

## Anarcho-Feminism in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain, 1880–1914

MATTHEW THOMAS

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**SUMMARY:** This article seeks to interpret the synthesis between anarchism and feminism as developed by a group of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century British women. It will demonstrate that the woman who embraced anarchism made a clear contribution to the growth of feminism. They offered a distinctive analysis of the reasons for female oppression, whether it was within the economic sphere or within marriage. The anarcho-feminists maintained that if an egalitarian society was ever to be built, differences in roles – whether in sexual relationships, childcare, political life or work – had to be based on capacity and preference, not gender. By combining these questions they developed a feminism that was all embracing at a time when the struggle for the vote was becoming the main question for women.

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Despite its small size when compared with socialist organizations like the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) and the Independent Labour Party (ILP), British anarchism exhibited great diversity, harbouring different ideological tendencies and organizational frameworks.<sup>1</sup> Its supporters included communist revolutionaries, libertarian individualists, rural communarians, and industrial unionists. At no time did the majority of these exponents unite under one organizational umbrella; they opted instead for small, independent units, many of whom had little contact with each other. British anarchism was not a political “movement” in the traditional sense of a closely regulated and coordinated body. Ideological, gender, ethnic, and class differences divided anarchists into multiform groups and disparate individuals, many of whom had little contact with each other.

1. One estimate for the actual number of anarchists in Britain gave a maximum of 2,000 in London in 1896 and double that number for a national total. This was at a time when the ILP had 35,000 members and the SDF 10,000. M.J. Thomas, “Paths to Utopia: Anarchist Counter-Cultures in Late Victorian and Edwardian Britain 1880–1914” (Ph.D., University of Warwick, 1998), p. 52, and J. Hinton, *Labour and Socialism: A History of the British Labour Movement 1867–1974* (Brighton, 1983), p. 60. The circulation figures for libertarian journals further suggest that the anarchists failed to break out from the status of sect into that of movement. Compared with *The Clarion*, with a circulation of 70,000 in 1906, and *The Labour Leader*, with 40,000 in 1911, *Freedom*, the leading anarchist paper, sustained a peak circulation of 3,000 in 1911.

This diverse movement did not spark off a wide following and failed to have any major impact on British politics. The reasons for this failure have been adequately charted by historians. Hermia Oliver and John Quail, for example, concluded that anarchism “did not achieve anything”, and “failed to survive beyond periods of great excitement”. Peter Marshall took a similar view, maintaining that “anarchism made little inroads into the British labour movement”, while Eric Hobsbawm claimed that “there was no Anarchist movement of significance”.<sup>2</sup> Why then study what was clearly a marginal current? The answer lies in the following discussion, which will demonstrate that the anarchists made an original and coherent contribution to the development of feminist theory, a contribution that has been overlooked by historians.

The existence of a synthesis between anarchism and feminism should not surprise us. Many of the central beliefs of anarchist ideology – individual liberty, the responsibility to refrain from limiting the freedom of others, and the rejection of all hierarchy – provided a unique opportunity for women who felt restricted by conventional gender roles. Women were drawn to anarchism due to its analysis of power and hierarchy. After all, an ideology that claimed as one of its principal tenets the primacy of personal autonomy ought to have had special appeal to a subordinate group. This appeal existed despite the fact that some of the men who developed anarchist theory did not apply the doctrine of individual liberty to women in the same way as to men.<sup>3</sup> The anarchist men who viewed women in conventional ways argued that certain behaviour patterns were natural for each sex. Since nature provided woman with a nurturing instinct and a desire for motherhood, to have her act in accord with those feelings would not violate her freedom because they would be an expression of her natural self. Much socialist writing on the evolution of the family during the late nineteenth century drew on studies by anthropologists whose analyses of the changing status of women were not part of liberatory schemes, but were instead efforts to understand what family structure the next stage of history required in order to insure social stability and an improved race. Many socialists shared these eugenic concerns, along with a particular interest in determining the proper role for women in a working-class, rather than a feminist, revolution.

2. H. Oliver, *The International Anarchist Movement in Late Victorian London* (London, 1983), p. 152; J. Quail, *The Slow Burning Fuse: The Lost History of the British Anarchists* (London, 1978), pp. 308–309; P. Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London, 1993), p. 491; E.J. Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour* (London, 1984), p. 3.

3. Proudhon had considered the patriarchal family as the fundamental social unit in his society without laws. Kropotkin, while arguing for the liberation of women from the burden of housework, expressed impatience with those women who put feminism ahead of their devotion to the male working class. See G. Woodcock, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon* (London, 1956), p. 243, and P. Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread* (London, 1985), p. 128.

Anarchist women, especially those who were influenced by the individualist current within anarchist thought, disagreed with this notion of woman's nature. Dismissing the interpretation of the male theorists, they appropriated for themselves the dogma of absolute individual liberty, reminded their male comrades of their responsibility not to impinge on the liberty of women, and rejected patriarchal as well as governmental authority. In their lives and work they gave evidence of their determination to apply anarchist beliefs equally to both sexes. Anarcho-feminists insisted that female subordination was rooted in an obsolete system of sexual and familial relationships. Attacking marriage and insisting on economic independence, they argued that personal autonomy was an essential component of sexual equality.

Anarcho-feminism constituted a vigorous challenge to traditional notions of woman's place, including in its analysis a demand for economic independence, the revolutionizing of marital relations and an end to male sexual harassment. For anarchist women, the socialists' focus on order and discipline offered less than the anarchist promise of radically independent and equal individuals, interacting in small, naturally harmonious groups, freed from the disabilities of man-made laws and the roles and authority of the family. Although many women possessed the municipal franchise and could vote in local government elections, the fact that national political institutions were closed to them may have made anarchism more attractive. The anarchist programme, unlike that of the state socialists, did not depend on feminists gaining access to national politics. Our analysis of this programme will challenge the view that the anarchists were "blind to the existence of gender based tyrannies".<sup>4</sup> The following study of the British anarcho-feminists suggests that this was not the case.

#### FEMINISTS AND SOCIALISTS

By the 1880s, there was a generally acknowledged social phenomenon underway in Britain whose complexity was captured in the open-ended phrase used to describe it: "the woman question". All over Britain women were demanding change. They sought to eliminate restrictions on women's educational and employment opportunities, gendered pay-scales, the sexual double standard and the legal authority husbands held over their wives.<sup>5</sup> No single word or coherent ideology was available that unified and explained this discontent, and the term feminism did not emerge until the

4. Sharif Gemie, "Anarchism and Feminism: A Historical Survey", *Women's History Review*, 5 (1996), p. 418. Gemie's view is not an exception. John Hutton argues that within late nineteenth-century anarchist political culture, there was a "theoretical void" concerning the politics of gender. John Hutton, "Camille Pissarro's *Turpitudes Sociales* and late Nineteenth Century French Anarchist Anti-Feminism", *History Workshop Journal*, 2 (1987), p. 41.

5. P. Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England* (Oxford, 1990).

Edwardian period. There was, however, one term gaining currency that claimed to address as well as make sense of the whole range of women's grievances. While the word "socialism" seemed to count as many definitions as there were socialists, all these definitions and advocates agreed that socialism meant, among other things, freedom for women. Most forms of socialism elevated women to a privileged place beside working men in a movement that idolized the powerless.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, socialism offered a theory, depending on the particular theorist, that placed women's oppression in a historical context, showing how it had arisen, and how it could be overcome. Every organization that called itself socialist included in its aims a demand for equal rights between men and women.<sup>7</sup> If a woman took the "woman question" seriously, and she was looking for a word to express these convictions, she might call herself a "socialist".

It is worth stressing here that throughout much of the text I use the term "socialist" in its wider generic sense, as a label that refers to anarchists, Marxists, social democrats and syndicalists. However, on several occasions I draw attention to the differences between the anarchists and those socialists who sought to utilize the state to change society. The latter I describe as "state socialists", a term that refers to both the SDF and the ILP. Unlike the SDF and the ILP, all anarchists were marked by their opposition to the use of existing legislative procedures or any organs of the state as tools for social change. That the anarchist struggle was untarnished by bourgeois politics was time and again emphasized, and was affirmed as the distinction between anarchism and the state socialists. Participation in the political system, which the anarchists held responsible for the protection of the exploitative economic order and for the furtherance of prejudices in society, would not only compromise the position of the revolutionaries, but also promote the existence of this very system. Even in a socialist guise, the preservation of the state would perpetuate exploitation and authoritarian behaviour.<sup>8</sup>

If socialism was the subject of varying political interpretations, the practical meaning of "women's freedom" was equally contentious. For many socialists, women's freedom meant freedom to return to their "natural" role as mothers and homemakers. "Women's equality" was interpreted to mean equal respect within their own separate sphere. An emphasis on women's common interests as a sex, and a recognition that working women could be oppressed by male members of their own class at the workplace and in the home, sat uneasily beside a socialist focus on class exploitation and the need for class solidarity to achieve change. The Marxist SDF viewed "the woman question" as a diversion from the class

6. See for example *Freedom*, 1:7 (April 1887), p. 27.

7. *The Commonweal*, 1:4 (July 1885), p. 3.

8. See for example W.K. Hall, *The Ballot Box Farce* (Edinburgh, 1896), and C. Wilson, *Anarchism and Outrage* (London, 1893), p. 4.

struggle which could be resolved after a revolution had been achieved. The ILP placed less emphasis on the class struggle and showed a greater sympathy towards “sex equality”. Nevertheless, in practice, the ILP did not give a high profile in the 1890s to issues relating to sex disabilities.<sup>9</sup> Many socialist men thus argued that feminist concerns should be subordinated to the wider question of male working-class liberation.<sup>10</sup> Socialist organizers also learned quickly that women could be useful in the time-consuming project of building a popular movement. Often the tedious tasks of organization and day-to-day work were performed by women. Lilian Wolfe for example, did the “hack work” on the anarcho-syndicalist journal, *The Voice of Labour*, and a lot of women who went into socialist-feminist liberation found themselves in that position. As the only woman on the Socialist League council, Eleanor Marx “ensured that the League’s journals and pamphlets were on display at meetings; found a window cleaner for the premises; compared estimates for the most economical hire of crockery, cutlery and plate for socialist repasts”. It was no surprise, therefore, that the division of labour within the Left, between “women’s work” and high-profile, leadership positions dominated by men, more than once was the cause of disaffection and separation with women activists breaking off to form their own groups.<sup>11</sup> It no doubt appeared to them that women were needed, but only in the right proportion, so as not to risk socialism’s reputation as an intellectually and politically serious movement.

While the assumptions about women’s intellectual limitations and their role within the movement were often products of debilitating but well-intentioned courtesy and custom, some male activists were so vocal about women’s inferiority that their views can only be described as misogynistic.<sup>12</sup> Helen and Olivia Rossetti’s recollections of their period of anarchist activity include many evocations of deep-rooted sexism amongst male anarchists. One male comrade explained: “Women are rarely of much use in a movement like ours. They so rarely seem able to forget themselves, to detach themselves from the narrow interests of their own lives. They are still slaves of their past, of their passions, and of all manner of prejudices.”<sup>13</sup>

Women therefore went about their socialist work in a movement where

9. *Justice*, November 1895, and E. Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland 1850–1914* (Oxford, 1991).

10. See for example *Freedom*, 22:232 (August 1908), pp. 57–58.

11. T. Keell to M. Nettlau, 19 March 1926, List 188, Nettlau Collection [hereafter NC], International Institute of Social History (IISH), and Y. Kapp, *Eleanor Marx: the Crowded Years 1884–1898* (London, 1979), p. 72. See also J. Hannam, “Women and Politics”, in J. Purvis (ed.), *Women’s History: Britain, 1850–1945* (London, 1995), p. 218.

12. See for example *Justice*, 16 July 1887.

13. I. Meredith, *A Girl Among the Anarchists* (Lincoln, 1992), p. 233.

the inherent intellectual inferiority of women was seriously argued. The most notorious spokesman for this view was Belfort Bax of the SDF. He believed that woman's most "prominent characteristic" was her "inability to follow out a logical argument".<sup>14</sup> In expressing these opinions, he posed a challenge to the equality and fellowship that defined the very essence of socialism for many anarchist feminists. The rejection by women of traditional domestic roles, Bax argued, had led: "to the illusion among men that they must look on their womankind not merely for sexual fidelity, and kindliness in word and conduct, but for intellectual companionship, and to the reading into their relations with their wives and other female associates an intellectual companionship which is not there".<sup>15</sup> The British had "deified women", claimed Bax, and placed them in an undeserved position of privilege and ease. "Privileges' have been granted to us", Agnes Henry responded: "with thinly veiled contempt, and polished courtesy has been the vaneer of male self-conceit [...]. I can assure Mr. Bax from personal knowledge that most of those who would abolish artificial sex privileges are quite ready to resign the privilege of walking out of a room in front of a man".<sup>16</sup> Bax persisted with his antifeminist claims, perhaps because he had the support of many other men. To Hyndman, the leader of the SDF, "the amusing part of the matter" was that it was "the truth of some of his statements in regard to their sex which has made the women socialists so furiously angry".<sup>17</sup>

Hyndman himself believed that women were the most reactionary group in society, a view shared by many other socialist men. While they paid tribute to an ideal of woman as the oppressed preserver of communal virtue, they simultaneously ridiculed the actual lives of bourgeois women as the epitome of capitalist waste and hypocrisy. The most energetic contempt and derisive humour of socialist polemics were often reserved for "the slaves of fashion", middle-class women whose insatiable consumerism was the mainstay of capitalist factory production and the root of English philistinism.<sup>18</sup> "The shopping doll, the anti-social puppet, whose wires (well hidden under the garb of custom and fashion) are really pulled by self-indulge", were a familiar character in socialist writing.<sup>19</sup> *Justice*, the organ of the SDF, extended its contempt for bourgeois women to the social purity and property reform agitation. The "egotistical"

14. *The Commonweal*, April 1886.

15. E. Belfort Bax, *Reminiscences and Reflections of a Mid and Late Victorian* (London, 1918), p. 197.

16. *Freedom*, 1:11 (August 1887), p. 89.

17. H.M. Hyndman, *Further Reminiscences* (London, 1912), p. 287.

18. See for example H.H. Champion, "The Slave of Fashion", *Justice*, 2:13 (16 February 1884), and J.L. Mahon, "Women under Capitalism", *The Commonweal*, 4:153 (20 December 1888), p. 391.

19. K. Pearson, "The Woman's Question", July 1885, MSS, p. 37, List 900 Karl Pearson Papers [hereafter PP], Manuscript Room, University College London.

proponents of “woman’s rights” failed to recognize that only class war would bring true equality.<sup>20</sup> Women socialists must have felt the contradiction as they dedicated themselves to a movement in which their own sex was alternately idealized and ridiculed.

A combination of outright misogyny amongst certain male comrades and a more general refusal to take women’s issues seriously, led some feminists to pose the question as to whether or not their concerns could ever be adequately addressed by the mainstream of the movement. The men and women of the movement were often talking right past each other when it came to the feminist meaning of socialism. Emma Brooke was sure that Karl Pearson had missed the point of her paper on “Women’s Sphere in Modern Society”. “But I think the misunderstanding lies where, between men and women, it always does lie – that is in the use of the same words with different meanings”.<sup>21</sup> Similar misunderstandings led Henrietta Muller to withdraw from the Men and Women’s Club in 1888 and to start a women-only club. The club had originally been established in 1884 for “the unreserved discussion of all matters [...] connected with the mutual position of men and women”.<sup>22</sup> Anarchists like Charlotte Wilson regularly attended its meetings. Yet by 1888 these women felt that the men in the club had imposed their own definitions of “emancipation” and “moral”: “It was the same old story of the men laying down the law to the women and not caring to recognise that she has a voice, and the women resenting in silence, and submitting in silence”.<sup>23</sup>

During the prewar period, anarchist women were less willing to “submit in silence”. The feminism of the 1900s was not just a matter of economic independence or discussions on the origin and future of the family in abstract, as it was when Agnes Henry and her comrades were active in the 1880s and 1890s, but an opposition, both political and cultural, to every aspect of patriarchal hegemony. The emergence of a more militant feminism with an autonomous organizational existence had a profound impact. It is likely that the mainstream of British anarchism could not offer an adequate platform for this feminism, whereas it had been able to contain the pre-1900 version of anarcho-feminism.<sup>24</sup> This was clearly

20. *Justice*, 19 January 1884.

21. E. Brooke to K. Pearson, 14 March 1886, List 10/28, PP.

22. Men and Women’s Club minutes, July 1885, List 600, PP.

23. H. Muller to K. Pearson, 29 March 1888, List 10/45, PP.

24. Several anarchist women were, however, hostile to the suspicion of men which prevailed amongst anarcho-feminists and criticized any moves towards separation. They were more concerned to emphasize the unity of class interests between men and women. See for example L. Gair Wilkinson, *Women’s Freedom* (London, 1914), pp. 2, 8. Her views were not an exception; Emma Goldman also opposed any separation on the part of feminists. Goldman was convinced that feminism could not develop an adequate theory and praxis of liberation in isolation from the larger struggle for human liberation. See E. Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays* (New York, 1969), p. 213.

demonstrated by the establishment of *The Freewoman* journal in 1911. By this time, female anarchists found it necessary to have their own forum, since their concerns were not being addressed in the rest of the anarchist press.

Although many women remained within the fold of the established anarchist groups, the founding of the paper highlights a tension between feminism and an anarchism that was productivist and masculine. Some feminists have indeed noted the lack of concern with household democracy which characterized anarcho-syndicalist reformers who emphasized workplace democracy. They exclusively expressed a masculinist perspective, the viewpoint of the male worker.<sup>25</sup> In the post-1900 period, the anarcho-syndicalist current sought social change through economic revolution, with the assumption that women, like men, would be liberated along with the sites of production. This analysis went largely uncriticized within the established anarchist media during the 1908–1914 period. The result was that a separation between the sphere in which the revolution would occur and the sphere in which most women worked was created. For feminists however, such a narrow focus did not show that a more inclusive democratic focus transcending masculinism was not a valid objective.<sup>26</sup>

*The Freewoman* first appeared in November 1911 and from its outset was envisaged as a platform for debate. Dora Marsden was the main force behind the paper. Formerly an organizer of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), by the time of the paper's foundation she was a convinced anarchist.<sup>27</sup> Marsden's dissatisfaction with suffrage politics and the neglect of other issues was forcefully conveyed in a number of attacks on the militancy of the WSPU, which was relying on men to emancipate women. To Marsden the paper was concerned with real emancipation: "what [woman] may become. Our interest is in the Freewoman herself, her psychology, philosophy, morality and achievements".<sup>28</sup> She saw women themselves as responsible for their emancipation – an emancipation held back in part by women's own cowardice. Women must give up the protection of men and take their place in the world as breadwinners; with the redesign of housing, the introduction of nurseries, the collectivization of cooking and cleaning, even those with children would be able to go out to work. Although directed against the WSPU, her comments also presented an attack on the anarchists. For example, *The Freewoman* published articles rarely addressed in the mainstream anarchist press, on housework, motherhood, sexuality and theories of art and literature in

25. C. Pateman, *The Disorder of Women* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 132.

26. See, for example, *Freedom*, 27:285 (January 1913), p. 1.

27. L. Garner, *A Brave and Beautiful Spirit: Dora Marsden 1882–1961* (Aldershot, 1990), pp. 94–95.

28. *The Freewoman*, 23 November 1911, p. 3.



relation to women.<sup>29</sup> A Freewoman Discussion Circle was also started in 1912. The French anarchist Françoise Lafitte recalled that the “meetings were naturally opened to both sexes, and [...] one felt there was a more fundamental equality between men and women than in the world at large, or in the ranks of the socialists and the suffragettes”.<sup>30</sup>

### WOMEN’S WORK

For many socialists productive labour was one of the most important human activities. Socialists looked to a new relation between humans and their worldly work to revive both communal solidarity and a true sense of aesthetics. As Charlotte Wilson, the editor of the anarcho-communist journal, *Freedom*, explained: “the expenditure of energy in creation, in productive work, is a natural human impulse [...] starvation of the impulse to work is a physical misery, just like starvation of the impulse to eat”.<sup>31</sup> Liberty of labour produced craftsmanship as well as social wealth, for “work which is the result of free choice is best done”.<sup>32</sup> Anarcho-feminists therefore argued and organized for the economic independence of women, suggesting that a key factor in their commitment to socialism was their belief that it provided the surest means for women “to escape the maddening irritation of enforced idleness” and to become part of the labouring community. “Only when she is economically free”, wrote Agnes Henry “can [woman] hope to obtain a position of personal independence and social equality with men”.<sup>33</sup>

However, the bare-torsoed working man of socialist iconography, wielding a forge hammer in one arm and sheltering a woman and child in the other, expressed an ideal of labour that for many socialists was incompatible with the notion of women as workers.<sup>34</sup> While socialist theorists elevated the manual labourer to unprecedented heights in communal esteem, socialist politicians confronted the practical reality of the working-class male undercut and alienated by women’s lower wages. The socialist message would not sell well among the male working class so long as it included a call for economic independence for women. The female worker posed a threat to male freedom in the sphere of wage labour and to the order of the private household based on the husband’s economic

29. See, for example, Rose Witcop’s article “Sex and Drama”, in *ibid.*, 18 April 1912, p. 437.

30. F. Delisle, *Friendship’s Odyssey* (London, 1946), p. 181.

31. *Freedom*, 2:21 (July 1888), p. 71.

32. *The Commonweal*, 4:71 (9 June 1888), p. 121.

33. *Freedom*, 6:64 (March 1892), p. 23.

34. For a discussion of socialist iconography in relation to men and women, see E.J. Hobsbawm, “Man and Woman: Images on the Left”, in *idem* (ed.), *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion and Jazz* (London, 1998), pp. 94–112.

dominance.<sup>35</sup> The conflict over female work was present from the start of the British labour movement. While the middle-class Owenites had few problems with the idea of female economic freedom, the more working-class Chartists considered women workers to be a violation of “the natural order”.<sup>36</sup> Early on in the trade union movement, the male worker’s right to “a family wage”, which assumed the exclusion of women from paid employment, emerged as an important bargaining point. In 1877, Henry Broadhurst, the secretary of the Trade Union Congress (TUC) won applause when he defined the aim of the labour movement as “to bring about a condition of things, where wives could be in their proper sphere at home, instead of being dragged into competition for livelihood against the great and strong men of the world”.<sup>37</sup>

Female labour was a key issue in the 1880s socialist revival, as its leadership divided between those whose heroic workers were both women and men, and those who looked to socialism to return women to their “natural” domestic sphere. The issue appeared in a debate launched by Charlotte Wilson in *Justice*. Its editor, Hyndman, aimed for the allegiance of the male working class. He accordingly supported Marx’s assumption of the family wage, set by the cost of the worker reproducing himself and his family. Hyndman backed the male Weavers’ Association in their strike against the employment of women at Kidderminster in 1884. He endorsed their efforts, noting that “it is the rule in all factory industry that women’s and children’s labour tends to displace that of men and thus to break up family life as well as to reduce wages”.<sup>38</sup> In the next issue Wilson called the editor’s attention to the fact that “you apparently exclude women from the category of workers”. “I submit that in the case in question, women are to be considered in every sense as much ‘workers’ as men, seeing that they have actually been engaged in the same sort of industrial operation.”<sup>39</sup>

Wilson admitted the problem of women’s lower wages, but argued that “instead of agitating for this indiscriminate dismissal”, the weavers should encourage the women to organize and demand equal pay. Wilson urged the male weavers to see the women’s interests as “identical with their own” and “to consolidate the ranks of the workers”, rather than divide them. She

35. See B. Harrison and H. Mockett, “Women in the Factory: The State and Factory Legislation in Nineteenth Century Britain”, in L. Jamieson and H. Corr (eds), *State, Private Life and Political Change* (London, 1990).

36. See B. Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1983), p. 268.

37. J. Lewis, “The Working Class Wife and Mother and State Intervention: 1870–1918”, in *idem* (ed.), *Labour and Love: Women’s Experience of Home and Family 1850–1940* (Oxford, 1986), p. 103.

38. *Justice*, 1 March 1884.

39. *Ibid.*, 8 March 1884.

concluded by protesting “against the classification of the labour of women and of children under one heading” objecting to Hyndman’s inclusion of defenceless children in the same class as women “who, as fully developed human beings, deliberately choose an occupation, and are not only theoretically capable of self-protection, but are beginning to show themselves practically so by the promotion of unions for the purpose”. Hyndman responded by admitting that after the revolution, women could perhaps work a few hours a day in “a well-ventilated and nicely decorated factory” without doing harm to their reproductive capacities, but that woman workers in the present were “a curse to the country”: “Women’s labour is harmful to the men who are their husbands and brothers, by cutting down their wages, and throwing them out of work; is injurious to themselves by lowering their strength and spoiling their beauty; and is utterly ruinous to the children who are neglected and half-fed”.<sup>40</sup> Other readers joined the debate. H.H. Clarke made the point that most women worked because they had to and that poverty was far more injurious to their health than work. By catering to male prejudice, Clarke maintained, Hyndman was “sacrificing to a miserable opportunism one of the most precious principles of socialism – the absolute equality of rights of all women and men”. Hyndman replied that socialism’s call for equality was never meant to include the “natural” inequalities between men and women.<sup>41</sup>

Anarcho-feminists restated the position adopted by Wilson, claiming that all socialists were “advocates of the equal claims of each man and woman to work for the community as seems good to him or her”.<sup>42</sup> Legislation which prevented women working in trades such as mining, and which limited the hours they could work sharpened the debate. To many reformers, such legislation as the 1886 Mines Regulation Bill, which prohibited the employment of women at the pit brow, was protective, since it would “prevent the deterioration of the race”, as well as protecting male wages.<sup>43</sup> For many women however, it was viewed as restrictive. Agnes Henry, herself a school teacher, supported the pit-brow women and argued that physically demanding labour was beneficial rather than damaging to female health: “The work of a pit-girl may be dirty and hard”, but it rightfully deprives her husband of his “dependent domestic serf” and gives her a “healthier life and one more worthy of a human being than most of the fine ladies who live on her labour”. Henry’s feminist opposition to the law overlapped with her anarchist objection to any increase in the state’s regulatory powers:

40. *Ibid.*, 22 March 1884.

41. *Ibid.*, 5 April 1884.

42. *Freedom*, 1:1 (October 1886), p. 2.

43. *The Practical Socialist*, January 1887.

What claim have any class or section of the community to forcibly decide for another what is or is not a “suitable” occupation? Have our Radical fellow-workers found the legislation of capital for labour such an unmixed blessing that they set about the analogous business of the legislation of men for women? <sup>44</sup>

Anarcho-feminists clearly believed that any regulation singling out women for special treatment amounted to economic discrimination.

