

1

Anarchist Women and the “Sex Question”

The question of souls is old—we demand our bodies, now. We are tired of promises, God is deaf, and his church is our worst enemy.

—Voltairine de Cleyre, “Sex Slavery,” 1890

I demand the independence of woman; her right to support herself; to live for herself; to love whomever she pleases, or as many as she pleases. I demand freedom for both sexes, freedom of action, freedom in love and freedom in motherhood.

—Emma Goldman, “Marriage,” 1897

“The Sex Question,” also known as “The Woman Question,” implies a sense of epistemic uncertainty about the nature of womanhood, or the “proper” place of women in society. Introduced in Europe and debated throughout late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, the question was part of an international dialogue in response to the social unrest that was evident among a growing number of women who began to challenge the notion that their sphere of influence was “naturally” limited to the roles of sweetheart, wife, and mother. Far from being singular in focus, the sex question pointed to an array of questions about whether (or to what extent) the bodies women occupy should delineate their rights and participation in public life, including questions about voting rights, access to higher education and professional employment, and the freedom to make choices about interpersonal relationships, marriage, and childbirth independently of the influence of men. Embedded within a dialectical discourse of

femininity and masculinity, these debates, in turn, reinforced the nature of manhood and masculine roles. Of course, the prevailing definition of manhood was perceived to be that which women were not: rational, intellectual, independent, capable of fulfilling civic duties, productive in supporting the family and society, sexually dominant, and physically powerful.

Questions about women's sphere of influence were a product of the consciousness-raising efforts of the early women's movement both in the United States and abroad. These questions were further shaped by responses to Charles Darwin's arguments on human evolution and natural selection in *The Origin of Species* (1859) and John Stuart Mill's rejection of social and legal inequality in *The Subjection of Women* (1869). Darwin's controversial book fueled disputes that centered on the philosophical tensions among social, biological, and divine determinism, while Mill's essay attacked the notion that women are naturally inferior to men. Are femininity and masculinity based on innate and biological traits or are they products of socialization and environment? Is the basic family structure in the form of a father and mother with children natural and divined by God or is it socially constructed (and therefore subject to change)? Is it possible and appropriate for a woman to make a contribution to society beyond her natural and God-given role as mother and wife? Could a woman receive an education equivalent to that of a man, participate in civic affairs, and live independently of a male authority figure? Would such behaviors violate what was seen as the natural place of women in the home and in the church? These were among the sex questions that were debated at the turn of the century by suffragists, progressives, scientists, Christians, and others; however, anarchist women took these debates even further by focusing *literally* on sex—that is, sex as a bodily pleasure and mode of human expression—and by questioning the binary opposition of “woman” and “man,” “feminine” and “masculine.” Questions about enfranchisement and access to participation in public institutions were, after all, irrelevant for anarchists, who understood the political and economic system to be inherently corrupt. Anarchists largely rejected all forms of institutionalized power.

Anarchist women asked questions that were broad in scope and transcended any proposals for social and legal reform. They aimed to realize individual and collective freedom beyond rights and privileges sanctioned by the power of the state. What does it mean to be truly free? What role do human relationships play in aspiring toward a

free society? How do biological and social aspects of human beings influence interpersonal relationships? What is the role of sexuality in achieving fulfilling relationships? What are the possible ways in which sexual fulfillment can be achieved? What are the connections between economic freedom, sexual freedom, and individual self-realization? Can women have a home and a family and still be free? What knowledge and resources do women need to care for their own bodies and make decisions about sex and reproduction? What social and economic conditions are necessary in order for both women and men to achieve equality, freedom, and self-realization? These are the sex questions that were raised by Emma Goldman and her contemporaries; and they are questions that continue to be asked today as evidenced in a variety of twentieth- and twenty-first century debates that center on equality and sexuality, including issues such as equal pay in the work place, access to birth control and abortion, availability of parental leave, the freedom for adults to engage in sexual intercourse without state intrusion, and the freedom to engage in same-sex relationships and receive equal recognition of domestic partnerships and marriages. Whether within the context of the nineteenth-century cult of female domesticity or present-day patriarchal hegemony, the persistent questioning of gender equality and sexual freedom reveals how the constitutive discourses of propriety and power concerning women's bodies have adapted to the historically specific needs of economic and political spheres of influence.

