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No Authority But Oneself: The Anarchist Feminist Philosophy of Autonomy and Freedom

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- Sears, Hal, *The Sex Radicals: Free Love in High Victorian America* (Lawrence, KS: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1977

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> "Why am I the slave of Man? Why is my brain said not to be the equal of his brain? Why is my work not paid equally with his? Why must my body be controlled by my husband? Why may he take my children away from me? Will them away while yet unborn? Let every woman ask…"There are two reasons why," answered in her and these ultimately reducible to a single principle — the authoritarian supreme power GOD-idea, and its two instruments — the Church — that is, the priests — the State — that is, the legislators… These two things, the mind domination of the Church and the body domination of the State, are the causes of Sex Slavery."
>
> — Voltairine de Cleyre in "Sex Slavery"

Voltairine de Cleyre's passionate yearning for individual freedom was nowhere more evident than in her writings on feminism (then called the Woman Question) and nowhere more at home than the anarchist movement. The anarchist feminist movement of the late 19th century was truly a haven in the storm for women who longed to be free of the strictures of the stifling gender roles of that time. Unlike most women in socialist and mainstream feminist organizations of the time, the anarchist feminists were not afraid to question traditional sex roles. Anticipating the 20th century feminist idea that the "personal is the political," they carried the anarchist questioning of authority into the personal realm as well. "The women who embraced anarchism," writes historian Margaret Marsh, "worked to restructure society as a whole, but they also wanted to transcend conventional social and moral precepts as individuals, in order to create for themselves independent, productive and meaningful lives."

Today it is hard to imagine how difficult and stifling the lives of women were a century ago. Without the right to vote,

women had few legal rights. Married women could not dispose of their own property without the husband's consent, could not sign contracts, sue or be sued, nor did they have any custody rights. The father's right as a parent superseded the mother's, violence against the wife was sanctioned; marital rape was an unheard of concept. Sentimentalized Victorian attitudes about the role of women as keepers of the hearth who must put the needs of husband and children above their own kept most women limited almost exclusively to the roles of wife and mother.

Since few economic opportunities existed for single women, let alone married ones, there was tremendous economic as well as cultural pressure to get married. The few job opportunities that existed were poorly paid, often with unpleasant conditions. While middle class women might be able to obtain jobs as teachers or nurses, most working class women were relegated to dismal sweatshops and grim factories where they worked 10 to 12 hours a day in harsh conditions.

Puritanical sexual mores also conspired to keep women in their place. Sex outside of marriage was considered shameful and the idea that women might actually like sex was simply not even imagined outside of radical and bohemian circles. Access to birth control and abortion was virtually illegal and very limited.

It was in this context that the anarchist feminists rebelled against conventional American culture as well as government, demanding not the vote as did the more mainstream feminists, but something far more sweeping and radical — an end to sex roles, the right to control their own lives and destinies completely, the right to be free and autonomous individuals.

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fine themselves to asking for more and more government intervention, more and more laws. Directing their criticisms mainly against conservative Republicans, these feminists insist that if they can just change the administration, they can use the power of the State to remake things in a way that would be better for women. Anarchists see it very differently. In "Government is Women's Enemy," the authors write "If we pass laws that force our values on others, we are no better than men who have forced *their* values on us through legislation." Power is power and coercion is coercion, whether wielded by an individual man against his family or by a government against its people, say the anarchists. And for the anarchists, coercion is always a moral wrong.

Voltairine de Cleyre's feminist writings are a rich source of thoughtful analysis which raises provocative questions that need to be seriously considered by contemporary feminists. Voltairine and 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 Voltairine de Cleyre and the questioning of the authority relationship in traditional marriage and the insistence on individual autonomy of women is her social and psychological legacy. It is a legacy that deserves to be both read and seriously explored.

