

*This talk, given at 'Past and Present of Radical Sexual Politics', the Fifth Meeting of the Seminar 'Socialism and Sexuality', Amsterdam October 3-4, 2003, is part of my ongoing research into sexual and political utopianism. Some of the material on pp.1-4 has been re-used and more fully developed in my later article, [Speaking Desire: anarchism and free love as utopian performance in fin de siècle Britain](#), 2009.*

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## **'Together we will make a new world': Sexual and Political Utopianism**

**by Judy Greenway**

By reaching for the moon, it is said, we learn to reach. Utopianism, or 'social dreaming', is the education of desire for a better world, and therefore a necessary part of any movement for social change.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I use examples from my research on anarchism, gender and sexuality in Britain from the 1880s onwards, to discuss changing concepts of free love and the relationship between sexual freedom and social transformation, especially for women.

All varieties of anarchism have in common a rejection of the state, its laws and institutions, including marriage. The concept of 'free love' is not static, however, but historically situated. In the late nineteenth century, hostile commentators linked sexual to political danger. Amidst widespread public discussion of marriage, anarchists had to take a position, and anarchist women placed the debate within a feminist framework. Many saw free love as central to a critique of capitalism and patriarchy, the basis of a wider struggle around such issues as sex education, contraception, and women's economic and social independence.

How was free love conceptualised? There was no single model, but the starting point was the legal and social subjugation of women in marriage, seen as destructive for both women and men.

In 1885 the anarchist Charlotte Wilson wrote: 'In the relations between men and women ... I cry for freedom as the first step – and after freedom, knowledge, that each may decide ... how that freedom can be used.' She says parenthood and marriage are separate issues, that motherhood should be chosen, and in a free society many women would not make that choice.

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<sup>1</sup> For utopianism as social dreaming, see Lyman Tower Sargent, 1994, 'The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited', in *Utopian Studies*, 5:1, pp.1-37; as the education of desire, see Ruth Levitas, 1996, *The Concept of Utopia*, Phillip Allan, London.

Children apart, it is an intolerable impertinence that Church or State or society in any official form should venture to interfere with lovers. If we were not accustomed to such a thing it would appear unutterably disgusting ...<sup>2</sup>

[H]ave you not noticed that men and women of the New Society which is struggling into being within the old, naturally fall into healthy relations of cordial equality without very much theorising?<sup>3</sup>

Soon after, Wilson became editor and publisher of the anarchist newspaper Freedom, and although the paper concentrated on economic and political matters, it was also a public space to discuss sex and marriage. Her critique of 'the existing hypocritical and unnatural sexual relations' (marriage) becomes more extreme. Not only is state interference 'disgusting', marriage itself is unnatural and unhealthy, contaminating all relations between men and women. Free love is part of a wider conception of a healthy, natural social world.<sup>4</sup>

In 1888, a national newspaper launched the so-called 'marriage controversy'. 'Is marriage a failure?' read the billboards.<sup>5</sup> In a front page editorial in Freedom, Charlotte Wilson asked: 'If the kernel [of society, marriage is] suspected of being unsound, what of the whole nut?' Although recent legal and social changes made some degree of economic independence possible for women, she argues that to become wage slaves rather than chattel slaves in marriage is little improvement, especially for mothers.

Women who are awake to a consciousness of their human dignity have everything to gain because they have nothing to lose, by a Social Revolution. 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>6</sup>

This recognition of the different perspectives of men and women is developed a few years later by another woman writer, Aphra Wilson. New woman, she argued, wants a new man: 'She will not put a foot into Bondwoman's Lane ... She shall take to herself a mate; with her shall lie the choice in childbearing.' Happily, lovingly, they will travel together on 'the Open Road ... of perfect freedom – the heroic path of a divine Liberty.' But new men are hard to find, and the enemies of liberty are the Licentious Male, the Priest, and the Man of Science.<sup>7</sup> It was clear to her and other 1890s 'New Women' that they would have to seek liberation their own way, on their own terms. Their emphasis was not just on freedom from marriage and bondage, but on the positive virtues of choice, and the conditions in which love can flourish.

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<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Wilson to Karl Pearson, 8 August 1885, ms. letter, Pearson Collection, London.

<sup>3</sup> Wilson to Pearson, 8 October 1885, ms. letter, Pearson Collection.