In this chapter, I examine how a collective of female anarchists at the turn of the century interrogated the sex question.¹ Although the two terms were employed interchangeably, I use the term "sex question" instead of "woman question" because when anarchist women addressed sexual freedom and women's liberation, they called attention to how women's power over their own bodies was at stake. Utilizing the spoken and written word as well as acts of protest to disseminate their ideas, anarchist women threatened the gendered separation of spheres by their critiques of economic privilege, labor exploitation, and feminine gentility and piety. Among anarchist-feminist activists, Goldman enjoyed the greatest access to audiences. During her career in the United States, which spanned from 1889, the year she moved to New York City, to 1919, the year she was deported, she spoke to large audiences in lecture halls and public squares across the country; and on at least one occasion she even spoke from a pulpit. As an immigrant, Goldman spoke English as a second language. She delivered some of her early lectures

in Russian, German, and Yiddish, and in later years she was able to speak in Italian and French. Some of her lectures were free, while others required an admission charge of about twenty-five cents. Smaller, impromptu audiences occasionally formed around her in saloons. She primarily addressed “promiscuous audiences”²—that is, crowds consisting of both men and women—with the goal of promoting anarchism to the masses, although occasionally she sought female-only audiences for select topics such as birth control. As she developed into a national public figure, her audience widened to artists interested in exploring unconventional forms of self-expression³ and spectacle-seekers who wanted to see in person this “High Priestess of Anarchy.” Government reports and newspaper articles indicate that it was not unusual for Goldman to draw a crowd of five hundred to eight hundred people to hear her speak. Chapter 5 thus examines the media sensationalism of this avowedly public woman, touted by tabloid-style newspapers across the country as “Red Emma, Queen of Anarchists.” Goldman’s prominence among anarchists, writes Margaret Marsh, is largely due to “her wide-ranging propaganda efforts that reached well beyond the confines of the anarchist movement.”⁴ And her popular appeal is especially noteworthy in the context of a male-dominated movement.

Anarchist women led unconventional lifestyles that signaled the rise of an economically and sexually independent “New Woman.” Anarchist women rejected institutionalized authority in all its forms; and their philosophical ideas and rhetorical practices, which were not uniformly shared, led to the formation of a radical counterpublic that was situated in opposition to not only *the* public, as an extension of the state, but reformers and radicals who were not willing to go as far in attacking the root causes of oppression. In this analysis of the contributions of Goldman, a central figure of the anarchist-feminist counterpublic, it is crucial to begin by understanding the sociopolitical context in which some women were drawn to anarchism as the only viable solution to the conditions of capitalism.

EMERGENCE OF AN ANARCHIST-FEMINIST COUNTERPUBLIC

For over two decades, theories about the nature of the public sphere have been analyzed, challenged, and amended, especially in response to

Jürgen Habermas's (1989) influential theory in which he distinguishes the public as a space that "mediat[es] between state and society, a sphere in which the public as the vehicle of opinion is formed."⁵ The constitution of the public realm has historically been understood to be shaped by the gender dichotomy that associates public affairs with masculinity (deliberating with the rational mind) and private matters with femininity, and, in particular, domesticity and reproduction (engaging the emotions and the body).⁶ In this regard, Judith Butler and Elizabeth Weed (2011) write, "gender is operating to help in the very definition and historical production of major dimensions of social and political life, including labor, class, politics, and rights."⁷ The perceived division of these two discrete spheres is thus complicated by the "interweaving of gender, labor, and publicness."⁸ Employing a singular construct of *the* public (and by implication *the* private sphere) has ideological implications that risk the exclusion of women and marginalized groups and the issues that matter to them in gaining a public hearing. Indeed, women of all classes and ethnicities, working-class people, people of color, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people share in a history of exclusion from Habermas's bourgeois public. As an alternative, Michael Warner (2002) conceptualizes a three-part construction of the public as a "social totality," a "concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in visible space," and as a "self-creating and self-organized" relationship among strangers.⁹ Additionally, Warner, along with Rita Felski (1989) and Nancy Fraser (1992), among others, has argued for the necessity of recognizing a plurality of publics, and, most notably, counterpublics that exist as sites of oppositional discourse.¹⁰

A counterpublic is a discursive (and sometimes physical) sphere of social influence that is generated by the collective speech and action of a subaltern group. Counterpublics are not fixed, discrete entities but rather they have borders that shift and overlap with one another as well as with the dominant public sphere. Subaltern counterpublics, as defined by Fraser, function as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourse to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."¹¹ Furthermore, as Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer (2001) contend, "Counterpublic spheres voice oppositional needs and values not by appealing to the universality of the bourgeois public but by affirming specificity of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or some other axis of difference."¹² Therefore, whereas Habermas's bourgeois public

brings together private individuals to engage in rational dialogue on public issues, thereby excluding private or domestic matters such as intimate relationships and family, counterpublics provide a space to deliberate openly about gender, sexuality, and other private affairs—and they may do so in a way that is not necessarily rational nor in service to hegemonic notions of the public good. The early anarchist movement in the United States was a dynamic “bodily habitus” that intersected multiple publics through the participation of women and men, immigrants, laborers, intellectuals, progressives, and radicals.¹³ The anarchist-feminist counterpublic was formed through the experiences of radical women whose interests were not adequately supported or represented by their male comrades.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the exclusion of women from public affairs was evidenced in the discourses of legal, political, economic, social, and religious institutions.¹⁴ Political disenfranchisement prevented women from influencing the policies that affected their quality of life, and economic disenfranchisement in some states prohibited them from owning property, controlling wages, and forming business contracts. Social and religious norms delimited women’s influence principally to the private sphere and obliged them to carry out domestic duties “appropriate” to their sex by demonstrating the virtuous qualities of piety and submissiveness—especially in the case of white, middle-class women who were not expected to work outside the home and contribute to household earnings.¹⁵ Poor women, who had no choice but to work in factories, farms, mills, and manufacturing plants—performing cheap labor in unregulated industries in order to sustain themselves and their families—could not possibly embody the nineteenth-century ideals of “true womanhood,” which continued to be embraced well into the twentieth century.¹⁶ The women who were drawn to anarchism emerged from varying socioeconomic backgrounds that included middle-class professionals (e.g., teachers, journalists, and other educated women) and “bold sexual experimenters,”¹⁷ in addition to working-class laborers and immigrants.

Articulated through the activism of an eclectic mix of women, the anarchist-feminist counterpublic was alienated from other political entities, as well as from anarchist men. Rejecting the authority of the state and relationships of power of all kinds, they opposed organized public bodies in favor of the free association and cooperation of individuals. This does not mean they sought to radically privatize

society, but rather they believed that “public goods” would be satisfied by the agency of individuals mutually supporting each other, not by institutions. Accordingly, anarchist women positioned themselves in conflict with reformers who accepted the existing hierarchy but sought to change it from within. For example, they critiqued the women’s suffrage movement for its failure to address the root causes of sexual inequality—namely, institutionalized authority and thought. Anarchist women’s interpretation of social inequality was also notably different from that of male anarchists, whose public advocacy tended to overlook gender-based forms of oppression. As free-love advocates, anarchist women “evoked radical notions of the possible by challenging their audiences to consider ‘woman’ as a transitional construct,” writes Kate Zittlow Rogness (2012).¹⁸ Furthermore, in the process of speaking and writing in public forums about sexual freedom, anarchist women embodied a sense of women’s agency and identity that pushed the boundaries of what is speakable in public. As precursors to the second wave of feminism, they theorized the personal as central to the struggle for an equal and free society.