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Voltairine de Cleyre's Role

Though Emma Goldman is the anarchist feminist best remembered today, Voltairine's role as an advocate of liberation for women was second only to Emma's in the turn-of-the-century American anarchist movement. From the 1890's till her death in 1912, Voltairine spoke and wrote eloquently on the Woman Question in individualist anarchist journals such as Moses Harman's *Lucifer* and Benjamin Tucker's *Liberty*, as well as communist anarchist journals such as *The Rebel* and Emma Goldman's *Mother Earth*. These writings on feminism were among Voltairine's most important theoretical contributions.

Voltairine's feminist writings began in 1891, a year after the birth of her son Harry, a child she did not want and did not raise. Adamantly in favor of women's reproductive rights but unable to have an abortion because of her precarious health, her experience as a reluctant and unmarried mother sharpened her feminist consciousness and helped impel her exploration of the Woman Question. Her ambivalent relationship with Harry's father, James Elliot, ultimately unhappy and embittering, was another experience that no doubt significantly colored her views on marriage, motherhood and childbearing.

Voltairine de Cleyre's Social and Psychological Legacy

Questioning traditional marriage

Voltairine's importance as a feminist rests primarily on her willingness to confront issues such as female sexuality and the emotional and psychological, as well as economic, dependence on men within the nuclear family structure. Though a few other writers, most notably socialist feminist Charlotte Perkins

Gilman, dealt with issues of the family and women's economic dependence, much of the organized women's movement of that time was far more wrapped up in the issue of women's suffrage. Mainstream documents such as the Seneca Falls Declaration had raised important issues about the nature of marriage and several prominent feminists, including John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor, even entered into written marriage contracts to repudiate existing law and custom, but Voltairine's radical anarchist individualist philosophy took the analysis of marriage a step beyond.

Voltairine and the anarchist feminists did not just question the unfair nature of marriage laws of that time, they repudiated institutional marriage and the conventional family structure, seeing in these institutions the same authoritarian oppression as they saw in the institution of the State. Though some, like Lillian Harman, daughter of anarchist publisher Moses Harman, were willing to participate in non-State, non-Church private wedding ceremonies and others, like Voltairine, denounced even the concept of a private ceremony, all were united in their opposition to State-sanctioned and licensed marriage.

Voltairine, while not rejecting love, was among those most vehemently opposed to marriage of any kind, a theme best explicated in "Those Who Marry Do Ill." In an age when men had almost total control over the family as well as the wife, when most women were economically dependent on men, and when women's chief duty was to her husband and family, even to the point of self-sacrifice, Voltairine understandably viewed marriage as slavery, a theme she developed further in "The Woman Question."

Voltairine's fierce advocacy of individual autonomy, "the freedom to control her own person," was the cornerstone of her denunciation of marriage, an institution that she saw as crippling to the growth of the free individual. "It is the permanent dependent relationship," Voltairine writes in "The Woman Question", "which is detrimental to the growth of individual

Most radical of all in a feminist context is Voltairine's anarchism itself. Few feminists today, even the most radical, are willing to explore the role of the State in oppressing women. Then as now, anarchists differ as to exactly what that oppression consists of, but modern anarchist feminists of all philosophical persuasions agree that the State is women's enemy. The communist and social anarchist feminists believe that the State protects capitalism, which in turn exploits women. The individualist anarchist feminists believe that the State has fostered economic oppression and institutionalized gender role stereotypes through laws that restrict women's choices, for example, protective labor legislation (which perpetuates the idea that women are weak) and protect men's interests at the expense of women.

What the anarchist feminists are calling for is a radical restructuring of society, both in its public and private institutions, a step the mainstream is not yet willing to take. Marsh put the essentially conservative nature of mainstream feminist political ideology this way: "Although late 20th century feminists recognize that political and legal rights wrested from the state have not resulted in fundamental equality," she writes, "they emphasize ERA and anti-discrimination statures because this can be accommodated without fundamental changes in the structure of society."