<sup>4</sup> Wilson, 1887, 'Sex and Socialism', Freedom, 1:7, April 1887.

<sup>5</sup> Lucy Bland, 1995, Banishing the Beast, English Feminism and Sexual Morality 1885-1914, Penguin, Harmondsworth.

<sup>6</sup> Wilson, 1888, Freedom, 3:25, October 1888.

<sup>7</sup> Aphra Wilson, 1896, 'Wanted: A New Adam', The Free Review, Jan. 1, 1896.

The public debate continued throughout that decade.<sup>8</sup> It was widely thought that free love was an excuse for promiscuity and the degradation of women. To its enemies, sexual freedom would lead to political and social chaos, the destruction of all order – anarchy. Anarchists, on the other hand, argued that anarchism heralded a New Order in sexual and social relations, and that chaos, disorder and immorality lay in the capitalist system and the patriarchal family.<sup>9</sup>

Anarchists disagreed about homosexuality. Although in theory the call for free love opened up a space to discuss same-sex love, in practice, at least in public, this happened only occasionally. At the time of the Oscar Wilde trials, Freedom ran an editorial condemning the hypocrisy of his persecutors, and an article by gay anarchist Edward Carpenter, defending same-sex love. Suggesting a more inclusive definition of free love, he argued that 'there can be no truly moral relations between people unless they are free.'<sup>10</sup>

Emma Goldman, then living in the USA, also publicly attacked the persecution of Wilde.<sup>11</sup> She was one of several notorious anarchist women who visited Britain in the 1890s, preaching free love to large audiences. Goldman argued that women should free themselves from internal as well as external tyrants, in order to express their true natures as women and as mothers.<sup>12</sup>

Another visitor, Voltairine de Cleyre, drew on her own bitter experience to advise women against living with their lovers, as they would become mere housekeepers.

Men may not mean to be tyrants when they marry, but they frequently grow to be such. It is insufficient to dispense with the priest or the registrar. The spirit of marriage makes for slavery.<sup>13</sup>

Utopianism often works by reversals which challenge what is taken for granted, and show existing society to be dystopian. This process can be seen in all these speeches and writings:

- patriarchal capitalism is chaotic and disordered; anarchism is the rational new order
- marriage constrains nature; free love is natural love
- marriage is immoral; free love moral
- unfree sex and motherhood is disgusting; love in freedom is beautiful

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<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Bland, 1995, op cit., especially Chapter 4; Bland, 1986, 'Marriage Laid Bare: Middle Class Women and Marital Sex', in Jane Lewis (ed.), 1986, Labour and Love, Blackwell, Oxford.

<sup>9</sup> LSB [Louise Bevington], 1893, 'Wanted: Order', in Commonweal, 1:2 NS, May 1893.

<sup>10</sup> Freedom, 11:94, June 1895; Edward Carpenter, 1895, 'Some Recent Criminal Cases', Freedom, 9:95, July 1895.

<sup>11</sup> See Jonathan Katz, 1976, Gay American History, Thomas Y. Crowell, New York, and Jim Kernochan, 1978, 'Emma Goldman: Morning Star of Sexual Anarchy', in The Storm, No.6, 1978.

<sup>12</sup> See Emma Goldman, (1910), 1970, 'The Tragedy of Women's Emancipation', and 'Marriage and Love', in Goldman, 1970, Love Among The Free, Friends of Malatesta, Buffalo. (Although of a later date, these essays draw on talks she had been giving over the years, and correspond with reports of her talks in Britain.)

<sup>13</sup> The Adult, 1:6, Jan. 1898, report of Voltairine de Cleyre's talk on 'The Woman Question' at the Labour Church in Bradford.

By the end of the century women were using their own experiences as a central part of their arguments, moving the free love debates on by discussing psychological power relations, and asserting the need for a free and natural sexuality which might not be confined to one relationship.

Here it may be useful to bring in queer theory, and the claim, derived from the concept of speech acts, that identity is created through performance. The paradigm case of a speech act is to say 'I do' in the marriage ceremony - saying the words *is* the act of assenting to marriage. Perhaps saying 'I don't' to marriage, can similarly be a speech act, the creation of a dissident, utopian self. In the late nineteenth century, for women to write or speak in public about their *own* sexual lives, desires and feelings, was still scandalous, as it was to speak publicly as anarchists. In speaking out, these women were in effect performing desire, enacting anarchist feminism, doing utopia.

The impact of these ideas on a younger generation can be seen in the life of Rose Witcop. Best known as a birth control activist, Witcop grew up at the turn of the century in London's East End Jewish immigrant community, with its flourishing anarchist movement. When in 1907, aged sixteen, she began a relationship with twenty year old Guy Aldred, she gave him pamphlets on free love and birth control, and spoke at length to him about her role model, free love propagandist Victoria Woodhull.<sup>14</sup> Biography and autobiography, then and later, could be as influential as theory for those seeking new ways to live their politics.

Both Witcop and Aldred were firm believers in sexual equality and staunch propagandists for free love. For many (though not all) anarchist women at this time, it was an integral part of a transformed society, though it was not a popular cause in the wider pre-war feminist movement. In 1912, in the anarchist feminist journal The Freewoman, Witcop wrote a sarcastic retort to a correspondent self-identified as a happily married woman:

There is a distinction between the terms lust, licence, prostitution and free love ... freewomen are not led by men, nor wish to lead men ... we who advocate free relationships between the sexes have no designs whatever on your particular husband ... we desire merely to see him a free man and you a free woman.

She advises the wife to broaden her horizons beyond married domesticity.<sup>15</sup>

The social changes brought about by the First World War gave a very different context to the debates, as we can see in the life of Ethel Mannin. Anarchist, pacifist and popular novelist, she was a prominent figure in the bohemian milieu of 1920s London. By her own account, her ideas were influenced by Freud, H.G.Wells, and D.H. Lawrence, among others, and her belief in free love developed in the context of widespread postwar hedonism, the developing sex reform movement, the belief in female independence and equality which was the legacy of the women's suffrage movement, and not least the availability of effective birth control (for the

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<sup>14</sup> Guy Aldred, 1958, No Traitor's Gait!, Strickland Press, Glasgow.

<sup>15</sup> Rose Witcop, 1912, 'A Retort', The Freewoman, February 22, 1912, p.273.

lucky few who knew how where to get it.) However, Mannin distinguishes between defying social convention for personal reasons, and doing so on principle as a deliberate and politicised transgression, part of an attempt to change society. For her, free love is not just what you do, but why and how you do it. Consciously setting herself up as a role model, she is part of that utopian tradition which seeks to exemplify or rehearse the possibilities of a better world not just in fiction but in the practices of life.

In the 1920s, she was part of a social and intellectual milieu that set itself against what it characterised as bourgeois puritanism. In the early forties, in Commonsense and Morality, she drew on psychoanalysis to oppose reason and commonsense to superstition and irrationality.<sup>16</sup> In the late 1960s, in Practitioners of Love, she contrasts the 'erotic seizure' of lust with the 'intense affirmation' of true love, and commends the 'Permissive Society'.<sup>17</sup>

'All you need is love', sang the Beatles in 1967. 'Take your desires for reality', went the situationist slogan in 1968. But what love, whose desires, which reality? What connections were being made in the late 1960s and early 1970s between sex, love, and social change?

1967 was dubbed 'the summer of love', and in chilly England we read about 'love-ins' in California parks. The fantasy was about beautiful young people making love in the sunshine with flowers in their hair. Sexual hedonism - but with a political angle. 'Make love not war', for example. What did this mean, exactly? If war is a keystone of an unjust world, sex is a keystone of a transformed world: sex as pleasure; sex as rebellion; sex as solidarity.

To understand what sexual liberation meant in 1968 and after, we need to understand what it was seen as liberation from, especially for the immediate post-war generation to whom adulthood still meant marriage, domesticity, social conformity. Sex, for young people, but especially for women, was associated with anxiety; for heterosexual women the fear of unwanted pregnancy. Lesbianism was invisible and sex between men was illegal. The sixties saw a rapid liberalisation of social attitudes as well as legal reforms, particularly the partial decriminalisation of male homosexual activity and of abortion, which seemed to affirm the importance of bodily autonomy and personal liberty.

Sex reform was associated with social change in the sense of inevitable liberal progress. Sexual freedom was about throwing off repression, in the name of post-war modernity, scientific enlightenment, consumerism, pleasure, abundance. For the young in particular, sexual freedom was part of a culture of rebellion, a rejection of 'bourgeois values' Amongst sexual radicals, sexual repression was seen as a way in which power is maintained, sexual liberation as a means to freedom.

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<sup>16</sup> Ethel Mannin, nd. [1942?], Commonsense and Morality, Jarrolds, London.

<sup>17</sup> Mannin, 1969, Practitioners of Love: some aspects of the human phenomenon, Hutchinson, London.

In 1968 and after the Situationists linked love, sex and revolution:

The more I make love the more I feel like making revolution; the more I make revolution the more I feel like making love.<sup>18</sup>

For them, sex is a motivating force, sexual love is subversive, anti-authoritarian.<sup>19</sup> They attacked 'a rampant sexual nihilism', where 'all pleasure is absent - the freedom which modern capitalism affords everyone is the freedom to meet, fuck, and remain as an *object*...the search for authentic life and communication which ... lies at the root of all sexual experience will only be satisfied through the transformation of all social relations.'<sup>20</sup> Like Reich and Marcuse, whose works were often referred to, if not always read, Situationists contrasted false with revolutionary sexuality, and argued that a twentieth century revolution required a new kind of person, new kinds of relationships, a new morality. We must find our true selves - or make new selves: ideas which may be logically incompatible, but in practice often coincided.

While the Situationists argued that sexual freedom was just another aspect of consumer capitalism, gay and women's liberationists began to challenge male domination and heterosexism. Both movements produced new critiques of marriage and the family. Patriarchy was alive and well within the sexual revolution, and sexual politics was about challenging male power at all levels. How did free love or sexual liberation fit into this?

By this time, so-called pre-marital sex was becoming pretty much taken for granted in mainstream society, and gay relationships were becoming more visible. Serial monogamy was, as now, seen as a natural way of organising sexual relationships. Non-monogamy was trickier. Some anarchist women felt that this was not liberty but male licence, with liberated women being expected to say yes to sex with anyone. For them, as for other feminists, the 'free love' of the sixties was another imposition of male-defined sexuality.

But the stories of experimenters like Ethel Mannin and Emma Goldman suggested that there were other possibilities, that women could be free and independent and set their own terms. In her best selling memoirs Confessions and Impressions, Mannin had asserted the supreme value of passion, especially sexual passion.

At the back of all our shame about sex is the puritanical hatred of life, and its fear of happiness ...

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<sup>18</sup> Anon, 1973, 'About sexual misery', *École du Mai*, France, trans. Hester and Marianne Velmans, in Steef Davidson, (ed.), 1982, The Penguin Book of Political Comics, Penguin, Harmondsworth, p.148.

<sup>19</sup> 'In love - in all love there resides an outlaw principle, an irresistible sense of delinquency, contempt for prohibitions and a taste of havoc', Anon, February 15, 2003, Disobedience against War. This quote, from an anarchist paper on sale at an anti-war demonstration in London earlier this year [2003], comes, I believe, from early seventies *Situationism* [2016 note: I subsequently found that the quote originates with surrealist Louis Aragon, writing in 1926. A good example of the way such ideas resonate over time and place.]

<sup>20</sup> Point-Blank!, 1972, 'Of Sexual Poverty', in Point-Blank! - contributions towards a situationist revolution, Point-Blank!, Berkeley, p.68.

[E]very women of courage and intelligence has had numerous lovers ... it is the attitude to life that counts ... not the number of *affaires*, but the amount of living.<sup>21</sup>

In the 1930's she met the love of her life, Reginald Reynolds. They lived separately in what they called a 'semi-detached marriage', both having other sexual relationships. Her memoirs conclude with a reaffirmation of belief in sexual and emotional fulfilment, a denunciation of puritanism and hypocrisy. 'Our need is for a new social order, a new religion - a religion not of God, but of Man; not of fear but of freedom, not of Heaven, but of Earth.'<sup>22</sup>

Emma Goldman, whose autobiography Living my Life was reprinted in 1970, valorised love, asserted that it must be free, and that sexual passion is natural and central to a fulfilled life. She tells a story of multiple sexual relationships integrated into a life of revolutionary activity.<sup>23</sup> Such autobiographies made such lives seem both admirable and achievable. (Only later did we find out what was being left out of these accounts - in particular the intransigence of jealousy.)

In our attempts to discuss the politics of the personal, and to experiment in our own lives, such narratives were centrally important, and the burgeoning women's liberation movement, with its emphasis on consciousness-raising, meant that the relationship of theory to practice became an exhilarating topic of discussion.

Free love was all very well – but what was love? For a while, a radical deconstruction of romantic love became popular. It was not something in ourselves needing to be liberated, but was constructed by bourgeois capitalist society to perpetuate the nuclear family. One poster of the period read: 'It begins when you sink in his arms, it ends with your arms in the sink'.

In The Politics of Sexuality in Capitalism, the Red Collective, a group of heterosexual revolutionaries, situate love and sexual desire in a social and political framework. The distinction between private life and public politics must be challenged, and we must share and analyse our internalised feelings, so that we can change our lives. Once the old patterns are deconstructed we will be able to make life less oppressive to women in particular, and more fulfilling for everyone. Jealousy is not a natural and inevitable obstacle to living differently; it is the product of the power relations within a specific society. Putting theory into practice, they analyse their own difficulties with non-monogamous heterosexual relationships.<sup>24</sup>

And now? Post-feminism, post-AIDS, with the renewed popularity of a modernised biological determinism, such ideas are too easily seen as naive. On the other hand, if sexual freedom is always defined in relation

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<sup>21</sup> Ethel Mannin, 1930, Confessions and Impressions, Jarrolds, London, pp. 90, 85.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid* p. 111.

<sup>23</sup> Emma Goldman, (1931), 1970, Living My Life, Vols. 1,2, Dover, New York.

<sup>24</sup> Red Collective, nd., The Politics of Sexuality in Capitalism: Red Collective Pamphlet 1; The Politics of Sexuality in Capitalism, Part Two, Red Collective, London.

to existing conditions, what can it mean in societies where there is widespread acceptance of the importance of sexuality and its free expression?

'Our bodies ourselves' was the slogan of the women's health movement, an argument for the right to abortion, to sex without fear. Now it seems our bodies are our possessions to modify, trade or dispose of as we wish; free love has become free trade; sexual liberation become sexual neo-liberalism. The focus on representation means that pornography can be seen as seen as pleasure for its consumers, regardless of its conditions of production. Porn stars and highly paid prostitutes (the others tend to be invisible in this argument) are seen as exercising their sexual powers in a free market. Freedom here is individual, not social. Free choice is freedom for individuals to sell and consume. Globalisation opens up the world for sexual tourism and sexual trafficking, while the new world economy creates the conditions where prostitution is for many a preferable option to sweatshops or starvation.

Audre Lorde, the African-American lesbian feminist, said that what matters:

is not who I sleep with ...nor what we do together... but what life statements I am led to make as the nature and effect of my erotic relationships percolate throughout my life and being ... [H]ow does our sexuality enrich us and empower our actions?<sup>25</sup>

If in the sixties free love needed to be about the importance of sex, and in the seventies about challenging love and the family as sites of sexual oppression, perhaps now it needs to be about reclaiming love from sentimentality and sex from simple hedonism, and reasserting a connection between the individual and the social. We need to be thinking about sex and solidarity; the relationship between passion and intimacy, commitment and friendship.

Studies of lesbian and gay friendship networks and 'families of choice' suggest new approaches.<sup>26</sup> Love, passion, commitment, monogamy – all these require explicit negotiation and have different meanings once we step outside socially legitimated structures of relationships. In the words of a seventies poster, together we can make a new world.

If sex is to be more than pleasure, a consolation in hard times, it is because it can make us question the conditions in which free love might be possible. Sex is not a solution, but as Linda Grant says:

Perhaps sex is just the ghost of freedom but until we have utopia, it can speak eloquently what the heart desires.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Audre Lorde, 1988, 'Sadomasochism: Not About Condemnation', in A Burst of Light: essays by Audre Lorde, Sheba, London, p.18.

<sup>26</sup> See Jeffrey Weeks, Brian Heaphy, and Catherine Donovan, 2001, Same Sex Intimacies: Families Of Choice And Other Experiments, Routledge, London.

<sup>27</sup> Linda Grant, 1993, Sexing the Millennium, Harper Collins, London. p.259.



Free love is not simply what people do in (or out of) bed, nor is it just one aspect of anarchist or libertarian theory. It is to speak publicly about what the heart desires; to try and work out, in our own lives, how a better world might be possible.