortion for the first time, having previously accepted it in the early months. Third, in 1873, the Comstock law, named after a notorious prude who was postmaster-general, made it a federal crime to send obscene material through the mails, and listed birth control as an obscene subject. Most opponents of birth control at this time did not distinguish contraception from abortion; they called it all murder and immorality. Nevertheless, the repression did not work. Then, as now, birth-control use continued to rise and the birthrate continued to fall.

It bears repeating that this struggle took place *with no new technological inventions*. The only nineteenth-century contribution to birth-control technology—the vulcanization of rubber, which permitted the manufacture of better condoms and diaphragms—had no impact in this country until this century. What, then, caused the decline in the birthrate, the rise of pro-birth-control movements, and the backlash against birth control?

In the late nineteenth century a debate raged about this question. One side blamed feminism, arguing that women, stirred up by licentious propaganda, were rejecting their duties to society and seeking selfish gratification. The other side blamed the industrial economy, showing that children were no longer respectful nor economically profitable toward their parents. In fact, these two explanations were both correct and were fundamentally the same. Feminism was a response to the industrial economy that had robbed women of their traditional productive labor and turned them—at least those of the prosperous classes, who were most likely to become feminists—into unpaid, disrespected housekeepers. Feminism was also, ideologically, a response to the liberal individualism that was once the revolutionary credo of the bourgeoisie and later became the justifying ideology of capitalism. The convergence between feminism and a new economic setup can be seen further in the fact that decisions about birth control and family size have in the main not been controversial within families; new class aspirations shared by husbands and wives included new views of the place of women as well as of family size. The birthrate drop started first among the professional and managerial strata, who cared most about educating their children well (which is expensive), and who contributed most feminists to the movement. From here the small-family tendency moved both upward to the capitalist class and downward to the working class, just as women's rights ideas moved both up and down from their middle-class origins. The biggest differential in family size was not primarily class, defined in a static way, but urbanization. By and large, migrants, both foreigners and southern blacks, coming from peasant societies, slowly relinquished their large-family preferences,

settled for fewer children, and adopted positive attitudes toward birth control.

Why, then, did nineteenth-century feminists cling so hard to such a backward position as their condemnation of contraception? (And they were tenacious. As late as the 1920s, feminists of the earlier generations were lined up against Margaret Sanger and other birth-control pioneers.) There are two reasons I want to advance. The first is that they wanted Voluntary Motherhood not as a single-issue reform but as part of a broad movement for the empowerment of women, and some possible reforms within the spectrum of women's needs contradicted each other, creating a double bind for the feminists. A second reason lies in a great intellectual and cultural ambivalence within feminism: It represented both the highest development of liberal individualism and also a critique of liberal individualism. Let me discuss these reasons briefly.

The Voluntary Motherhood advocates, as I have said, were part of a general women's rights movement; they were also working for suffrage, property rights, employment opportunities, and some of the more daring for divorce rights. Their concern for all the needs of women, even to some extent their attempt to grasp the larger problems of working-class women, led them to recognize a number of contradictions. First, they realized that while women needed freedom from excessive childbearing, they also needed the respect and self-respect motherhood brought. By and large, motherhood then was the only challenging, dignified, and rewarding work that women could get (it still is, for the majority of women). Second, they understood that while women needed freedom from pregnancy, they also needed freedom from male sexual tyranny, especially in a society that had almost completely suppressed accurate information about female sexuality and replaced it with information and attitudes so false as to virtually guarantee that women would not enjoy sex. Abstinence as a form of birth control may well have been the solution that made most sense in the particular historical circumstance. Abstinence helped women strengthen their ability to say no to their husbands' sexual demands, for example, while contraception and abortion would have weakened it. Nineteenth-century feminists have often been considered prudish, and indeed they were reluctant, for example, to name the sexual parts of the body; but they were not reluctant to speak of marital rape, which traditionalists found even more shocking. A few feminists even began discussing the possibility of forms of sexual contact other than intercourse as a means of nonprocreative sex, thus opening a challenge to phallic sexual norms that was continued a century later. In other words, some women had figured out that it was not sex they disliked so much as the particular sexual activity they had experienced.

The Voluntary Motherhood advocates faced a second set of con-

traditions in their ambivalent attitude toward individualism. The essence of their feminism was their anger at the suppression of the capabilities and aspirations of individual women. They envisaged a public sphere of adults equal in rights, though unequal in native abilities, each individual guaranteed maximum opportunity for self-development. At the same time they were firmly committed to the family. They did not challenge gender, or even "sex roles." They did not challenge heterosexual marriage based on a firm sexual division of labor (man the chief breadwinner, woman the mother in that expanded sense described above), even though this family form condemned women to remaining primarily out of the public sphere. Many of them could see the problems with this arrangement, but all of them felt sure that the family was an absolutely essential institution for the maintenance of civilization. At moments, some of their rhetoric suggests that they glimpsed the possibility of the further individualization and atomization of people the wage labor system could bring, and they feared it. Fear of that individualism reverberates in many socialists and among feminists today; a world in which self-improvement, competition, and isolation dominate human energies is not appealing. Indeed, what civilization *meant* to nineteenth-century feminists was the tempering of the individual struggle for survival by greater social values and aspirations that, they believed, women supported through their nurturing role in the division of labor. And yet their very movement was increasing the number of women who joined that atomized world of the labor market. Their historic compromise must be seen sympathetically in that context: They argued that more respect for women should be used to reinforce motherhood, to give it more freedom, respect, and self-respect. Hence their reluctance to accept a form of birth control that could exempt women from motherhood.

Feminists changed their minds about contraception in the early twentieth century. Again, no new techniques affected them; rather, after they changed their minds, they took the initiative in finding the technology they needed. Two leaders, Emma Goldman and Margaret Sanger, separately traveled to Europe where rubber diaphragms were being prescribed in labor and trade-union-funded health clinics. The women personally imported these devices into the United States. In America, as in Europe, these new pro-birth-control feminists were mainly in and around the Socialist Party. It is logical, I think, that socialist feminists were the first to take a pro-contraception position. Concerned as they were with the working class, they realized the consequences and hardships of a massive employment of women; attempting as they were to build a working-class movement, they saw the weakness of a movement in which women were politically immobilized by sexism and exclusive responsibilities for large families; having rejected religion and viewing traditional morality as a

form of social control beneficial to the capitalist class, they saw liberating possibilities in a freer sexual life.

All along, feminists had been responding to family change and trying to direct and even initiate it. The trajectory of change that formed the primary experience of most nineteenth-century feminists was a decline of patriarchy⁷ that produced increased independence for grown children without enhancing very much the autonomy of women (with one exception, educated single women). In that context it was reasonable for women to cling to their work as mothers as the basis for their social status and desired political power. By the early twentieth century, the further development of industrial capitalism had begun to allow a vision of greater independence for women. Not only prosperous women but also working-class women in the World War I era were experiencing the effects of public education, mass employment of women, the transformation of virtually the entire male population into a wage labor force, and extensive commodity production replacing most household production. These changes created both negative and positive consequences for women. Negatively, the separation of productive from reproductive labor, in the context of a capitalist culture, demeaned the social status of motherhood. Positively, the devaluing of domestic work allowed a vision of a public role for women, in work and politics, that for the first time in the history of feminism made women want equality. (Early feminists did not dream of full equality between the sexes.) And equality for women absolutely required reproductive self-control.

When socialist feminists first adopted pro-birth-control positions in the early twentieth century, nonfeminist socialists had divided reactions. The majority of the U.S. Socialist Party, for example, believed that, at best, birth control was a dangerous distraction from the class struggle. Some responded even more negatively, out of a traditional anti-neo-Malthusian appraisal that the major purpose of reproductive control was to reduce the numbers and hence the strength of the working class. Some Socialists, however, supported the birth-control movement, if weakly, because they believed it could reduce women's domestic burdens and free them for greater political activity in support of their class interests.

By contrast, black radicals in the United States in the 1910s tended to support birth control far more frequently. They saw it as a tool for the self-determination of black Americans. In the 1920s and afterward, however, birth control was increasingly absorbed into programs aimed not at self-determination but at social control by the elite. Eugenics became a dominant motif in the effort to legalize contraception and sterilization, and even birth controllers from the socialist-feminist tradition, such as Margaret Sanger, made accommodations with the eugenicists. These policies

cost the birth controllers most of their black support—and many of their white radical supporters as well.

Sanger and other spokespeople used racist rhetoric, urging reduction of the birthrates of the “undesirables”; private birth-control clinics in the 1910s and '20s experimented with evaluating the eugenic worth of their clients and advising them on the desirability of their reproductive intentions. The first publicly funded birth-control clinics appeared in the South in the 1930s, sold to southern state public health services on the grounds that they would lower the black birthrate. Throughout the country during the Great Depression, birth control was touted as a means of lowering welfare costs. In these developments were premonitions of the involuntary and coercive sterilizations performed today. (A 1979 study shows that 70 percent of hospitals fail to comply with DHEW sterilization guidelines.)⁸

Thus the cry of genocide that began to be raised against reproductive-control campaigns in the 1930s, and continues today, is not wrong. It is only too simple. It arises from at least three sources. First, the tensions between white feminism and black liberation movements that arose in the struggle over the Fourteenth Amendment underlie this problem and have virtually blotted out the contribution of black feminists (not only today but historically). So convoluted are these tensions that anti-abortionists have manipulated the fear of genocide in a racist way—suggesting, for example, that black and working-class women do not need or want reproductive self-determination, that they are satisfied with their status, that aspirations for independence and prestige exist only among privileged white women.⁹

Second, beyond this general distrust is the actual racism of the white-dominated women's movement, which was clearly manifested in the birth-control movement as much by socialist as by liberal feminists. Its pattern resembled that of the white-dominated labor movement. Elizabeth Cady Stanton's appeal for giving the vote to educated women in preference to ignorant men is of a piece with trade-union denunciation of blacks as scabs even as they excluded them from their unions.

Third, and most pertinent, is the dominance of the relatively conservative population-control and eugenics programs over the feminist birth-control program. Planned Parenthood's use of small-family ideology and its international emphasis on sterilization rather than safe and controllable contraception have far overshadowed its feminist program for women's self-determination. Most Americans do not distinguish between birth control as a program of individual rights and population control as social policy. Moreover, many scholars continue this ideological confusion and fail to make this essential analytic distinction. The tendency to fetishize reproduction-control technology, as if the diaphragm or the pill,

rather than the social relations that promote their use, were the news, further legitimates this analytic mush.

The distinctions started to reappear in the 1960s with the emergence of abortion as the key reproductive-control issue. In the early twentieth century, most feminists did not support abortion for several reasons: reluctance to take on too much of a backlash at once; their own conviction that sex belonged primarily in marriage, where contraceptive use was more likely to be systematic and where an unplanned child was not usually the total disaster it might be for an unmarried woman; and the fact that most poor women still had no access to decent medical care. The contemporary drive for abortion rights was a response to several factors that developed gradually in the 1920–60 period. First, there was a great increase in teen-age sexual activity without contraceptive use—in other words, it was not technology that increased sexual activity but the behavior that increased the demand. Second, there was a great increase in the number of families absolutely dependent on two incomes and an increase in women-headed families, thus making it no longer possible for mothers to stay home with an unplanned baby; this spurred the demand for abortion among married women for whom contraception had failed. The third and perhaps more surprising factor behind the movement for abortion rights was the relative underdevelopment of contraception. In this factor we see yet another flaw in the technological-determinist explanation of birth control. Far from being an area of great progress, the field of contraception today lags far behind our need for it. Women must still do almost all the contracepting, and they are forced to choose among unwieldy, dangerous, or irreversible methods.

The changes in the dominant feminist positions about birth control should now be clearer. For feminists, the issue of reproductive control is a part of an overall calculus of how to improve women's situation. The birth-control campaign of the late 1960s and '70s was not a single-issue reform campaign, such as that of the population controllers and eugenicists who had dominated in the 1920s through '50s. Feminists always have to balance the gains and losses from contraception and abortion against the other problems women face, such as unequal employment opportunity, unequal wealth, unequal education, and unequal domestic responsibilities. Thus a position appropriate to one historical era was not appropriate in another when the balance of women's needs and possibilities had changed.

Contemporary feminist positions about birth control are still ambivalent. Within the reproductive rights rubric, groups have primarily emphasized single issues: abortion, sterilization abuse, vaginal self-examination. Few have addressed the issues of sex and motherhood over-

all, and their contemporary meanings for women of different classes. These two questions, about the proper role of sex and motherhood in women's lives, are publicly asked now mainly by the New Right, because of the "crisis" in the family. This crisis of the family is not new—indeed it was the foundation of the rise of feminism, the crack in the social structure that made feminism possible. It is hardly a criticism of contemporary feminism that it has not been able to produce a definitive program for liberated sex and parenthood—these failings are part of what propels the women's movement, just as they propel the new right-wing antifeminist movement. Still, it is important to call attention to the centrality of the family crisis to contemporary politics and to the need for further development of feminist theory about sex, reproduction and the family.

In thinking about the family, contemporary feminism, like feminism a century ago, contains an ambivalence between individualism and its critique. The individualism has reached a much higher development with the challenge to gender definitions. Few modern feminists would argue that women are innately suited to domestic activity and unsuited to public activity. The rejection of gender is an ultimate commitment to the right of all individuals to develop to their highest potential. Unfortunately, the most visible heroines of such struggles immediately suggest some of the problems with this uncritical individualism; for example, a new image of the liberated woman, complete with briefcase, career, sex partners, and silk blouse, but absolutely without nurturing responsibilities. Of course, this liberated woman is primarily a creature of the capitalist economy, not feminism. Moreover, she is a creature of the media, for there are few such women in reality. But parts of the feminist movement identify with this ideal. Those parts of the movement have deemphasized the other side of the feminist tradition: the critique of the man-made society, the refusal to accept merely integration of female individuals into a competition whose rules we did not define and do not endorse. There is, in fact, a tradition of feminist criticism of capitalism itself, representing it as the opposite of the nurturing values of motherhood.¹⁰ Without weakening our support of the rights of individual women to seek achievement, it is important to keep both sides of this ambivalence in view. Feminists have conducted a close scrutiny of the family in the last years and have seen how oppressive it can be for women. But undermining the family has costs, for women as well as men, in the form of isolation and the further deterioration of child raising, general unhappiness, social distrust and, solipsism; and sensitivity to these problems is also part of the feminist heritage.

The feminist critique of individualism should give us some insight into the opposition. What are the abortion opponents afraid of? I do not think it is the loss of fetuses, for most. For example, I doubt there would have been such a big backlash had the legalization of abortion occurred

under the auspices of the population controllers rather than in the context of a powerful women's liberation movement. The abortion opponents today, like those of a hundred years ago, are afraid of a loss of mothering, in the symbolic sense.¹¹ They fear a completely individualized society with all services based on cash nexus relationships, without the influence of nurturing women counteracting the completely egoistic principles of the economy, and without any forms in which children can learn about lasting human commitments to other people. Many feminists have the same fears. The overlap is minimal, of course. Most abortion opponents are right-wingers, involved in a deeply antidemocratic, anti-civil libertarian, violent, and sexist philosophy. Still, their fear of unchecked individualism is not without substance.

The problem is to develop a feminist program and philosophy that defends individual rights and also builds constructive bonds between individuals. This raises anew the question of the family. The truth is that feminism has undermined the family as it once existed faster than it has been able to substitute more egalitarian communities. This is not a criticism of the women's movement. Perhaps families held together by domination, fear, violence, squelched talents, and resignation should not survive. Furthermore, the women's movement has already done a great deal toward building supportive institutions that prefigure a better society: day-care centers, shelters, women's centers, communes, gay bars and bars where women feel comfortable, publications, women's studies programs, and health clinics. The movement has done even more in creating a new consciousness that pervades the entire culture. There has been a veritable explosion of feminist cultural work, a new definition of what is political and of what is a social problem, a new concept—sexism—that is widely understood. Even the mass media reflect a new respect for relations between women; a strong lesbian liberation movement has arisen; and, perhaps one of the best indices of the status of women in the whole society, a more respectful attitude toward single women has developed.

These very successes have created problems. Clearly the successes created a backlash. More complicated, the successes in consciousness changing outstripped successes in community and institution building. The nuclear, male-dominated family remains for the vast majority the only experience of permanent, noninstrumental personal commitments. Within the family, motherhood still is—and may forever be—one of the most challenging and rewarding emotional and work experiences people can have. The feminist reproductive rights movement faces the task of finding a program that equally defends women's individual rights to freedom, including sexual freedom, *and* the dignity of women's need and capacity for nurturance and being nurtured, with or without biological motherhood. This is but the application to one issue—reproduction—of

the general task of feminism: to defend all the gains of bourgeois individualism and liberal feminism while transcending the capitalist-competitive aspects of individualism with a vision of loving, egalitarian communities.