Contemporary anarchist feminists contend that mainstream feminists are unwilling or unable to recognize the authoritarian nature of the modern state as just another form of patriarchy. Mainstream feminists, say the anarchist feminists, would have to give up too much if they acknowledged that the power of the State is no different in form than the power of patriarchy. "To anarchist feminists" writes Howard Ehrlich, "the state and patriarchy are twin aberrations." 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. Instead mainstream feminists merely con-

State, she also believed, keeps women and men from having economic independence through its protection of monopoly capitalism and the subsequent detrimental effect on the ability to earn a living.

Though Voltairine was not alone in her denunciation of the pernicious role of religion in oppressing women, most of the criticisms were not welcomed by more conventional feminists. Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *Women's Bible*, issued in 1895–1898 and Matilda Joslyn Gages' *Women, Church and State* were both indictments of Christianity as destructive of women's rights. Neither book, however, was well-received within the mainstream women's movement of the time. The freethought movement, while abounding with women who criticized religion and its detrimental roles on both women and society, was also outside the mainstream.

Though there are feminists today such as Mary Daly, who criticize the Catholic Church, or Sonia Johnson, who criticize the Mormon Church, relatively few are willing to denounce the idea of religion per se or discuss its role in oppressing women. A few feminist writers such as Katha Pollitt and Barbara Ehrenreich have been willing to declare that they are atheists but it has mostly been left for women outside the feminist mainstream to strike modern blows against religion and the Bible as harmful to women in books such as the Freedom From Religion Foundation's *Woe to the Women* and journals such as the secular humanist *Free Inquiry*.

Left inadequately explored within the mainstream of feminism today are the many questions that Voltairine's analysis suggests. What is the role of religion in keeping women "in their place?" Are conventional religions inherently sexist? How can the misogynist content of the Bible be reconciled with feminist ideals? Are palliatives such as allowing women to be ministers enough? Voltairine's pointed analysis reminds us that this important area of social belief merits continued serious attention.

character to which I am unequivocally opposed." This advocacy led her to a position more radical than all but the most radical of contemporary women — a call for separate living quarters. Seeing dependency as a sure way to lose one's individuality, she even advised against living together with the man one loves in a non-marriage love relationship if it means becoming his housekeeper.

This desire for autonomy, "a room of one's own," a separate space to grow and explore one's own individuality, though appearing as early as the late 18th century writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, is a theme still being examined today among mainstream feminists. However, though many feminists may now eschew formal marriage in their love relationships (at least till children come along), relatively few of them have been willing to emulate the example of feminist icon Simone de Beauvoir when she decided *not* only not to marry her livelong lover, philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, but to live separately from him as well. Voltairine would have understood her motivation very well, not only because of the issue of individual autonomy but also because she believed that love could only be kept alive at a distance. Though many feminists have thought about the potentially negative psychological effects of living together in a love relationship, the issue is still very much alive, often unresolved in individual women's lives, and certainly deserving of more consideration.

Opposition to the economic dependence of women

An integral part of the anarchist feminist opposition to institutional marriage was their belief that the chief source of women's oppression within marriage was their economic dependence on men. This was a theme explored frequently by many anarchist feminists in the pages of anarchist journals

such as Benjamin Tucker's *Liberty* and Moses Harman's more avowedly pro-women's rights *Lucifer*. In "The Case of Women vs. Orthodoxy," Voltairine asserts that material conditions determine the social relations of men and women, suggesting that if economic conditions change, women's inequality would disappear. Though she, like her compatriots in both the communist and individualist camps, deplored the wretched living conditions of the working classes in the big cities and had a negative view of the capitalism of that time, Voltairine blessed capitalists for making women's economic independence possible. As unpleasant as the jobs might be, at least they were jobs actually available to women, a rarity in that time.