The debate over women’s work was carried out mostly in the context of industrial employment and working-class women. Middle-class women advocated the rights of working-class women and provided the leadership of the women’s trade union movement.<sup>45</sup> An equally contentious theme was the expectation that socialism would remove the barriers to economic independence for bourgeois women as well. Everything female anarchists wrote and said about the frustrations and emptiness of middle-class life, was doubly applicable to the lives of middle-class women. More so than men, bourgeois women were denied satisfaction “of one of our strongest, most persistent impulses [...] to do, to act, to make something, to express ourselves in some course of action, some process of thought, the fashioning of some material object which seems to fulfil a purpose of use or beauty”.<sup>46</sup> Middle-class female anarchist writings were full of the moral and aesthetic virtues of work. Yet Victorian society offered few opportunities for the type of work they romanticized.<sup>47</sup>

Anarcho-feminists who believed that competition among equals was the engine of social progress, were told as women and potential mothers that they should not compete in the labour market. This advice often came from their socialist comrades. While Karl Pearson theoretically supported the economic independence of women, he felt that scientific research should first be done to determine whether women’s labour would be damaging to the race. Pearson also assumed that child-bearing women would always be economically dependent. Furthermore, he believed that “race-evolution has implanted in women a desire for children”. If this was true, “race evolution” had created an insurmountable barrier to women’s freedom.<sup>48</sup> Charlotte Wilson was no less concerned with the survival of the race, but was reluctant to accept that women’s subjection was required. She felt that Pearson seriously overstated women’s natural desire for motherhood:

For ages [women] have been educated to concentrate their whole attention upon this question of marriage and children [...]. With some it is an intense passion and they are marked out by nature as the mothers of the community; but if

44. *Freedom*, 1:10 (July 1887), p. 63.

45. B. Drake, *Women in Trade Unions* (London, 1984).

46. *Freedom*, 6:63 (February 1892), p. 15.

47. *Ibid.*, 6:64 (March 1892), p. 23.

48. Pearson, “The Woman’s Question”, p. 37.

motherhood were understood clearly, as it ought, to be a matter of deliberate choice and not the haphazard result of marriage, I believe that something less than half the women of England would care to undertake the responsibility.<sup>49</sup>

Although anarcho-feminists believed that women had to become part of the labouring community, they were swimming against the tide in the peak years of the Victorian romance with motherhood.<sup>50</sup> Pearson's assumption of a universal maternal instinct was the consensus view. It was not surprising, therefore, that some anarchists supported a more maternalistic feminism which did not emphasize economic independence. The focus on a productivist dignity of labour reflected Wilson's middle-class idealization of the world of work and her ignorance of the lives of working-class women. She sought to abandon the feminine and private world of home and family in order to embrace an unknown world, the masculine and public world of work. However, the argument that exclusion from labour made for a life of idleness was not a thought that would have crossed the minds of housebound working-class anarchist women who hardly wanted any more work to do. Middle-class anarcho-feminists could demand work and an end to idleness since they belonged to households with servants. This middle-class view was therefore challenged by a maternalist version of feminism in which a properly resourced devotion to motherhood and homemaking, alongside an equal relationship between the sexes, could have its own dignity. This form of feminism was more suited to the world of the working-class wife, who often shared her partner's desire for a secure family wage.<sup>51</sup> Such a clearly defined female sphere might strike progressives as a mere excuse for keeping women down, yet within its limits it had given many women such individual and collective resources they had and these were not always negligible. Women were not always victims, and in some subjects and situations men were expected to defer. Thus, in many working class marriages it "would be misleading and inaccurate to see the wife as downtrodden, bullied and dependent. She was much more likely to be a respected and highly regarded, financial and household manager, and the arbiter of familial and indeed neighbourhood standards".<sup>52</sup> The rule of men over women, however absolute in theory, was never completely unrestricted in practice, and many women found that they had a real independence in their own sphere.

The Sheffield anarchists were very much concerned with the experiences of working-class mothers and sought to address their problems, although often in an abstract and male-defined way. In an article entitled "Woman and the Family", they recognized the family's role in defending people

49. C. Wilson to K. Pearson, 8 August 1885, List 900, PP.

50. *Freedom*, 24:256 (August 1910), p. 63.

51. See E. Ross, *Love and Toil, Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870–1918* (Oxford, 1993).

52. Elizabeth Roberts, *A Women's Place* (London, 1984), p. 124.

against the external ravages of the cash-nexus, it was a “green spot in the desert of our present society [...] a little community where each one works according to his strength and consumes according to his needs”. The article was aware of the woman’s labour in the family. “If we should try to measure the value of the work done for the family by the mother, after the rules of political economy, the price would not be estimated.” The Sheffield anarchists were concerned that women support the struggles of their male partners, and do this from the home, rather than by demanding work for themselves.<sup>53</sup>

Louise Michel was equally opposed to the idea of women demanding the right to work: “You’re the ones who bear the responsibility of family and home, while men are responsible for work outside the home [...]. Once you are free, you must no longer deform your natural attributes, nor spend twelve [...] hours a day in the workshops”. Her longed-for form of social organization would not require women to leave their homes. Men would be able to supply the family’s needs.<sup>54</sup> Emma Goldman held similar views, asking:

[...] how much independence is gained if the narrowness and lack of freedom of the home is exchanged for the narrowness and lack of freedom of the factory [...]? A so-called independence which leads only to earning the merest subsistence is not so enticing, not so ideal, that one could expect woman to sacrifice everything for it.

In a plea for the protection of “women’s nature” that would have shocked Charlotte Wilson, she maintained:

Our highly praised independence is, after all, but a slow process of dulling and stifling of woman’s nature, her love instinct and her mother instinct. Nevertheless, the position of the working girl is far more natural than that of her seemingly more fortunate sister in the more cultured professional walks of life – teachers, physicians, lawyers, etc., who have to make a dignified, proper appearance, while the inner life is growing empty and dead.<sup>55</sup>

Views such as this are antipathetic to contemporary feminism, but, if analysed within the context of nineteenth-century culture, are more difficult to dismiss. Indeed, many nineteenth-century feminists based their arguments on similar notions of difference, stressing women’s unique domestic role. Many of the women who organized in support of the labour movement, did so in order to bolster, not undermine domestic ideology.<sup>56</sup>

53. *The Sheffield Anarchist*, 19 July 1891.

54. E. Thomas, *Louise Michel* (Montreal, 1980), p. 294. See also *The Commonwealth*, 4:152 (8 December 1888), p. 389.

55. E. Goldman, “The Tragedy of Woman’s Emancipation”, in *idem*, *Anarchism and Other Essays*, pp. 216–217.

56. This was certainly the case with the Women’s Labour League. See C. Collette, *For Labour and for Women: The Women’s Labour League, 1906–1918* (Manchester, 1989).

## MOTHERHOOD, CHILDCARE AND HOUSEWORK

Although some anarchists were clearly interested in developing a well-resourced devotion to motherhood, anarcho-feminists seem to have had diverse attitudes towards the raising of children. Many men and some women, as we have seen, felt that women's freedom meant the freedom to fulfil herself as a mother, with a natural responsibility for childbearing. Charlotte Wilson, Gertrude Guillaume-Schack, Nellie Shaw, Emma Goldman, Lilly Glair-Wilkinson and Louise Bevington were, however, never mothers. This may have been a deliberate choice, given the nature of many of their views on the subject of maternity. Those women who were childless preferred a fuller measure of independence to motherhood, and presumably enjoyed the cooperation of their partners in the matter. Certainly a number of women who were sexually involved with men and wished to remain politically active chose not to have children. Emma Goldman expressly considered her political activities a noble substitute for motherhood.<sup>57</sup>

Most anarchist women believed that women had the right to bear children outside marriage. When she was in jail in 1914 for her antiwar activities, Lilian Wolfe applied to have her baby in Queen Charlotte's Hospital, but the authorities refused because she was an unrepentant sinner who intended to live with the baby's father afterwards. "I certainly was one of the first single women to have a baby deliberately", she recalled.<sup>58</sup> A few women went further than this, arguing for women's right to choose to have children outside an ongoing relationship: "As a freewoman", wrote one anarcho-feminist, "I refuse to bear children either to the state or to a man; I will bear them for myself and for my purpose [...]. My children shall be mine for my pleasure, until such time as they shall be their own for their own pleasure".<sup>59</sup> Françoise Lafitte agreed: "Women may claim children without a man, in spite of man, apart from his so-called chivalry, which feeds her and her children only to keep her enslaved".<sup>60</sup>

On the other hand, another anarcho-feminist wrote: "Men must do child rearing if they are to become complete human beings instead of mere males, if children are to have the benefit of fathering as well as mothering, and if there is to be equality between the sexes".<sup>61</sup> This was a rare viewpoint and, despite the impressive rhetoric, most frequently male anarchists retreated to cultural orthodoxy in their domestic relationships.

57. C. Falk, *Love, Anarchy and Emma Goldman* (New York, 1984), p. 51.

58. S. Rowbotham, "Interview with Lillian Wolfe", *Wildcat*, 6 (March 1975), p. 5.

59. *The Freewoman*, 1:15 (29 February 1912), p. 94.

60. T. Thompson (ed.), *Dear Girl: the Diaries and Letters of Two Working Women, 1897–1917* (London, 1987), p. 160.

61. *The Freewoman*, 1:17 (14 March 1912), p. 116.

As of the early 1890s, Jewish men were the only males Emma Goldman had met who in the home, practised the “equality of sexes” ideal which they preached.<sup>62</sup> There is little evidence of men taking a substantial role in caring for young children. However, within some anarchist communities, older children were seen as more of a communal responsibility, and men sometimes became involved in education, though less often than women.<sup>63</sup>

An equally contentious theme for anarcho-feminists was the reform of housework. As a contributor to *The Freewoman* stated: “I feel that this question of housework [...] is fundamental [...]. Women have no time to get free. They will only have the time when domestic work has been properly organised”.<sup>64</sup> Given the existence of such feelings, it was not surprising that within their communes many of the British anarchists did indeed try to revolutionize the domestic division of labour. Kropotkin, who was a source of inspiration for many of the settlers, urged them to “do all possible for reducing housework to the minimum [...]. Arrangements to reduce the amount of work which women uselessly spend in the rearing up of children, as well as in the household work, are [...] essential to the success of the community”.<sup>65</sup> For Kropotkin, any experiment in communism had to be committed to the liberation of women from domestic drudgery. New technology might reduce the burden of household chores and that would help, but a change in male attitudes was more essential.<sup>66</sup> Kropotkin was concerned to impress the importance of women’s freedom upon the colonists, who for their part varied in their receptiveness.

At Clousden Hill colony near Newcastle, in theory “all housework [...] [was] to be done on the most improved system, to relieve the woman from the tiresome work which unduly falls to their share today”.<sup>67</sup> To what extent this was followed is unclear, although in 1897 a visitor noted that men did the washing and women the cooking and mending.<sup>68</sup> At the Whiteway colony in Gloucestershire, which was started on communist lines, the women did the domestic work including washing and cooking for all the men. Eventually the colony moved away from communism, for, amongst other reasons, the women rebelled against doing all the washing when some of the men would not even collect firewood to heat the water. The women preferred to do housework for just one man rather than all of them.<sup>69</sup> Other communities varied in whether men were expected to do

62. E. Goldman, *Living My Life* (New York, 1970), p. 93.

63. *The Torch*, 1:12 (18 May 1895), p. 14.

64. *The Freewoman*, 1:15 (29 February 1912), p. 98.

65. *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 20 February 1895.

66. *Freedom*, 5:56 (July 1891), p. 48

67. *The Torch*, 1:12 (18 May 1895), pp. 14–15.

68. *The Clarion*, 24 December 1897.

69. N. Shaw, *Whiteway: A Colony on the Cotswolds* (London, 1935), p. 65.



housework. At Purleigh colony in Essex the men “did as many things as possible for themselves [...] they made their own beds, not leaving it to be done by the women”.<sup>70</sup>

Even when the women did not feel that housework was more natural to them, they often ended up doing it on the grounds of efficiency, because men did it badly. Men in men-only collectives would do their own, though some middle-class men felt humiliated to be seen doing “women’s work”. In Edward Carpenter’s household at Millthorpe, though women visitors spoke admiringly of his domestic skills, they noted that his working-class lover took on the responsibility for running the house.<sup>71</sup> In mixed communities, working-class women were more likely than the other women to end up doing most of the work. Often women did both “women’s” and “men’s” work, as at Whiteway where they were involved in agriculture and building. Nellie Shaw told a women’s class that “the women do exactly the same kind of work as the men, and do not find it too tiring”.<sup>72</sup> In her rightful exultation, what she failed to say was that the reverse was not true – it was a step towards equality, but limited by the failure of the men to abandon their work in favour of domestic chores. On their own, cooperatively, or as part of a family business, some women would earn money by traditional female occupations such as dressmaking, weaving or craftwork.<sup>73</sup> This was sometimes the major or only source of family income while the men got on with what was seen as the more “important” political work.<sup>74</sup>

### THE FAMILY AND MARRIAGE

During the late nineteenth century many intellectuals placed sexual relations at the centre of history. Darwin’s theory of evolutionary progress fuelled by sexual selection was a subject of study for anarchists, including the implication that women were less “evolved” due to their “passive” role in the process. Herbert Spencer, more explicit than Darwin about the evolutionary roots of woman’s contemporary status, maintained that sexual difference was a consequence of the early arrest of women’s development in order to conserve energy for reproduction; highly

70. *The Clarion*, 20 August 1898.

71. T. Barclay, *Autobiography of a Bottle Washer 1852–1933* (Leicester, 1934), p. 85.

72. Shaw, *Whiteway*, pp. 54–55.

73. *Ibid.*, pp. 87, 207.

74. Given that the women were busy doing the domestic chores, earning money, and also participating in collective work, it is not surprising that fewer women compared with men had the time to engage in political activity. In the anarchist commune established in the years before World War I at Marsh House in London, both sexes shared the housework, but when Tom Keell, the editor of *Freedom*, moved in, he was exempted because his own work was more important – a recurring theme in many male–female relationships. See S. Rowbotham, “Interview with Lilian Wolfe”, *Wildcat*, 6 (March 1975), p. 5.

differentiated sex roles indicated a highly developed society. “Power over children was the root of the old conception of power”, wrote Professor Maine in a study that linked the patriarchal family and the emergence of the nation-state.<sup>75</sup> In *Ancient Society* (1877), Lewis Morgan proposed that the social organization of any particular historical epoch was determined by the stage of development of production and by the structure of the family. His analysis of primitive society drew from the work of J. Bachofen, whose *Das Mutterrecht* (1861) provided intellectuals with the concept of matriarchy, an historical era in which women were at the centre of power and culture due to their immediate relation to their offspring. According to Bachofen, the succession of patriarchy constituted a radical change and an intellectual advance for society, as a culture based on the physical love of the mother and child was replaced by the abstract valuation of the father for his progeny. With patriarchy began the capacity for devotion to abstract concepts like the family and the state.

Although works of anarchist anthropology and ethnology – notably Elie Reclus’ *Les Primitifs* (1885) and Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1888) – were drawn from exactly the same sources as Engels’s *Origins of the Family*, the anarchist works consistently omitted the concept of a preclass matriarchy. Kropotkin, in fact, denied that any such formation had ever existed. Despite the stance of the leading male theorists, anarchist feminists were nevertheless well aware of the ideas of Morgan and his associates. This was certainly the case with women like Wilson and Dryhurst who would have come across their work at the Men’s and Women’s Club. References to the matriarchate were frequent in the meetings of the club and were utilized by feminists in their journalism.<sup>76</sup> The wider socialist debate was therefore conducted largely under the assumption that universal matriarchy preceded the current rule of men. The anarchist journal, *Freedom*, summarized the work of Morgan and others who had shown that “sex relations have played as fundamental a part as economic relations in social evolution”.<sup>77</sup> The study of matriarchy provided access to the nature of primitive communism, an era before the introduction of property and individualism. “The world historical defeat of women” occurred with the overthrow of the patriarchal *gens*, a process inextricable from the introduction of law and government: “The state arises on the ruins of the gentile constitution”.<sup>78</sup>

Though Engels’s history of the family was not available in English until

75. A. Maine, quoted in E. Brooke, “Each Sex its Own Moraliser”, *The New Review*, December 1895.

76. See, for example, C. Wilson, “The Marriage Controversy”, which drew on the work of Lewis Morgan and Alfred Maine; *Freedom*, 3:25 (October 1888), p. 1.

77. *Ibid.*

78. F. Engels, *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884; repr. New York, 1972), pp. 50, 154.

the twentieth century, his ideas were being discussed in radical circles alongside the similar theories of August Bebel.<sup>79</sup> This led many to the question Karl Pearson raised: “With the centuries as the patriarchy vanishes, when a new form of possession is coming into existence, is it rational to suppose history will break a hitherto invariable law, and a new sex-relationship will not replace the old?”<sup>80</sup> Those who speculated on the nature of future sexual relations, agreed that the issue was crucial, not necessarily from a concern for the emancipation of women, but from a scientific interest in the reproductive structure evolution required.

Anarcho-feminist speculations on the future of the family predicted a reproductive arrangement that would be both liberating for women and eugenically sound. Charlotte Wilson picked up where the seventeenth-century philosophers left off, identifying the roots of political authority in the family. Filmer, not Locke, drew the honest picture of family life when he justified the divine right of kings from the father’s power in the home. Paternal authority lay the seed for “the spirit of domination and the habit of domineering” in the larger society. In the modern family, the husband’s

[...] will and word are the law of the household [...]. He has the patria-potestas on which the whole Roman civil law and the derivative jurisprudence of modern states are founded. The land, the house, the wife and children are his [...]. He, like Louis XIV, is the state [...]. The father who is lord and master seeks to be the father of two or more families. He becomes the chief, the king. Moved by the same spirit and habit now grown inveterate, the tribal chiefs go to war in the hope of coming home bigger fathers [...]. Here is the school of Greek slave-owning Republic, medieval serfdom, and of the present hypocrisy which calls itself civilisation.

Once permitted in the family, the dominating spirit propagates itself throughout society. Once legitimized in politics through the state, it prevents the natural development of the family into its next and final form: “A society of free equals, of friendly men and women, who know how to give and take, understand sharing and the community of work, rest and enjoyment”. The children of the future will be educated in independence that they may “enter the commune, where their brothers and sisters, awaiting their coming, are free and a law unto themselves”. Wilson’s vision of anarchism was a society composed of these primary clusters of freedom: “The final stage of family life is the first form of social life [...]. This autonomous commune of autonomous units, the springs of whose life are in reasonable good will, is Anarchism realised. Anarchy is just, reasonable and kind home-rule”.<sup>81</sup>

79. See, for example, Eleanor Marx Aveling’s review of Bebel’s work in *The Commonweal*, 1:6 (July 1885), pp. 63–64.

80. *To-Day*, February 1887.

81. *The Anarchist*, 1:14 (20 April 1886), p. 2.

The unity of family and society, the “softening and shading of the edge of division between family life and the common life” was a persistent theme in anarcho-feminist theory. It dovetailed with their support for women’s economic independence. Women’s wage labour did indeed break up the family, but “after all, this is the great point [...]. It is a necessary step towards the realisation of a free socialism that men and women alike should learn to recognise their direct relation to society; to live and work directly for the commonwealth”.<sup>82</sup> The goal was not a return to matriarchy, a dated form in the march of history, but instead the joining of matriarchy’s communalism, enforced only by public opinion, with “the individualising process” that marked the modern era.<sup>83</sup> The process was finally reaching women, as shown by their entrance into the world of education and labour. At the centre of many anarcho-feminists’ evolutionary theory was a picture of the future woman, already present in society and struggling “in the darkness against the outworn forms that crush her back”.<sup>84</sup>

For anarcho-feminists, the principal “outworn form” hindering the healthy evolution of the family was the institution of marriage. On this issue they could tap into a strong current of public opinion which was concerned with marriage. In August 1888, for example, *The Daily Telegraph* requested its readers’ response to the question “Is Marriage a Failure?” Over the next month the paper received 27,000 replies. Although support for marriage was declared by a few, the majority revealed discontent and profound unhappiness. The correspondents usually blamed their individual spouses, but their complaint of difficulties in extricating themselves from bad marriages demonstrated their more general dissatisfaction with marriage as an institution.<sup>85</sup> *Daily Telegraph* readers were not alone in their ambivalence towards marriage. Feminists had been criticizing it for some years, not so much in a general sense, but in terms of its injustices: a woman’s economic dependency, loss of legal and political rights, an unequal divorce law and the assumption of a husband’s ownership of his wife.<sup>86</sup> It was, above all, a married woman’s right over her own person that needed to be won, and it was this which became the main focus for feminists in their discussion of marriage.<sup>87</sup>

Despite their criticism of marriage, most feminists were opposed to the formation of free unions and looked instead to reformed legal marriage

82. *Freedom*, 2:10 (July 1887), p. 63.

83. C. Wilson to K. Pearson, 28 February 1889, List 900, PP.

84. *Freedom*, 3:25 (October 1888), p. 2.

85. Cited in J. Walkowitz, “Science, Feminism and Romance: the Men and Women’s Club, 1885–1889”, *History Workshop Journal*, 21 (1986), pp. 37–59.

86. J. Lewis, *Women in England 1870–1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change* (Brighton, 1984), p. 78.

87. *Freedom*, 20:212 (November 1906), p. 38.

since they feared such “lawless” unions would allow men unrestrained sexual licence and would thereby render women more vulnerable. Until men’s sexual impulses had been curbed, marriage law at least gave some women protection; given the reality of the double moral standard, it was better to increase rather than decrease the taboo against non-marital sex. If feminists were primarily opposed to free unions on the grounds of female vulnerability, the question of respectability came a close second. An unrespectable woman implied a woman with a “reputation”.

It is thus perhaps explicable why many feminists looked aghast at those women who entered free unions, fearing that scandal of impropriety would harm the woman’s cause. Although for most feminists who supported free unions, the notion of “free love” was one of monogamy and, if love persisted, permanence, the term always had negative connotations, being equated with promiscuity and polygamy, so that sometimes an advocate of “free unions” could argue that this did not mean she supported “free love”. Wilson for example, sensed the threat to the free-love issue posed by the theories of James Hinton, a prophet of polygamous free unions.<sup>88</sup> Perhaps fearful of the public reaction, she wanted no connection between anarchism and Hintonism, despite the latter’s thoroughly anarchist call for the abolition of all laws and restrictions on sexuality. Wilson insisted that Hintonism was in “complete contradiction” to anarchism.<sup>89</sup> She assumed, as did many other anarchists, that free sexual relations would foster, rather than defeat fidelity:

If the relations between men and women were free, I think so far from conducting to loose living such a state of society would be the best safe-guard against it. Having many friends on whom they were on terms of intimate affection, women would be in far less danger of mistaking friendship for love of another sort, and would give themselves to a lover far less readily than now.<sup>90</sup>

The greatest advocate of free love was the Legitimation League which was set up in 1893 “for the purpose of changing the bastardy laws so that offspring born out of wedlock were not deprived of their rightful inheritances”.<sup>91</sup> Partly contingent on legal change, this was not an anarchist goal as such, but the polemics that this issue sparked off about legal marriage attracted anarchist attention.<sup>92</sup> This interest grew after 1897, when the league adopted as its primary aim the education of public opinion

88. S. Rowbotham and J. Weeks, *Socialism and the New Life: The Personal and Sexual Politics of Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis* (London, 1977), pp. 143–145.

89. C. Wilson to K. Pearson, 21 February 1886, List 900, PP. Her objection to Hintonism was probably reinforced by the experience her friend Emma Brooke had undergone when she met Hinton. Apparently, Hinton tried to convert her to his sexual theories and in the process made an attempt to seduce her. See E. Brooke to K. Pearson, 4 December 1885, List 900, PP.

90. *Freedom*, 1:7 (April 1887), p. 28.

91. *Liberty*, 17 June 1893, p. 3.

92. *Freedom*, 12:126 (May 1898), p. 26.

“in the direction of freedom in sexual relationships”. The issue of illegitimacy was relegated to second place.<sup>93</sup> With its new aim blazoned, the League launched its journal, *The Adult*, in the same year. It was anxious to dispel any fears that support for free love would be at a woman’s expense: “One of the fundamentals of our position is the equal sex freedom of man and woman. ‘Free love’ for one sex at the expense of the other means neither freedom nor love.”<sup>94</sup> Although it is clear that not all members were supportive of feminism, the League’s formal commitment was explicit. *The Adult*’s editor, George Bedborough, assured readers: “The League holds to the precious principle that a woman belongs to herself, that neither priest nor lawyer has any right to dictate to her”. And in *The Adult*’s first issue it was stated that “we protest [...] against the theory underlying laws, marriage settlements and popular practice that a woman’s person can be the ‘property’ of her husband”.<sup>95</sup> It appears that about half of its members were women, as were the holders of official posts. The League’s treasurers were both women, and its president from 1897 was the American anarchist feminist, Lillian Harman. According to Inspector Sweeney, who had infiltrated the organization, the League had “a large and influential membership”, containing many anarchists.<sup>96</sup>

*The Adult*’s editor may have been convinced that feminism and free love were reconcilable, but not all its members were so sure. In addition to a woman’s economic vulnerability within a free union, several women elaborated upon the effects of lost respectability. A woman labelled a “free lover” was likely to have been slandered not simply as “sinner” for living with a man outside wedlock, but also as a “promiscuous woman”, sexually available to all.<sup>97</sup> That free love gave all men potential property rights in a woman’s sexuality was an idea held to even by certain league members. J.C. Spence objected to free love because “the idea that we are to share the woman we love with other men is repulsive”.<sup>98</sup> Harman recounted a talk given by W.M. Thompson to a recent gathering of the league, in which he had asserted that “freedom in love is impracticable because no man can love and respect a woman who is the ‘common property of the herd’”. To Harman, Thompson seemed to possess “a hazy conception of what Free Love means. It is impossible for him to realise that a woman may be the property of herself”.<sup>99</sup> Indeed, a woman’s desire to be her own person, free

93. *The Adult*, 2:8 (September 1898).

94. *Ibid.*, 1:10 (October 1897).

95. *Shafts*, April 1897, p. 125; *The Adult*, 1:6 (June 1897).

96. J. Sweeney, *At Scotland Yard: Being the Experience during 27 Years’ Service of John Sweeney, Late Detective Inspector* (London, 1904), p. 178.

97. *The Adult*, 2:8 (August 1898).

98. L. Bland, *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality 1885–1914* (London, 1995), p. 158.

99. *The Adult*, 2:2 (February 1898), p. 32.

to enter a relationship in which no man held property rights in her sexuality, was at the heart of why women supported free unions. But women feared that the support of at least some men for free love was motivated by the potential sexual access to more than one woman, and the avoidance of financial responsibilities. If Spence and Thompson are anything to go by, men's objection to free love was in terms of their disinclination to give up sole ownership rights in a woman's body.

When *The Adult's* London office displayed Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion* for sale in late 1897, the League hit the headlines. The book had only been out a short while when Bedborough was arrested and tried for selling "a certain lewd, wicked, bawdy, scandalous libel", namely *Sexual Inversion*. From Sweeney's memoirs it is clear that the police were primarily concerned not so much with the banning of Ellis's book as finding a means by which to destroy "a growing evil in the shape of a vigorous campaign of free love and anarchism", namely the League. They succeeded. The public prosecutor was only too anxious to cooperate in order "to protect the public from all the objectionable features of an open and unashamed free-love movement".<sup>100</sup> Bedborough was bound over and renounced any connection with the League, which collapsed soon after. Nevertheless, the League helped ensure that a substantial portion of opinion grew which agreed that the marriage laws were oppressive.

The anarchists argued that those who loved each other did not need legal compulsion to keep them united, while those who did not should not have it. The "idea that lovers would ever need to make a contract to manifest their love to each other [was] ridiculous".<sup>101</sup> The only use of the contract of the marriage bond, "was to insure cohabitation in case there is not sufficient love to insure it. All such cohabitation is [...] prostitution".<sup>102</sup> Similarly, anarchists argued, the state could not change the moral nature of the sexual act: coitus was either good or bad in itself, regardless of the legal condition in which it occurred. The very presence of law in sexual relations perverted and concealed the bonds that naturally existed between lovers.

While the anarchists may have lost ground in their struggle to define socialism as a stateless society, they won a near total victory in identifying revolutionary socialism with the abolition of the law of matrimony.<sup>103</sup>

100. Sweeney, *At Scotland Yard*, p. 186.

101. C. Wilson to K. Pearson, 8 August 1885, List 900, PP, UCL.

102. *The Anarchist*, 1:1 (March 1885), p. 4.

103. State socialists joined the anarchists in their attack on "Christian property-marriage". Eleanor Marx justified her decision and Edward Aveling's to live extramaritally as a rejection of state-sanctioned marriage and as an example of a union between a "true husband and true wife": "We have both felt that we were justified in setting aside all the false and really immoral bourgeois conventionalities." Although Marx depicted her relationship as an example of a "true" union, it should be stressed that Aveling did not live up to this high ideal. His frequent affairs and total lack of morality in his private dealings were common knowledge within socialist circles and

Although for many non-anarchist feminists free unions were largely something to be discussed in terms of a future goal, rather than something to be embarked on in the present, for the anarchists it was necessary to try and live out the ideals of the future within the existing world. Inevitably, this put pressure on those who embarked on free unions. John Paton recalled that he and his partner Jessie discussed living together without getting married:

We were both without religious beliefs and contemptuous of convention, we subscribed to the ideal of “free union” of the sexes: legal ties were recognised to be a degradation of the ideal relation. But there was a prospect of children to be considered and we came to grip with realities.<sup>104</sup>

This was not an uncommon occurrence. In 1908, Guy Aldred and Rose Witcop also decided to live together without the sanction of church or state. In 1909, however, they eventually married, admitting that their free union was farcical given that they both used “Mrs” when it was awkward to have done otherwise.<sup>105</sup> The anarchist emphasis on such heroic acts of defiance necessarily placed a great strain on people. The new morality was so completely at variance with the standard of the time that it was restricted to a minority even within the extreme Left.

Public hostility was a very real concern. During our period, those pioneering women who stepped outside the conventional norms of feminine sexual behaviour, by placing issues of sexual liberation at the core of their ideologies, were often branded as sexually deviant. This sometimes occurred, not only because they discussed issues of sexual freedom, but simply because of their public activism. Often their opponents hurled epithets at them or launched investigations into their private lives in an effort to undermine their appeal. Louise Michel, for example, was one anarchist who suffered this fate.<sup>106</sup>

### SEXUAL MORALITY

For anarcho-feminists, issues of sexual morality in both public and private were inextricably linked. They recognized that the interrelationship of the so called “public woman” – the prostitute, and the “private woman” – the wife, was reflected both by the ideology which reduced all women to mere physicality, and by the men who passed between them, sexually serviced in

may have helped drive Eleanor to commit suicide in 1898. See E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London, 1977), pp. 365–369, 370.

104. J. Paton, *Proletarian Pilgrimage: An Autobiography* (London, 1935), pp. 194–195.

105. J.T. Caldwell, *Come Dungeons Dark: The Life and Times of Guy Aldred, Glasgow Anarchist* (Barr, Ayrshire, 1988), p. 90.

106. See M. Marmo Mullaney, “Sexual Politics in the Career and Legend of Louise Michel”, in *Signs*, 15 (1990), pp. 300–322.



one quarter, morally serviced in the other. There was a keen understanding that women in marriage and prostitution shared common concerns. The heart of the marriage bargain, it was argued, was the wife's promise of exclusive sexual availability. Here the comparison was obvious with the only other profession where women received economic benefits in exchange for sex. Female anarchists often referred to the only two choices available to a sexually active women as "married or unmarried prostitution".<sup>107</sup>

Prostitution was made a socialist issue by the disclosures of W.T. Stead, who undertook an investigation into the "vice trade" in 1885. He presented his findings in a series of articles entitled "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon". These caused an uproar, and as a result a diverse alliance of radicals and philanthropists called for a "war on vice". This new movement managed almost immediately to force through the Criminal Law Amendment Act, which raised the age of consent and tightened up the law on brothels.<sup>108</sup> The socialist movement joined in the outcry against the "white slave traffic" and took positions in the debate over the Act. The SDF supported it, but the Socialist League considered it irrelevant, believing that "the sexual corruption" of "the children of the working class" inevitable "so long as one class can buy the bodies of another, whether in the form of labour power or sexual embraces". Eleanor Marx predicted that the legislation would be used to harass rather than help the working class, since "laws are not applied equally".<sup>109</sup>

Charlotte Wilson opposed the Act, both as a feminist and an anarchist. She denounced the legislation as a "mere plaster" that hid but did not heal "the sore" of sexual exploitation. The Act, argued Wilson, like all laws, would appease society's conscience, but leave the problem untouched, for no legislation could address the basic causes of prostitution. As an anarchist, Wilson had no reason to believe that the cure could be found in manmade law: "The police and rulers of society have been shown to be so implicated in the evils complained of, that is surely the most errant folly to entrust them with the remedy". Like most socialists, Wilson addressed the economic causes first, but focused her analysis on the idleness of the monopolist, not on the poverty of the prostitute. The capitalist system created a class of wealthy but bored men, who spent their time and money in a "fevered search for new sensations".<sup>110</sup>

A contributor to *The Anarchist* disagreed, arguing that whilst women were taught that it was,

107. *Freedom*, 6:69 (August 1892).

108. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 6 July 1885, cited in D. Gorham, "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' Re-examined", *Victorian Studies*, 21 (1978), pp. 353–379.

109. *The Commonweal*, 1:8 (September 1885), p. 2.

110. *The Anarchist*, 1:6 (August 1885).

[...] honourable to sell their labour to a manufacturer or themselves to a man in marriage; it is vain to imagine that multitudes will not be induced by distaste for wage slavery, ignorance, flattery, or despair to submit to a deeper degradation [...]. To treat [prostitution] as if it were the outcome of animal passions, to be restrained by appealing to the self-respect of socialised mankind is both to do it too much honour and to under state its strength.<sup>111</sup>

Wilson however was less concerned with the economic causes than with the moral root of the problem, described as an absence of “personal responsibility and of reverent regard for the rights of every individual”.<sup>112</sup> Her concern for civil liberties was well founded. As Eleanor Marx predicted, the law was used to prosecute, not the men who bought sexual services, but the women who provided them.<sup>113</sup> Wilson’s analysis of the law’s broad powers registered her concern for the prostitutes themselves, but she seemed more concerned for the middle-class man who might be wrongly accused by “meddling philanthropists”.

Wilson’s essay was inconsistent throughout, but especially so in her recommended substitute for criminal punishment. Crossing the thin line between anarchist individualism and right-wing libertarianism, with her concern for the wrongly-accused forgotten, she advised the population to exercise “lynch law” on those who submitted to “loathsome and unnatural desires”. She was, however, more consistent in the list of “active steps” she recommended for ending sexual exploitation. The first was “the equal and common education of boys and girls”, including “physiological instruction” in the “origins of life”.<sup>114</sup> In addition, girls should receive “training in independence in thought, and courage in action and in acts of self-defence, to counteract the cowardice and weakness engendered in women by ages of suppression”. Wilson also recommended schools “to teach girls to gain their living independently” and womens’ trade unions to protect their interests. In her final recommendation, she urged the boycott of “all employers on whose premises vice is deliberately encouraged” and the boycott of establishments where vice “is rendered inevitable by starvation wages”.<sup>115</sup>

#### ANARCHO-FEMINISTS, SUFFRAGE AND THE STATE

In contrast with the majority of feminists, while they praised the militancy of the suffragettes, anarcho-feminists regarded their political instincts

111. *Ibid.*, 1:5 (July 1885), p. 1.

112. *Ibid.*, 1:6 (August 1885).

113. J.R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London, 1992), p. 125.

114. See C. Wilson’s article, “Sex Education Reform”, *The Revolutionary Review*, 1:9 (September 1889), pp. 136–137.

115. *The Anarchist*, 1:6 (August 1885).

(hoping for significant change through the vote and parliament) as hopelessly naive.<sup>116</sup> For anarchists, to link feminism with politics was indeed necessary, but meaningless when left at the level of elections and the state. The nature of the state between 1880 and 1914 was such as to give many women little reason to believe that their best ally in the socialist struggle was law and the machinery of electoral power. The state socialists were placing the future of socialism in a governmental system that women could not enter and that had legitimized and perpetuated their subordinate position in society. Many women were understandably sceptical of the argument that law would lead the way to socialist equality and morality.

The Fabian careers of Charlotte Wilson and Florence Dryhurst demonstrate a tendency among women with regard to socialist tactics and electoral politics. Both women left the Fabian society in 1888, when the Fabian Parliamentary Society was formed. The society officially adopted the policy of using state power as the means to socialism. This was the signal that anarcho-feminists should leave. The Fabian picture of socialist MPs representing the interests of all no doubt looked suspiciously familiar to such women. It was the same argument for virtual representation that had excluded the working man in 1832 and women at every occasion of franchise reform. The socialist official, wielding authority on behalf of the workers, was championed by Fabians in terms too similar to James Mill's facile dismissal of women's direct political participation: "One thing is pretty clear, that all those individuals whose interests are indisputably included in those of other individuals may be struck off without inconvenience".<sup>117</sup> Women had good historical reasons to doubt the legitimacy of representative democracy and to object to the identification of socialism with that political form. As Dryhurst put it, "the man who wins" in representative politics "is he with the loudest voice".<sup>118</sup> Anarcho-feminists suspected that the winning voice would not be theirs.

In arguing that law was an immoral tool of the powerful, anarchist women were restating one of the principal assumptions of the women's movement. From its origins, the feminist movement was principally a campaign against disabling, immoral, and intrusive laws. The antistate rhetoric found in anarchist journals was no more venomous than the libertarian language of women's rights literature, as feminists contrasted the private world of feminine morality with the political world of war ruled by masculine states. This antistatism was based on a perception of a profound difference in political cultures: the state's culture was radically different in its morality from feminist cultures. Indeed, studies of the women's movement tend to emphasize the way in which feminists derived

116. See for example A.A. Davies to M. Nettlau, 19 March 1908, NC, IISH.

117. J.S. Mill, "Essay on Government", (1821), cited in Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, p. 293.

118. *Freedom*, 6:63 (February 1892), p. 7.

their ideas and motivation from a common libertarian or reforming outlook, and disliked party politics.<sup>119</sup> The anarcho-feminists built on this perception and tried to convince their sisters that the state was unable to work for feminist causes.

Women socialists and their nonsocialist counterparts also took pride in their distance from the halls of state and turned their inability to wield electoral power into an example of, and argument for, “women’s moral superiority”.<sup>120</sup> Socialism, too, argued many women, was a pre-eminently moral cause. As state socialists and anarchists debated whether or not socialism was to be a political or an ethical revolution, women often sided with the anarchist view, in substance if not in name. The defining principle of socialism, Edith Lees Ellis argued,

[...] is that internal reform in the individual will inevitably lead to external reform in the community, whereas mere external reform, as advocated by the Marxian socialists, may still leave the individual as egotistic and narrow as before, and as much a danger to the general well being of the community.<sup>121</sup>

Robert Parker noted, in the Men’s and Women’s Club’s final report, that the men and women showed distinctly different views on “the principles which ought to limit state interference in sexual matters”. The men tended to hold “socialistic” views and supported some measure of state control, while the women were decidedly “individualistic”.<sup>122</sup>

At stake in the debate between anarchist and state socialist was whether socialism was to come all at once through revolution or to be gradually implemented through piecemeal reform. Only a total revolution would reach the private world of the family, where women remained trapped from cradle to grave. Legislated socialism and the permeation of existing institutions threatened to leave women just where the liberal revolutions had left them, excluded from politics and subordinated at home.<sup>123</sup> It was not surprising, therefore, that Rose Witcop criticized the middle-class women’s suffrage movement for giving too much attention to Parliament and too little to working women. Many would not qualify for it anyway, so why should women who worked all week in factories or at home care whether or not the middle-class women had the vote? What was needed, she argued, was an agitation for general emancipation; to make women realize that it was not the lack of voting rights that created bad conditions,

119. Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England*, pp. 38–39. See also B. Harrison, “State Intervention and Moral Reform”, in P. Hollis (ed.), *Pressure from Without* (London, 1974), pp. 289–322.

120. J. Hannam, “Women and Politics”, in Purvis, *Women’s History in Britain, 1850–1945*, p. 228.

121. E. Lees Ellis, *The New Horizon in Love and Life* (London, 1910), p. 159.

122. Men and Women’s Club Minutes, 19 June 1889, List 600, PP.

123. For a critical reading of the liberal-feminist tradition see V. Plumwood, “Feminism, Privacy and Radical Democracy”, in *Anarchist Studies*, 3 (1995), pp. 97–120.

but the attitudes of a paternalist society which regarded women as a slave in factory and home.<sup>124</sup>

Anarchist women urged their socialist sisters to see that only anarchism could express socialism's true meaning for women. When called upon to deliver a speech on the Paris Commune, Wilson identified its legacy with both anarchism and feminism:

Historians have [...] left unchronicled the spontaneous action of the people [...]. Take, for instance, the conduct of that part of the people who are generally supposed to be creatures of habit and routine, least fit to act for themselves – the women. When the treachery of the men entrusted with authority allowed the cannon to be surprised [...] the women waited for no centralised organisation, no word of command, but marched up the streets against the muskets of the soldiers [...]. When the fighting was over, they bestowed equal energy upon the reorganisation of social life [...]. They formed committees to inquire into the wants of every family and to organise labour for women.<sup>125</sup>

The Commune and all of evolutionary history had taught that state authority and submission to law was forever linked to the oppression of women. For women like Wilson, socialism had to mean anarchism if it was ever to mean their own liberation. They therefore attempted to direct the politics of socialism away from state-sponsored reform and towards a moral revolution, believing that “It is possible to conceive a tolerably intelligent man advocating palliative measures and gradual reform; but a woman who is not a revolutionist is a fool”.<sup>126</sup>

## CONCLUSION

A wide reading of the available sources demonstrates that anarcho-feminism had a substantial, if diffuse, presence among socialist women. Anarcho-feminism, while sharing many of the ambiguities and confusions common to all debates about the “woman question”, had distinctive things to say on a number of issues. It offered a distinctive analysis of the reasons for female oppression, whether it was within the economic sphere or within marriage. The anarcho-feminists maintained that if an egalitarian society was ever to be built, differences in roles – whether in sexual relationships, childcare, political life or work – had to be based on capacity and preference, not gender. By combining these questions they developed a feminism that was all embracing at a time when the struggle for the vote was becoming the main question for women. A minority of British feminists clearly saw anarchism as the only ideology that could address their concerns. Agnes Henry explained the appeal: “In anarchism I see the

124. *Voice of Labour*, 1:7 (2 March 1907), and *Freedom*, 26:284 (December 1912), p. 89.

125. *Freedom*, 2:19 (April 1888), p. 7.

126. *Ibid.*, 3:25 (October 1888), p. 2.

only base for women to escape marriage without love and obligatory maternity [...] and the degrading laws and servile customs to which women of all classes have been subjected to for so long.”<sup>127</sup> This appeal should not really surprise us given “the links between anarchist ideology and feminism [which] include a similar analysis of the evils of hierarchical domination, a commitment to individual choice, and a desire to build relationships and institutions upon voluntary cooperation and mutuality rather than upon structural authority”.<sup>128</sup>

The anarcho-feminists took part in the campaign to undermine the prejudices underlying male–female relations and anticipated many of the campaigns that would absorb the energies of the Left in the 1960s, but they never became a central strand in the contemporary women’s movement. They were destined to remain a small clique of individuals, working largely in isolation, with very few adherents. Although many women would have agreed with the anarcho-feminist analysis of female subordination, the ideology of anarcho-feminism as a whole elicited little attention outside anarchist circles. It appealed neither to mainstream feminism nor to most women radicals, who turned instead to state socialism. The reason for this rejection was partly, no doubt, due to the negative public view of anarchism.<sup>129</sup> As a result, alliances between anarchists and other reform groups, including socialists and feminists, became more difficult to construct. This division was reinforced by broader questions of strategy. Anarcho-feminism was, in effect, a form of pressure-group politics seeking to influence women throughout society. While this approach to political issues had worked for pressure groups earlier in the century, a good example being the antislavery societies, the increased role of the political party in late Victorian Britain made it less effective. This was no doubt why many women embraced state socialism, rather than anarchism.

The lack of influence of anarcho-feminism also lay in the nature of the ideology itself; for the anarchist goal of complete personal freedom, limited only by the prescription against interfering with the liberty of others, precluded organization, except in the most rudimentary sense. There was little coordination among anarchist feminists in promoting their ideas, and they worked largely as isolated individuals. Their writings were scattered throughout the radical press. The only journal concentrating on the subjection of women was *The Freewoman*, which did not appear until 1911, too late to exert any great influence for change on the suffrage-orientated feminist movement. The fact that anarchism demonstrated such

127. A. Hamon, *Psychologie de l’Anarchiste-Socialiste* (Paris, 1895), p. 142.

128. B. McKinley, “Free Love and Domesticity: Lizzie M. Holmes, Hagar Lyndon and the Anarchist Feminist Imagination”, *Journal of American Culture*, 13 (1990), p. 55.

129. See Hermia Shpayer-Makov, “Anarchism in British Public Opinion 1880–1914”, *Victorian Studies*, 31 (1988), pp. 488–516.

a strong disregard for organizational efficiency meant that the anarcho-feminists lacked the necessary organization to make the most of their important ideas.

Finally, the anarcho-feminists were undermined by the broader cultural constraints that restricted all women who were active in progressive political groups. The form of emancipation to which they aspired, namely to be treated legally and politically like man and to take part as individuals, irrespective of sex, in the life of society, assumed a transformed pattern of social life which was already far removed from the traditional “women’s place”. The ideology of domesticity was so dominant that any attempt to emphasize the self-development of women, above and beyond the function of wife and mother, was almost impossible. Women’s lives in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain were confined by essentialist definitions of what women were: mothers first, equal citizens second.