Birth Control and First Wave Feminism

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"Feminism" --that is, activism seeking to advance the socio-political status of women--has taken many forms throughout American history. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, this often took the shape of campaigning for suffrage, prohibition, and improved divorce laws.[1] These movements sought to increase women's autonomy and to protect them from men who would otherwise mistreat them. Although it lacked the same status on the national stage, birth control--that is, any means of preventing or terminating an unwanted pregnancy--was tied to many women's concept of bodily autonomy. This includes items such as condoms or abortifacients as well as abstinence, coitus interruptus, and other strategies to prevent conception without medical intervention. Birth control was a tool that women could use to allow them longer to focus on their education, or on political activism, rather than on birthing and raising children. The concept of birth control also challenged the idea that a husband was able to unilaterally decide when to have intercourse and children. Although birth control was not always an explicitly stated goal of feminist movements in the 19th and early 20th centuries, it remained an underlying factor for women who sought greater control over their own lives.

In the 1840s, northern urban centers saw an increase in abortion rates. Specifically, an increase in abortions being sought by married, middle-class, white women.[2] Although abortion was possible before this, and methods for inducing it were present in home medical manuals throughout the 19th century, the 1840s and beyond saw an increase in women seeking abortions from doctors.[3] Many of these women may have been seeking help for irregular or missed menstruation, or so they claimed.[4] This was hardly the only form of birth control being utilized, but it was the easiest for opponents to take action against. The Comstock Act of 1873 was a result of public backlash against abortion and contraceptives.[5] The Comstock Act made it illegal to mail or import contraceptives, although exceptions were made for "legitimate medical

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[1] Alison M. Parker, "The Case for Reform Antecedents for the Woman's Rights Movement," in *Votes for Women*, edited by Jean H. Baker (2002), 21-22.
[2] James C. Mohr, "Abortion in America, 1800-1880," in *Women's America: Refocusing the Past,* 8th ed., (2016), 206.
[3] Mohr, "Abortion in America," 204.
[4] Mohr, "Abortion in America," 203, 205.
[5] Mohr, "Abortion in America," 207; "The Comstock Law, 1873," in *Primary Source Documents to Accompany Women and the Making of America*, Susan Rimby, Pamela Marquez, and Katie Janssen, eds., (Upper Saddle River: Pearson 2009), 236.

purposes".[6] This act also outlawed "obscenity" in published works and advertisements--including advertisements for contraceptives.

It remains unclear exactly how much abortion contributed to the falling birth rates throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. Certainly it was not the only cause, and more than likely it was a symptom of an existing trend in which couples found various ways to reduce the number of pregnancies and children they had. American birth rates began to decline around 1800 and continued steadily downward until the 1930s.[7] Lowered infant mortality rates coupled with urbanization and increased education seem to have led to a lessened desire to have large numbers of children. Also worth note was the availability of knowledge regarding contraceptive and abortive techniques that could be used at home--methods that it is impossible to gather concrete data on because they could be accomplished without outside intervention--prior to the passage of the Comstock Act.[8] Even following the passage of the act, the end of the nineteenth century saw newspaper ads for "rubber goods" and pills for treating "obstructions" appearing in newspapers in Cleveland, Chicago, Boston, and similar ads likely were able to be found in other cities.[9] These ads carefully avoided language that would have seen them removed from the public eye, and indicate that there existed a demand for such goods. Although it was early feminists and advocates of "free love" who were actively campaigning for women's right to control when they had children, this evidence signals that the average woman also desired this ability.[10]

One of the forms that this campaigning took was "voluntary motherhood". The ideology behind "voluntary motherhood" is, theoretically, one that advocates for birth control. Although they were opposed to contraceptives based on the idea that they would promote promiscuity, those who advocated for "voluntary motherhood" sought a balance between recognizing the sexual desires of women and allowing them periods of abstinence to prevent conception.[11] Key in this idea was allowing women to refuse her husband's sexual advances if she so desired.[12] In the context of a society where it was seen as a woman's duty to submit to her husband and do as he pleased, the idea of

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[6]Etienne Van De Walle and Virginie De Luca, "Birth Prevention in the American and French Fertility Transitions: Contrasts in Knowledge and Practice," *Population and Development Review* 32, no. 3 (2006): 546, accessed May 16, 2021, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20058903.

[7]James Reed, *The Birth Control Movement and American Society,* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 3-4.

[8]Reed, *Birth Control*, 7-11; Mohr, "Abortion in America," 204.

[9]"Advertisement for Contraceptives from Late Nineteenth Century Newspaper," in *Primary Source Documents to Accompany Women and the Making of America*, Susan Rimby, Pamela Marquez, and Katie Janssen, eds., (Upper Saddle River: Pearson 2009), 237.

[10]Linda Gordon, "Voluntary Motherhood and the Beginnings of the Birth Control Movement," in *Family Life in America 1620-2000* (1981),131-138.

[11]Martin Henry Blatt, "The Anarchism of Ezra Heywood: Abotion, Labor Reform, and Free Love," (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1983), 272.

[12]Blatt, "The Anarchism," 273.

allowing women to refuse sex--rather than the more common mutual or male decision for a couple to be abstinent--was radical.

First, the idea of a woman choosing when to have sex brought with it the idea that women were capable of wanting sex. In 19th century America, it was widely accepted that there was "an innate passionlessness on the part of women"; that is, women did not experience lust.[13] This was based on the belief that women were morally superior to men, and that they lacked the male predisposition for sin. It is also possible that this "prudery", Freedman explained, was leveraged by women outside of activist circles who sought to avoid intercourse with their husbands.[14]Mainstream feminists, who in the 19th and early 20th centuries often relied on women's perceived moral superiority in their campaigning, also rejected the idea that women were capable of lust, and instead campaigned for the right to refuse their husbands on the basis that men's excessive lustfulness towards their wives was depraved and destructive.[15] This concept of female consent only allowed women to experience a desire for sex in the context of motherhood, rather than in the context of lust.[16]

"Free love" advocates also campaigned for women's right to decline sex, but their reasoning acknowledged the existence of female lust.[17] Free love ideology, which rejected traditional religious concepts of love and marriage "which, they believed, stifled love", was an ideology predominantly practiced by men, but one which had ideological overlap with contemporary feminism.[18] Ezra Heywood (a prominent free love activist) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were both strong advocates for the idea that women should be equal to men politically, socially, economically, and sexually.[19] Although many feminists worked to maintain the public's image of women as respectable, maternal, and morally pure, there was an overlap between free love and feminism. Victoria Woodhull was active both in suffrage and free love circles.[20] Feminist doctor Alice Stockham acknowledged the female capacity for sexual desire as well as devising a system of birth control called "Karezza" where both man and woman avoided climax.[21] Suffragist Paulina Davis "was accused of being a free lover, [and] she accepted the description".[22] Although Elizabeth Cady Stanton never directly identified with the free love movement, there was overlap between her views and theirs,

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[13]Estelle B. Freedman, "Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America: Behavior, Ideology, and Politics," *Reviews in American History* 10, no. 4 (1982): 201; Gordon, "Voluntary Motherhood," 134.
[14]Freedman, "Sexuality in America," 208.
[15]Gordon, "Voluntary Motherhood," 134-138.
[16]Gordon, "Voluntary Motherhood," 134.
[17]Blatt, "The Anarchism," 283.
[18]Gordon, "Voluntary Motherhood," 132.
[19]Blatt, "The Anarchism," 13.
[20]Gordon, "Voluntary Motherhood," 132.
[21]Van De Walle and De Luca, "Birth Prevention in the American and French Fertility Transitions," 547.
[22]Gordon, "Voluntary Motherhood," 137.