The relevance of Voltairine de Cleyre's views on marriage today

In today's more socially enlightened times, Voltarine's opposition to marriage and even living together may seem anachronistic and unnecessary. We need not, however, espouse living alone to see that her stance raises important questions about the extent to which individual autonomy is possible in a relationship that involves not only living together but the inevitable compromises of family life. Is it possible to maintain individuality within the confines of family obligations? Are family obligations distributed equitably or is it the wife or mother who must inevitably bear the major burden of responsibility for childcare and household work and the husband or father the major economic burden? Is the division-making power distributed equitably or is the one who is most economically independent the one who has the most say? Can autonomy be maintained if either the woman or the man is economically dependent? In a conflict, how can a woman maintain her autonomy without sacrificing either others in the family or herself? That issues are still a problem in many modern households is clear

Voltairine's astute observation of a century ago is no less relevant today. The use of "science" to justify traditional gender roles has remained constant since her time, only the particulars have changed. Where once scientists claimed that males are smarter than females because males have larger brains or that males are more rational because they have larger parietal or frontal lobes, now it is claimed that males are more dominant than females because of differences in sex hormones and brain structure. Where once Freud claimed that women are morally inferior to men and inherently masochistic, now the psychiatric establishment subtly perpetuates the idea that women are more maladjusted and irrational than men through the use of questionable diagnostic categories such as Masochistic Personality Disorder and Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder in the DSM (the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, the "bible" of the psychotherapy community). *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* (the more things change, the more they stay the same). Her observation not only reminds us that science has been used against women in the past, it reminds us to be alert for its misuse in the present.

Voltairine de Cleyre's Political Legacy

In "Sex Slavery," we find Voltairine's most radical position of all, a position that not only differentiated her from most of the mainstream feminists of her day but today as well — Voltairine's denunciation of the twin roles of the Church and the State in oppressing women. Declaring that "We are tired of promises, God is deaf, and his church is our worst enemy," she pointed out how it colludes with the State to keep women in bondage.

The Church teaches the inferiority of women while the State-constructed crime of "obscenity" keeps people like Moses Harman from telling the truth about the slavery of marriage. The

As with many other anarchists of the time, Voltairine was vehemently opposed to the lack of rights that women suffered within institutional marriage. Though she was not active in the so-called Free Love movement (the membership of which greatly overlapped the anarchist movement), she advocated similar positions of freedom for both women and men to choose whomever they wanted for sex partners and the right of women to seek sexual satisfaction for themselves. Carrying the anarchist rejection of coercion into the realm of the personal, she agreed with Harman that when a man forces himself on a woman, even if they are married, it is still rape.

In this essay, Voltairine also attacks the idea that sex roles are inherent in human nature, seeing them as the result of socialization. In a comment that reminds us that we haven't come as far as we sometimes think, she notes that little girls are taught not to be tomboys and boys aren't allowed to have dolls. "Women can't rough it like men," she queries. "Train any animal, or any plant as you train your girls, and it won't be able to rough it either." Many enlightened parents today may talk about nonsexist childrearing but Barbie Dolls and GI Joes still crowd the shelves of toy stores everywhere, suggesting that the struggle against culturally imposed sex roles that Voltairine decried is a battle yet to be won.

Nor is the idea that gender roles are the result of socialization practices rather than genetics a battle that has been won. Voltairine observed in "The Case of Women vs. Orthodoxy" that men of the "scientific 'cloth'" can be obstacles to women's freedom. If women are ever to have rights, she declares, they must not only pitch out the teachings of the priests but also those of the men "who hunt scientific justifications for keeping up the orthodox standard." Though most feminists would agree with Voltairine that these roles spring from training rather than biology, the idea that "anatomy is destiny" keeps resurfacing in other quarters in newer, more sophisticated, and seemingly scientific guises.

from studies such as sociologist Arlie Hochschild's *The Second Shift*, which shows that women still do most of the domestic cleaning and childcare even when they have jobs outside the home.

Though such questions have been explored by contemporary feminists, the issues raised are far from settled. This is not merely a matter of such superficial questions as "can a woman have it all?" that surface frequently in popular women's magazines. It is a fundamental question about the nature of the family structure as we know it. Though the issue of autonomy is a much discussed theme within feminist writings, the questions raised by Voltarine's analysis are far from being resolved in actual practice within the family.

