



Feminism In *Liberty*



By Sharon Presley

If American anarchism has been ignored by most historians, anarchist feminism has been even more overlooked. Until the publications in recent years of *An American Anarchist: the Life of Voltairine de Cleyre* by Paul Avrich, *The Sex Radicals* by Hal Sears, and *Anarchist Women* by Margaret Marsh, 19th century anarchist feminism was neglected even by anarchist historians. But as the above works show, the anarchist feminists made significant contributions not only to the anarchist cause but to the intellectual heritage of the women's movement as well.¹

The two major outlets for the promulgation of what was then called "the Woman Question" were Moses Harman's anarchist and free love journal *Lucifer* and Benjamin Tucker's *Liberty*. Though *Liberty* was not as explicitly oriented toward women's rights as *Lucifer*, in the 1880's it did devote considerable space to the "sex-question."²

The major themes of 19th century anarchist feminism were explored in the pages of *Liberty*, most notably, abolition of traditional institutional marriage, support of free love, and calls for the economic independence of women. But, points out Marsh, the male and female writers in *Liberty* differed in their reasons for opposing traditional marriage and supporting free love:

. . . there was a clear difference of opinion between men and

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women concerning the purpose of free love, with the male writers emphasizing the importance of compatibility and the tragedy of personal unhappiness that resulted from unsuccessful marriages. The women, on the other hand, emphasized the belief that marriage precluded women's economic independence and rendered her too dependent in other ways on men. The women argued that entirely different social and sexual arrangements must accompany free love, while the men foresaw no dramatic changes in the domestic roles to be played by a free love couple.³

The principal writer on sexuality and marriage in the 1880's was Sarah E. Holmes, who usually used the pseudonym "Zelm". A radical feminist who went beyond even the standard anarchist call for abolition of institutional marriage, Holmes, like Voltairine de Cleyre in the next decade, argued against couples living together in arrangements where domestic responsibilities were based on traditional sex roles. "Her ideal," writes Marsh, "was individual homes for men and women, for she believed that only physical separation could promote the economic and emotional independence so necessary for a free womanhood."⁴ Holmes, like many other anarchist feminists and unlike the mainstream feminists of her day, also believed that true spontaneity in love required the option of sexual nonexclusivity.⁵

Most of the women writers in *Liberty* in the 1880's saw physical and economic independence as intertwined issues. Florence Finch Kelly, another important contributor, agreed with Holmes that "the separate individual existence of the man and woman" was a desirable goal but felt it was impossible till women were economically independent. "Not until a woman becomes a self-supporting creature who has ceased to beg alms of him and who can and does support herself as easily and with as much comfort as he does," she wrote forcefully, "will he respect her as his equal."⁶

Kelly also emphasized the connection between sexual freedom and economic issues. Without economic independence, marriage was, in her view, merely legalized prostitution. "The only important difference between the two conditions," she declared, "is that prostitution gets better pay than marriage."⁷

Though the connection between economics and women's rights was a major theme for the women writers in *Liberty*, most of the male writers, particularly Tucker and Victor Yarros, failed to grasp

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its significance. A notable exception was Stephen Pearl Andrews, who, according to historian Charles Shively, "understood better than any other male contemporary the issues of sexual politics." Like Florence Finch Kelly, he viewed institutional marriage as prostitution, condemning it and the corollary principle of male supremacy as a "house of bondage and the slaughterhouse of the female sex."⁹ Understanding that the traditional family system made women "helpless dependents," he argued for economic independence in his classic, *Love, Marriage, Divorce and the Sovereignty of the Individual*, which was serialized and expanded in *Liberty* in 1888.¹⁰ It was later reprinted by Tucker as a separate book in 1889.

The role of Benjamin Tucker himself in regard to feminism in the pages of *Liberty* was complex. Though sexist in his personal views toward women's abilities, he did not flinch from the political implications of the Woman Question. Like other anarchists, he was opposed to institutional marriage, even going so far as to condemn the private non-State wedding of Lillian Harman and E.C. Walker.¹¹ Unlike some anarchists who were equivocal on contraception and abortion, his belief in equal rights for women extended to reproductive freedom. A "On Picket Duty" editorial in 1883, for example, expressed strong support for Ezra Heywood, who had been arrested for distribution of a tract on contraception for women.¹² In 1906, another editorial voiced opposition to a campaign against abortion.¹³

But Tucker, like most men of his day and even many other anarchist men, thought women to be intellectually inferior. In a "On Picket Duty" editorial in 1891 he wrote:

Apart from the special inferiority of women as printer (a rule to which there are many exceptions), there exists the general inferiority of woman as worker and employee (a rule to which there are few exceptions). Even the skilled women printers, as a rule, show the average woman's lack of ambition, of self-reliance, of sense of business responsibility, and of interest in her employer's undertakings."¹⁴

Tucker was not convinced, however, that women's alleged inferiority was inborn. "That they will never acquire these qualities [of ambition, self-reliance, etc.] I by no means dogmatically assert... Should these deficiencies be overcome," he continued, "I should heartily glad to see such a result."¹⁵

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Though Tucker was not always sympathetic to the issues raised by the feminists, and indeed was on occasion callous, he was no enemy of women's causes. Unlike male writers like Yarros and Jo Labadie who thought women's issues should be secondary, Tucker devoted considerable effort to promoting women's rights. He was editorially responsible not only for the publication of the many articles in **Liberty**, but for two articles in his earlier four-issue journal, **Radical Review**, and several feminist books published by his press.¹⁶ In 1891, he published **The Strike of a Sex** by George Miller, a novel about women going on strike for their rights, and **The Rights of Women and the Sexual Relations** by Karl Heinzen, a historical review of the legalized prostitution of women through marriage. Tucker's edition of Charlotte Bernard Shaw's translation of **Maternity** by Brioux, a French play proclaiming the right of women to control her reproductive freedom and her right to choose not to be a mother, appeared in 1907.

A number of feminist books originally printed elsewhere were serialized in **Liberty**. In addition to Stephen Pearl Andrew's treatise on marriage and divorce, Tucker's translation of the Russian revolutionary nihilist classic, **What's to Be Done?** by N.G. Tchernychevsky, first appeared in serial form in 1886.¹⁷ "The fundamental idea of Tchernychevsky's work," wrote Tucker in the preface, "is that woman is a human being and not an animal created for man's benefit, and its chief purpose is to show the superiority of free unions between men and women over the indissoluble marriage sanctioned by Church and State."¹⁸

Tucker was also an enthusiastic promoter of the works of Olive Schreiner, the radical feminist South African novelist. Calling her novel, **The Story of an African Farm**, "one of the finest and most artistic works of fiction that has seen the light in many a day," Tucker declared "so radical is it, especially in its attitude toward love and marriage, that I have determined to include it in **Liberty's** propaganda . . ."¹⁹ Schreiner's novels and her beautiful feminist allegory, **Three Dreams in a Desert** (published by Sarah E. Holmes) were frequently advertised in **Liberty** and sold in Tucker's bookshop.

A forceful contributor to the discussion of the Woman Question, even though he thought the issue should be secondary, was Victor Yarros.²⁰ His views were even more opposed to the women writers than Tucker's. Unable to see that economic dependence was partly

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responsible for women's legal and social inequality, he naively believed that free love and "intelligence" were somehow the solutions to the problem of women being treated as property in marriage.²¹ Though not unsympathetic towards women's desire for self-control and personal freedom, Yarros assumed that women had maternal instincts that made them naturally unequal.²² This belief, coupled with his espousal of the traditional division of labor in familial relationships, led him to battle on several occasions with Zelm in the pages of *Liberty*.²³ Unlike Zelm, he believed motherhood incompatible with an independent and separate existence, declaring patronizingly, "Why a man should not make a room for the woman he loves, I am unable to see."²⁴

Besides marriage, sexuality and economic independence, other feminist issues argued in *Liberty* included women's suffrage and children's rights. The vote for women, like the Equal Rights Amendment today, was controversial in libertarian circles not out of opposition to women's rights but because of concern about the morality of the legislation. Those writers like Tucker and Lizzie Holmes, who were against woman suffrage, were opposed to all voting on principle.²⁵ Those writers, like Ellen Dietrick, who supported it, believed that suffrage was necessary to achieve legal equality.²⁶

Debated also was the question of children's rights. On the one hand, Tucker viewed children as property while John Badcock, Jr., the author of *Slaves to Duty*, believed in equal rights for children.²⁷ "You are anxious," Badcock wrote sarcastically in 1895, "to give *all* the liberties to the parents and *none* to the child. What *equal* liberty! What impartiality!" In that same issue of *Liberty*, A.S. Matter also argued that children should be free to leave their parents at any age.²⁸

By the end of the 1880's, *Liberty's* concern with sexuality and marriage began to diminish. Zelm had disappeared from the columns along with Florence Finch Kelly and many of the other women writers. Thereafter *Liberty* only occasionally printed essays and letters on feminist subjects. Discussion of marriage, except for essays by John Beverley Robinson, mostly took the form of fictional sketches. These sketches by writers such as George Forest and Miram Daniell, presented unconventional views of marriage and divorce and questioned the possibility of the wife's independence in marriage.²⁹

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In the 1890's, John Beverley Robinson was one of the few essayists on women's issues, and, according to Marsh, the only male writer to develop a theoretical framework for the abolition of marriage.³⁰ Though differing from the women writers of the 1880's in his belief that women did not need to support themselves at all times, he was genuinely concerned about the subordinate position of women in marriage and argued firmly for the abolition of male privileges in familial relationships. Though he assumed many women would stay at home to bear children, he believed that many others would choose outside careers. He was also a discreet but strong supporter of birth control, a position not universal among the anarchists.³¹

By 1895, *Liberty's* concern with women's issues was mostly limited to its continuing stand behind the campaign to eliminate the double standard and the right to sexual freedom and sexual pleasure for women. The controversies which raged in the 1880's in the pages of *Liberty* were never resolved. "After a decade of analyzing the issues of sex and marriage," writes Marsh, "the men and women who wrote for *Liberty* remained in disagreement over the question of woman's freedom within the free-love relation."³²

Though *Liberty* ultimately offered few solutions for the problems of women, it had served women well as a major forum for the most radical feminist ideas of the day, providing an intellectual cornerstone for anarchist feminists like Voltairine de Cleyre and Emma Goldman who carried the battle into the 20th century. While the mainstream feminists continued to urge strong marriage ties and traditional domestic roles, seeing mere legal equality as the solution, the early 20th century anarchist feminists continued to question marriage and the State and their destructive effects on personal freedom and self-realization.

The anarchist feminist legacy to the late 20th century women's movement, contends Marsh, is the raising of questions about the nature of marriage and family relationships. Political and legal rights are not enough; personal autonomy is crucial also, as the anarchist feminists realized so well. "For the most part," writes Marsh, "contemporary feminists have not confronted the question of whether inequality may be inherent in our more intimate institutional arrangements, such as the family Among the anarchist women of a century ago we find the kind of serious probing of sexual and familial relationships that could serve as a preface to a

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new feminist analysis."³³

Nor have modern feminists come to grips with the role of the State in perpetuating not only legal inequality but traditional sex roles and power relationships as well. The 19th century anarchist feminists, unlike most feminists today, never failed to understand that the State is inherently hierarchical and authoritarian.

The recognition that the State is the enemy of women is the political legacy of the 19th century anarchist feminists and the questioning of the authority relationship in traditional marriage is their psychological legacy. *Liberty* played a significant role in fostering this intellectual heritage.

Footnotes

1. Paul Avrich, *An American Anarchist: the Life of Voltairine de Cleyre* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978). Hal Sears, *The Sex Radicals* (Lawrence, Ks.: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1977). Margaret S. Marsh, *Anarchist Women, 1870-1920* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1981).
2. Marsh, *Anarchist Women*, p. 77.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
5. Zelm (Sarah E. Holmes), "A Reply to Victor," *Liberty* 125 (1888):6.
6. Florence Finch Kelly, "The Economic Freedom of Women," *Liberty* 119(1888):4.
7. Kelly, "The Sexual Freedom of Women," *Liberty* 121 (1888):5.
8. Charles Shively. Introduction to Stephen Pearl Andrews *Love, Marriage, Divorce and the Sovereignty of the Individual* (1889; Weston, Mass.: M & S Press, 1975).
9. Cited in: William O. Rerchart *Partisans of Freedom*, Bowling Green, Ohio, Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1976, p. 92.
10. Andrews, "Love, Marriage, and Divorce," *Liberty* 119(1888):2.
11. Tucker, "Not Compromise, but Surrender," *Liberty* 88(1886):4.
12. Tucker, "The Value of the Heywood Victory," *Liberty* 36(1883):3.
13. Tucker, "On Picket Duty," *Liberty* 302(1906):1.
14. Tucker, "On Picket Duty," *Liberty* 206(1891):1.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Radical Review*, No. 2, Aug. 1877 and No. 3, Nov. 1877.
17. N.G.Tchernychewsky, "What's to be done?," *Liberty* 42 (1884):2.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Tucker, "On Picket Duty," *Liberty* 134(1888):1.
20. Victor Yarros, "The Woman Question," *Liberty* 124(1888):6.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, *Liberty* 125(1888) and 133(1888):7-8.
24. *Liberty*, 124(1888) and 133 (1888).

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25. *Liberty*, 295(1894) and Lizzie Holmes, "The Ballot in Colorado," *Liberty* 362(1899):6.
26. *Liberty*, 312(1895).
27. Tucker, "L'Enfant Terrible," *Liberty* 320(1895):4.
28. *Liberty* 322(1895).
29. *Liberty* 205(1891) and 238 (1892).
30. Marsh, *Anarchist Women*, p. 87.
31. *Liberty* 148(1889) and 238 (1894).
32. Marsh, *Anarchist Women*, p. 91.
33. Marsh, *Anarchist Women*, p. 5.