including both the earlier mentioned ideas about bodily autonomy as well as the idea "that a healthy woman has as much passion as a man".[23] Free love was more radical than mainstream feminism, but it was an ideology with feminist goals and one that also pursued birth control. These 19th century ideologies were opposed to contraceptives, but existed alongside the rise in abortion and decline of American birth rates; activists practiced methods of birth control that fit their ideologies, while the average person who sought to avoid conception instead relied on the methods convenient to them, such as the previously mentioned abortions and "rubber goods" that were available, as well as home remedies offered in books such as Owen's *Moral Physiology* and Buchan's *Domestic Medicine*.[24]

The successors to feminist and free love activists for voluntary motherhood were women such as Crystal Eastman and Margaret Sanger, who in the early 20th century fought against the restrictions of the 1873 Comstock Act in trying to spread information about birth control to the public.[25] Like other feminists before them, Sanger and Eastman advocated for women to control the size of their family. Eastman encouraged the spread of information as a means for women to avoid having unwanted children "in times of poverty and weakness".[26] She maintained that all women desired, on some level, knowledge of birth control, and that obtaining it was an essential step in women achieving economic freedom, which she considered the end goal of feminism.[27] Sanger's experiences as a nurse had led her to conclude that a lack of knowledge of birth control was leading to widespread health problems among women, many of them working class.[28] She believed that educating women about birth control would prevent unwanted and dangerous pregnancies, prevent misinformation, reduce the frequency of abortions, and increase the bond between a married couple.[29] Sanger's publications frequently violated the Comstock Act, including a period in which she fled to Europe and her husband was arrested.[30] Both women still considered motherhood to be an

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[23]Gordon, "Voluntary Motherhood," 132-134, 137.
[24]Reed, *Birth Control and American Society*, 3-4, 7; Mohr, "Abortion in America," 204, 206.
[25]Eastman, "Birth Control in the Feminist Program," in *Primary Source Documents to Accompany Women and the Making of America*, Susan Rimby, Pamela Marquez, and Katie Janssen, eds., (Upper Saddle River: Pearson 2009), 237-239; and Sanger, "The Woman Rebel and the Right for Birth Control, 1916," in *Primary Source Documents to Accompany Women and the Making of America*, Susan Rimby, Pamela Marquez, and Katie Janssen, eds., (Upper Saddle River: Pearson 2009), 243-244.
[26]Eastman, "Birth Control in the Feminist Program," 237-239.
[27]Eastman, "Birth Control in the Feminist Program," 237-239.
[28]Sanger, "The Woman Rebel," 243-244.
[29]Sanger, "The Woman Rebel," 243; Sanger "Happiness in Marriage, 1926," in *Primary Source Documents to Accompany Women and the Making of America*, Susan Rimby, Pamela Marquez, and Katie Janssen, eds., (Upper Saddle River: Pearson 2009), 240-243.
[30]Sanger, "The Woman Rebel," 243-244; "Woman's Case Dismissed," *Dallas Morning News, (Dallas, Texas), February 20, 1916: 2. Readex: The Historical Dallas Morning News, 1885-1985.*

important factor of womanhood, but they, like earlier feminists, thought that allowing women to limit the number of pregnancies they had would enable them to have greater control over all facets of their lives. Eastman also ties birth control to women's suffrage: she says that "a suffrage state should make short work of repealing these old laws that stand in the way of birth control", in reference to the Comstock Act which impeded her and Sanger's efforts to educate women.[31]

Aside from the censorship of information, increased usage of birth control methods was met with pushback from other sources. Even the relatively simple basis of "voluntary motherhood"--the idea that a woman could unilaterally refuse sex--was controversial. In Davis' words: "'voluntary motherhood' was considered...outrageous...by those who insisted that wives had no right to refuse to satisfy their husbands' sexual urges".[32] Unless the husband decided to abstain from intercourse, or both spouses mutually agreed upon it, abstinence was deemed unacceptable by those who held conservative views about women's role in a household.

Even more extreme in their opposition to birth control were those such as Anthony Comstock, who both lobbied for strict laws against "immoral" and "obscene" materials and personally found and arrested "abortionists" and those selling contraceptive tools.[33] Comstock was one of many who believed that contraceptives were tied to sin; even feminists believed that contraception promoted promiscuity.[34] There were several religious sects whose birth rates did not fall as rapidly as those of the general population because birth control was against religious doctrine.[35] Groups such as Mormons only considered sex acceptable when done with the intention of procreation.[36] Although religious and moral opposition to birth control have remained the most prominent detractors, other groups also took issue with the concept.

The decreasing birth rates seen among white women was a cause for alarm among white supremacists, and even President Roosevelt decried what was seen as "race suicide" in speeches given in 1905 and 1906.[37] This alarmism was rooted in a combination of factors: the low birth rates in established white communities, and the existing white-supremacist nativism in the United States.[38] Although between 1880 and

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[31]Eastman, "Birth Control in the Feminist Program," 237-239.

[32]Angela Davis, "Racism and Reproductive Rights," in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Lewis Reina and Mills Sara, 353-67, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 353, accessed May 1, 2020, doi:10.3366/j.ctvxcr9q0.21.

[33]Reed, *Birth Control and American Society*, 37-38.

[34]Gordon, "Voluntary Motherhood," 133.

[35]Tamara K. Hareven and Maris A. Vinovskis, eds, *Family and Population in Nineteenth-Century America*, (NJ: Princeton U.P., 1978), 202.

[36]Freedman "Sexuality in America," 203.

[37]Davis, "Racism and Reproductive Rights," 357.

[38]Freedman "Sexuality in America," 198.

1940, the birth rate of African-Americans also declined, this did not alleviate the fears of white Americans who feared their nation being overtaken by other races.[39] Another source of these fears was from the high rate of immigration into the United States; although it is difficult to find the fertility rates of immigrants to the United States, the rate of immigration itself was enough to alarm many.[40] The city of Buffalo, New York, saw their population of foreign-born adults jump from roughly seventeen thousand to over fifty-five thousand between 1845 and 1855.[41] Of additional concern was the idea that "a low birth rate goes hand in hand with high wages and the spread of education"--since immigrants, African-Americans, and other "undesirable" demographics tended to be poorer and less educated, it was assumed that their birth rates would remain higher than those of the educated and better paid white, native-born middle class.[42]

As with all feminist campaigning, the fight for access to birth control methods took decades. From the beginning of the 19th century when American birth rates began to decline to modern cases such as *Griswold v Connecticut* or *Roe v Wade* and beyond, there have been a variety of arguments for and against birth control.[43] Most still form along the same lines as those that were seen in the 19th century; advocates cite birth control as a means for a woman to have complete bodily autonomy and as something that allows her to pursue her goals without being impeded by unwanted or unexpected pregnancies. Critics cite religious texts that condemn sex for purposes outside of procreation, women's role as a man's helpmeet, and demographic concerns including declining birth rates--sometimes still motivated by white supremacist ideologies, sometimes not.

Birth control has taken many forms throughout American history, but its most consistent factor is women's desire for access to it. These women may not have embraced contraceptives or abortion, but they sought greater control over their pregnancies--something that can be brought about many ways, all of which are forms of birth control. American women have used abstinence, coitus interruptus, abortion, "rubber goods", and abortifacients when available as a tool to gain greater control over their lives. From advocates of "voluntary motherhood" to activists like Margaret Sanger, feminism in the 19th and early 20th century was inseparable from birth control.

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[39] Hareven and Vinovskis, *Family and Population*, 128-130.
[40] Hareven and Vinovskis, *Family and Population*, 157-158.
[41] Hareven and Vinovskis, *Family and Population*, 158.
[42] J. L. Brownell, "The Significance of a Decreasing Birth-Rate," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 5 (1894): 54, accessed May 1, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/1008973.
[43] Reed, *Birth Control and American Society*, 3-4; "Griswold v. Connecticut," *Oyez,* accessed April 30, 2020, https://www.oyez.org/cases/1964/496.; "Roe v. Wade," *Oyez*, accessed April 30, 2020, www.oyez.org/cases/1971/70-18.