Nor do such questions deal with another fundamental and related issue raised by the anarchist feminists: should the State be involved in the institution of marriage? A few feminists have commented on the legal and often unknown and unwanted baggage that comes with the State license but most have not confronted the question of why the State has the right to set the terms of what is essentially a private relationship and whether this interference results in more harm than good.

Living her beliefs

Though Voltairine was a founding member of Matilda Joslyn Gage's Women's National Liberal League in 1890 and, in 1893, a principal organizer of the Philadelphia Ladies Liberal League, she admonished women not to invest their hopes in organized movements. Like Emma Goldman, she believed that independence for women was best achieved by individual acts of rebellion. We must act "by making rebels wherever we can," by living our beliefs. Nor can we expect anything from men, she warned. The precious freedom of individual autonomy is not easily gained. "The freedom to control her own person" has to

be wrested from men, she says in another of her feminist essays, "The Gateway to Freedom." "I never expect men to give us liberty. No, women, we are not *worth* it, until we *take* it."

This ability to put into practice what she preached was an important contribution of Voltairine's. "She also lived in conformity with her feminist principles" writes Marsh " which forced those who came into contact with her to confront her philosophy in concrete not just abstract." Though anarchist men accepted in theory the idea of economic independence combined with sexual liberation, Voltairine points out in "Sex Slavery," that even some of those who repudiate the State still cling to idea that they are the heads of families, that women's place is in the home. Many, such as Victor Yarros, a frequent contributor to Liberty, still expected the traditional division of labor within the home. Voltairine herself had personal experiences with this unwillingness on the part of some men to apply libertarian principles to home life, struggling with lovers in her life who were unwilling to treat her as an equal and ultimately rejecting them.

The discrepancy between theory and practice, between alleged advocacy of equalitarianism and actually more conventional behavior is a battle that is still being fought today, not just in conventional society, not just in the homes of mainstream feminists, but in the personal and even political lives of anarchists and libertarians. Mainstream and libertarian women alike still struggle with the issue of division of responsibility for childcare and housework, issues of autonomy and dependence, while many of the men deny, ignore or fail to come to grips with such issues. While few libertarians or anarchists today are so boldly retrogressive as to take the position openly, the notion of inherently determined gender roles is not totally dead nor is the anarchist family necessarily egalitarian. Such issues are even still being debated, for example, on individualist libertarian Internet discussion groups. Meanwhile, many libertarian magazines still subtly neglect issues that are associated with women, i.e., social welfare, reproductive rights, and worldwide oppression of women while at the same time claiming they are in favor of women's rights. Though the communist anarchist feminists have explored the application of the political to the personal in considerably greater depth than the individualists, they too complain about the gap between theory and practice in their camp. Voltairine's willingness to live out her principles can therefore serve both as a model and a challenge to today's feminists, whether mainstream or anarchist, liberal or libertarian.

Questioning traditional sex roles

Radical as her other feminist essays were, "Sex Slavery" is, in important ways, the most radical of all. It is an essay that is both striking in its modernity — expounding on the "constructed crime" of pornography, marital rape, sex role socialization, and the double standard — and breathtaking in its still radical rejection of both Church and State.

The impetus for this essay was the arrest of Moses Harman, the editor and publisher of *Lucifer: the Lightbearer*, the leading freelove/anarchist/feminist journal of the time. Running afoul of the stridently prudish, pro-censorship Comstock Act, which provided stiff prison terms for anyone who knowingly mailed or received "obscene, lewd, or lascivious" printed material through the mail, Harman had been arrested for printing a letter in 1886 in which the word "penis" was used. In this letter, a Tennessee anarchist named Markland, reporting a letter he had received, decried a case of marital rape in which the wife, still recovering from post-childbirth vaginal surgery, nearly hemorrhaged to death because her husband forced himself on her. For this "crime," Harman eventually spent two years in Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary.