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Sleeping Beauty Awakes: Self-Interest, Feminism, and Fertility in the Early Twentieth Century

Never before, in any society, had the pursuit of wealth been legitimated, much less celebrated, for everyone.

—ROBERT HEILBRONER (1999: 312)

THE STORY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CAPITALISM AND THE pursuit of individual self-interest has focused, for the most part, on men in search of money. A gendered perspective reveals a more complicated narrative. The pursuit of wealth was, to use Robert Heilbroner's word, "legitimated" for men far earlier (and with far greater enthusiasm) than for women. A moral double standard can be traced particularly clearly from Adam Smith (who questioned the benevolence of the butcher and the baker but never that of the wife and mother) to Alfred Marshall (who feared that wage employment would tempt women to neglect their family duties) (Folbre and Hartmann, 1988; Pujol, 1992). Ideologies of gender mediated and slowed the advance of individualism; legitimation of the female pursuit of wealth did not unfold rapidly in capitalist countries until the latter half of the twentieth century.

Differences in sequence and timing are overlaid by gendered twists in the plot. The liberation of self-interest took place in the realm of sex as well as money. Here, too, a moral double standard ruled, with

significant economic and demographic consequences. Women's lack of control over reproductive outcomes enforced their economic and sexual subordination. It also slowed the decline of marital fertility. As women gained economic and political autonomy, their collective struggle for individual rights took a different shape than men's, with more emphasis on sexual liberation and more immediate implications for demographic change.

Early feminist efforts to claim women's rights to the pursuit of sexual self-interest represent an important episode in the evolution of individualism. Margaret Sanger is best known to scholars as an early advocate of birth control. Indeed, she is said to have invented the term. But she was also a utopian feminist who believed that women had only to be liberated by birth control in order to lead mankind to a happier world. Her optimism blossomed most luxuriantly in her 1922 book, *The Pivot of Civilization*.

Through sex, mankind may attain the great spiritual illumination which will transform the world, which will light up the only path to an early paradise. . . . If I am criticized for the seeming "selfishness" of this conception it will be through a misunderstanding. The individual is fulfilling his duty to society not by self-sacrifice but by self-development. . . . This is fundamentally the greatest truth to be discovered by womankind at large. And until women are awakened to their pivotal function in the creation of a new civilization, that new era will remain an impossible and fantastic dream (Sanger, 1922: 271-272).

Until women are awakened Sleeping Beauty needed more than just a kiss. She needed a diaphragm.

In this paper I describe the ideas of two early twentieth-century advocates of birth control—Margaret Sanger in the United States and Marie Stopes in England—to illustrate a larger argument: feminist efforts helped transform the boundaries of appropriate self-interest for women in ways that both reflected and encouraged the demographic transition to lower fertility. Sanger and Stopes

provide a particularly vivid example, because their philosophizing was linked directly to their political demand for reproductive choice. But many of their predecessors and successors in the struggle for women's rights also argued that women could and should be just as self-interested as men.

J. A. and Olive Banks argue that feminists played little role in promoting birth control in the Anglo-American world (Banks and Banks, 1964). Angus McLaren persuasively argues just the opposite (McLaren, 1978). I am less concerned here with the mechanics of demographic cause and effect than with the emergence of historical changes in gendered concepts of self-interest. The Western cultural tradition seldom condemned men's efforts to postpone or avoid fatherhood, whether through abstinence, delayed marriages, prostitution, or use of condoms. The same tradition, however, damned most women's efforts to postpone or avoid motherhood as selfish violations of female responsibility for others.

A small but vocal minority, including many well-known feminists, pecked away at the inconsistencies of the sexual double standard. In the twentieth century, this minority helped sway majority opinion. Public policies and social norms shifted in gradual and uneven ways, shaped by national and racial conflicts. What is most important about Sanger and Stopes is that they explicitly demanded more permission for women to pursue their own self-interest in bed. In doing so, they carried the banner of liberal individualism further than their male predecessors had ever dared.

DEMOGRAPHY AND DOUBLE STANDARDS

The economic division of labor by sex has long been accompanied by what might be termed a moral division of labor. Enlightenment thinkers urged men—but not women—to compete for economic success. Adam Smith never applied the concept of *laissez-faire* to marriage or the family. Throughout much of the history of the West, explicit state regulation restricted women's economic autonomy. Equally important was the cultural construction of femininity as a set of traits centered

upon ideals of love and care for others. Masculinity was to self-interest as femininity to altruism.

The history of the sexual double standard helps explain why prostitution was tacitly encouraged and actively regulated by most European governments in the nineteenth century. It also helps explain why Malthus remained stubbornly opposed to contraception within marriage, despite his concerns about overpopulation. Malthus is sometimes excused by reference to the prevailing norms of his day. But at least some of his influential contemporaries, including James Mill, were willing to risk carefully worded public advocacy of contraception. And others were willing to risk incarceration. John Stuart Mill (son of James) was arrested at the age of 17 for distributing one of Francis Place's handbills on use of the contraceptive sponge (Folbre, 1992).

The early French socialist feminists, Saint-Simon and Fourier, were notorious for their criticisms of organized prostitution and the sexual double standard. While they prescribed more individual rights for women, they also insisted on more social responsibility from men. They wanted to reconstruct society as an egalitarian family in which men and women would live as sisters and brothers (Moses, 1984). The opposition they aroused helps explain why later advocates of "scientific" socialism such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels took such great pains to dissociate themselves from the earlier "utopian" socialist tradition (Folbre, 1993). The unmarried Engels, incidentally, accepted legal paternity of a child born to the Marx family's domestic servant, Helene Dumuth, almost certainly fathered by Marx himself (Manuel and Manuel, 1979: 708-709).

The sexual double standard reflected a larger conceptual duality: men were individuals, but women were members of families. This duality was perfectly embodied in James Mill's 1825 argument that women did not need the right to vote, because their interests were politically represented by their fathers, husbands, and brothers. Men needed the right to vote, of course, because no one else could represent *their* interests. Anna Wheeler and William Thompson pointed out this inconsis-

tency in 1825, and it was later reiterated by John Stuart Mill, in a famous speech before Parliament in 1867 (Thompson, 1825).

Other telling examples can be found in late-nineteenth-century economics. Both Stanley Jevons and Alfred Marshall worried that if women started behaving in self-interested ways, society would crumble (Folbre, 1991). Marshall's *Principles of Economics* was welcomed by one reviewer as an excellent source of arguments for excluding women from wage employment (Groenewegen, 1994). Marshall believed that the employment of women was a "great gain in so far as it tends to develop their faculties; but an injury in so far as it tempts them to neglect their duty of building up a true home, and of investing their efforts in the personal capital of their children's character and abilities" (Marshall, 1961: 685). Men had rights, but women had duties.

THE FIGHT FOR CONTRACEPTION

These attitudes help explain the repression of both contraceptive information and technology that intensified in Britain and the United States in the late nineteenth century. Most of this repression came from the top down, enforced by a male elite concerned about effects on the morality of the masses. In Britain the popular demand for contraceptive information was so great that efforts to legally suppress it simply publicized it further. In 1877, the London obscenity trial of Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh became the talk of the town. The two escaped conviction on a legal technicality (other free-thinkers were not so lucky) but sales of their publication skyrocketed (Soloway, 1982: 54).

Most liberal feminists were horrified and many socialists were dismissive. But Annie Besant soon became a spokesperson for social feminism, denouncing retrograde comrades who believed that the birth control problem would go away after the revolution. As women became more educated and more economically independent, she argued, they would refuse to be "mere nurses of children throughout the whole of their active life" (McLaren, 1978: 179). One could hardly ask for a more direct critique of Alfred Marshall.

In the United States, the so-called Comstock Act¹ passed in 1873 made it illegal to ship any information or devices that could be used for preventing conception—which were defined as obscene—on either public or private freight carriers. The first application of the law came with the incarceration of the feminist activist Victoria Woodhull. After she published an article denouncing the sexual hypocrisy of a famous preacher, it was decided that other material in the same issue of her weekly magazine² was obscene, and all copies were seized. The prosecution effectively ended her political career in the United States (Goldsmith, 1998). The Comstock Act was later used against the socialist Emma Goldman as well as against Margaret Sanger.

By the close of the nineteenth century it was becoming clear to observers in both Britain and the United States that birth rates were dropping, particularly within the upper class. Efforts to discourage selfishness among women began to take the form of exhortations to bear more children. Particularly influential in Britain were the writings of the eugenicist Karl Pearson, who emphasized racial conflict and suggested that the imperial race needed to expand demographically. It followed that the state should make every effort to increase the birth rate, especially among families with the best genetic endowments.

That the education of women seemed to lower their desired number of children seemed, well, unfortunate. “If child-bearing women must be intellectually handicapped,” wrote Pearson, in a rather ominous hypothetical, “then the penalty to be paid for race-predominance is the subjection of women” (Pearson, 1995). In 1908, the secretary of the British National Birth Rate Commission proclaimed that the difference between the number of cradles and the number of coffins would determine “the existence and persistence of our Empire” (Lewis, 1980: 201). Alfred Marshall believed that fertility decline was attributable partly to a “selfish desire among women to resemble men,” and believed that a “national protest against the restriction of births from selfish motives” might help (Marshall, 1966). Petitions were circulated stipulating that only women who had borne at least four children should be allowed the vote (Lewis, 1980: 143).

In the United States, immigrants, rather than empire, were the cause of concern about the fertility decline of white American-born women. The eminent political economist Francis Walker argued that economic competition from immigrants was undermining the desire and ability of true Americans to reproduce themselves (Walker, 1896). Eugenic analysis quickly penetrated mainstream economics journals. In an article published in the *Journal of Political Economy* in 1900, Carlos Closson ridiculed those who believed that inherited racial differences were unimportant, and concluded that the ambitious classes should be encouraged to reproduce (Closson, 1900: 96).

President Theodore Roosevelt became the most influential worrier about what he called “race suicide.” An interview detailing his concerns was published in the *Ladies Home Journal* in 1906. He explained that the size of the U.S. population would decline if married women failed to bear at least four children. Bemoaning fertility decline among the “old New England stock” he attributed the trend partly to the “highly welcome emancipation of woman” but went on to explain that “this new freedom has been twisted into wrong where it has been taken to mean a relief from all those duties and obligations which, though burdensome in the extreme, women cannot expect to escape.”¹

Roosevelt was wrong. Women could and did expect to escape the burdens of rearing four or more children. This would soon be explained by two well-educated reformers who believed that women’s assertion of their own self-interest would liberate not only themselves, but also their race. Furthermore, they would insist, this liberation required both public sex education and access to contraceptive technology.

MARGARET SANGER

Margaret Sanger is generally considered the pioneer of family planning in the United States. In 1914 she was arrested for violations of the Comstock Act, but the charges were soon dropped, and she boldly published a pamphlet entitled *Family Limitation* that represented the first update on contraceptive methods since the Comstock Act had gone into effect. In 1917, she spent 30 days in jail after being convicted of

actually dispensing contraceptive devices. As soon as she was released she resumed her activities, hampered more by social disapproval than by legal persecution (Chester, 1992; Kennedy, 1970).

Sanger was not particularly successful in her efforts to garner support from either social feminists or more liberal mainstream groups such as the League of Women Voters. The reasons were profoundly ideological. Despite her awareness of the strategic risks, she was irrepensible in her emphasis on individual sexual pleasure as well as the “good of the race.” Sanger believed that female desire was a radiant force, and hoped to reduce the fears of pregnancy that inhibited it. Even free-thinking feminists like Charlotte Perkins Gilman were taken aback by what they regarded as her “over-sexualization” (McCann, 1994: 48).

Sanger was heavily influenced by writers such as Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis, advocates of more attention to sexual satisfaction. However, she put their arguments in her own words, developing a philosophy of feminine self-interest that extended Enlightenment optimism to women. In *Woman and the New Race*, she pronounced that women were inexorably driven to greater self-development. If given free play, they would assert themselves in beneficent ways (Sanger, 1920). If interfered with, they could become destructive. In *Pivot of Civilization*, published in 1922 and graced with an introduction by H. G. Wells, Sanger explained that birth control was the key to reconciling the conflict between altruistic commitment and individual autonomy (Sanger, 1922). Forced maternity was, for Sanger, a metaphor for forced submission to the welfare of others.

Sanger initially denounced conservative eugenic prescriptions, pointing out that their discussion of who was “fit” and who was not betrayed a distinctly middle-class bias. She lampooned talk of a “cradle competition” in which educated women should sacrifice their own interests in order to advance the race. If contraception was a selfish act, she asked, why wasn’t the state more unselfish in offering to help unwed mothers to support their children?

Like other heirs of the Enlightenment, Sanger never worried that individuals would become too selfish. She believed that the release of

feminine self-interest had redemptive potential because women's natural bond with children would ensure their devotion to the future of the race. She became far more conservative in the 1920s, perhaps because a backlash against progressive and feminist movements was accompanied by growing financial support for reducing fertility among the "defective, dependent, and delinquent classes."

As the leader of an increasingly respectable social movement, Sanger found it expedient to relinquish her progressive ideals. At the Sixth International Birth Control conference in New York in 1925, she criticized the French system of awarding allowances to families for raising children and proposed that the United States do just the opposite: award bonuses to undesirable families who limited fertility (Sanger, 1931: 290; Kennedy, 1970). Her loss of concern about middle-class bias was accompanied by a new confidence in her own ability to determine which families were undesirable and which were not.

MARIE STOPES

The magnetic power of the gender/self-interest nexus was also apparent in the work of Marie Stopes, a paleobotanist whose involvement in the birth control movement was an almost incidental by-product of her own sexual frustration in her first marriage. She and Sanger were initially friends, encouraging one another's interest in birth control. Although they soon parted ways, they followed similar trajectories. Both took advantage of the new interest in the psychology of sex.

In 1918, Stopes published a book entitled *Married Love*. Marketed as a marriage manual, it did not include details about how to avert births. It did, however, provide an exceptionally clear explanation of how conception took place, using words such as penis, erection, semen, clitoris, and vagina. Because these words were considered obscene at the time, readers were warned that the book was "unexpurgated" (Stopes, 1932). Stopes was immediately labeled a pornographer, but her book became a best-seller.

Married Love was controversial because it urged married couples to limit births to improve the quality of their personal relationship.

Its style was florid. The first sentence declared, "Every heart desires a mate." The chapter titles included "The Fundamental Pulse" and "The Glorious Unfolding." Stopes announced that it was healthy, not sinful, for women to enjoy sexual intercourse. Indeed, without such enjoyment, marriages would inevitably fail. She offered a spurious theory of the periodicity of female sexual desire, which for some reason she believed peaked every two weeks. On the other hand, she offered a scientifically accurate explanation of why many married women fail to reach orgasm.

Stopes brilliantly reversed the traditional religious notion that sensual and spiritual love were at odds, hinting that sexual intercourse allowed men and women to transcend selfish individuality. Each partner's hormones affected the other, she argued, creating a conjugal unit far greater than the mere sum of its parts: "In union with the beloved there will be added powers of every sort which have no measure in terms of the ordinary unmated life" (Stopes, 1932: 162). Stopes was no libertine. She confined her attention to marital sex and insisted on sexual self-control.² She believed that husbands as well as wives should be freed of the fear of unwanted pregnancy. Better sex would lead to better marriages. Since marriage was the cornerstone of society, it followed that society as a whole would benefit.

By 1927, *Married Love* had gone through 18 editions and had been translated into 12 languages (Rose, 1992: 186). A sequel, *Wise Parenthood*, offered a more explicit guide to contraceptive methods so that couples could practice what had been preached. Unfortunately for her fans, Stopes became a famously egocentric partisan, alienating many if not all of her colleagues. Still, she poured much of her money and energy into the establishment of birth control clinics, and remained a relentless advocate of sex education and promoter of birth control technology. She registered a cervical cap she designed with the trademark Pro-Race (Rose, 1992: 198).

That trademark was emblematic of the point that both she and Sanger constantly reiterated. Karl Pearson and Teddy Roosevelt were wrong. Women's pursuit of their own self-interest would strengthen

the human race, not weaken it. Both women believed that birth control would reduce poverty, the primary cause of social degeneracy (Lewis, 1980, 205; McAnn, 1994). Good motherhood, by which they meant intelligent, reasoned, planned motherhood, would lead to redemption. In the words of the socialist hymn, “Bread and Roses,” the “rising of the women is the rising of the race.” If poor parents had fewer children, those children would fare better, and the public would be more willing to help provide education and social services for them.

In retrospect, Sanger and Stopes appear prescient. Historical counterfactuals are always difficult to construct, but it seems quite likely that fertility decline in both Great Britain and the United States helped improve standards of living. More relevant to intellectual historians is the uncanny parallel between Adam Smith’s argument and their own: just as the male pursuit of self-interest would promote economic growth, the female pursuit of self-interest would promote social welfare.

THE MORALS OF THE STORY

Sleeping Beauty and Prince Charming did not live happily ever after just because their sex life improved. Both Margaret Sanger and Marie Stopes were caught up a fairytale that was obviously too good to be true. Some might argue that they raised expectations too high and set the stage for a backlash against feminism. I believe that they overstated the case for pursuit of individual self-interest. Both marriages and families have proved less stable than they anticipated. Celebration of declining birth rates is gradually giving way to concerns about the possible long-term consequences of reduced commitments to future generations (Folbre, 2001).

Nonetheless, three important lessons can be drawn from early efforts to encourage women’s pursuit of sexual self-interest. First, cultural discourse matters. The transition to lower fertility cannot be explained simply in terms of individual calculations of costs and benefits. In the early twentieth century, most people lacked the information and the technology to make reliable reproductive choices. Furthermore,

their sense of what they wanted—and what it was possible to want—was constrained by social norms. The creative energies of writers and activists like Sanger and Stopes challenged those constraints, enabling women and men to imagine new possibilities.

Second, the transition to lower fertility never reflected a smooth or easy adjustment to economic pressures. The power of the state and other hegemonic social institutions was applied to restrict information, limit choice, and punish dissent. Liberal feminist risk-takers and troublemakers played an important role in destabilizing a sexually repressive system. While their efforts to mobilize support for their cause sometimes landed them in bed with unattractive partners like eugenicists, they were motivated by a genuine desire to improve social welfare.

Finally, writers like Margaret Sanger and Marie Stopes should be counted among the ranks of the “worldly philosophers.” Economists have focused too narrowly on the male world of market exchange, overlooking the economic significance of family life or relegating it to a lower level of analysis. The mode of production conventionally labeled capitalism can be described as a more complex system in which collective interests based on gender and age sometimes collide with those based on nation, race, and class (Folbre, 1994). Robert Heilbroner’s brilliant depiction of the capitalist ways of understanding the world urges us toward parallel and intersecting studies of the evolution of patriarchal ideology.

NOTES

1. “Mr. Roosevelt’s Views on Race Suicide” *Ladies Home Journal* (1906): 21. Roosevelt reiterated these views in his book, *The Foes of Our Own Household* (1917).
2. “The fullest delight, even in a purely physical sense, can be attained only by those who curb and direct their natural appetites” (Stopes, 1932: 76).
3. David Kennedy makes this argument in *Birth Control in America* (1970),⁵ referring to Keniston (1965).

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AUTHOR QUERIES

- 1 Changed this and next reference from “law” to Act, as you have it later in the paper and as it is generally known.
- 2 Name of magazine?
- 3 Please provide full citation information in References
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