Because anarchist women emerged from and identified with diverse socioeconomic and ethnic experiences, they differed from one another in the way they envisioned anarchist solutions to inequality and injustice—and, as provocateurs of anarchy, they did not hesitate to critique one another’s arguments and contributions to the anarchist cause as they vied for the attention of audiences and readers. Yet, despite any competing interests and differences in philosophy, they were willing to support one another in times of need, if only on behalf of the greater cause of anarchism. On some occasions, they also were willing to lend their support to socialists, communists, and other radical non-anarchist groups—for example, to defend freedom of speech or support striking workers. They also found common inspiration in the “martyrs” of Chicago’s Haymarket Square tragedy of 1886. Their political conscience was awakened by eight anarchist men who were convicted (and four of whom were executed), for a bombing incident during a labor demonstration in the square—despite the lack of an identifiable culprit.¹⁹

In what follows, I offer the following brief survey of the contributions of five anarchist women—Kate Cooper Austin, Voltairine de Cleyre, Florence Finch Kelly, Lucy Parsons, and Emma Goldman—in order to illustrate some of the areas of difference and commonality that formed the anarchist-feminist counterpublic. This overview also

serves the purpose of momentarily decentralizing Goldman, who has received the most attention from scholars, no doubt because of her prolific career as a speaker and writer and her public notoriety as “Red Emma.” Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that the emergence of anarchist-feminism in America involved the activism of a diverse collective of radical women.²⁰

One of the lesser-known anarchist women, **Kate Cooper Austin** (1864–1902), lived and worked on a farm in Hook’s Point, Iowa. Raised by a family that practiced Universalism, spiritualism, and free thought, writes Howard S. Miller (1996), “Austin was a product of this contrary, rural America, where populist experience crossbred with left-wing European social theory.”²¹ According to her obituary, Austin was first exposed to anarchism when “a stray copy of Moses Harman’s *Lucifer* fell in her hand. It was a ray of light, for the paper touched on questions that had already revolved in her mind, demanding solution.”²² She married a like-minded husband and together they raised five children and managed a buttery and household in which the conventional gender/sex division of labor was not practiced—the time and physical demands of farm work required cooperative effort. An avid reader of radical journals, she eventually turned to writing and publishing her own articles and letters on sexual freedom, the ills of capitalism, and the worker’s revolution. Her writings appeared in various periodicals from the 1890s through early 1900s, including *Lucifer*, *Discontent*, *The Firebrand*, and *The Demonstrator*. She carried out her anarchist activism through the written word rather than speechmaking because she was committed to being with her family and tending to her farm. Austin’s philosophy of anarchism centered on individual autonomy, mutual cooperation, and free love, and she believed both individual and collective acts of rebellion were necessary to bring about a free society. She developed a close friendship with Goldman, who shared many of her views and occasionally visited her farm. Austin was at the height of her activism, writing articles on a weekly basis, when she died tragically of consumption, also known as tuberculosis, at the age of thirty-eight.²³

Voltaire de Cleyre (1866–1912) grew up in the rural town of Leslie, Michigan, and was placed in a Catholic convent at an early age because of her family’s economic hardship. Poverty and the restrictive nature of convent life were among the catalysts that led her to anarchism, feminism, and atheism. Catherine H. Palczewski’s (1995) analysis of de Cleyre’s anarchist-feminism demonstrates how de Cleyre

developed a nuanced critique of sexuality through her rejection of male privilege and masculine norms, in addition to compulsory marriage and feminine purity.²⁴ De Cleyre’s political philosophy centered on the sovereignty of the individual in all aspects of life, and therefore she embraced the concept of personal-property ownership—a view that contrasted with Goldman’s communistic approach to anarchism, which rejected private ownership as a form of power. In a speech delivered on the occasion of Goldman’s arrest during a demonstration in New York City on December 16, 1893, de Cleyre respectfully explained their philosophical differences:

Miss Goldman is a communist; I am an individualist. She wishes to destroy the right of property, I wish to assert it. I make my war upon privilege and authority, whereby the right of property, the true right in that which is proper to the individual, is annihilated. She believes that co-operation would entirely supplant competition; I hold that competition in one form or another will always exist, and that it is highly desirable it should.²⁵

Paul Avrich (1978) notes that de Cleyre’s approach to anarchism evolved over time, focusing less on individualism and more on promoting tolerance and cooperation across different categories of anarchism, to the point where she declared herself an “anarchist without adjectives.”²⁶ As a writer, de Cleyre frequently contributed articles to *Mother Earth*, the anarchist journal published by Goldman, and served as a writer and editor of *The Progressive Age*. De Cleyre was also recognized as a prolific poet, and one of her poems, “Light Upon Waldheim,” was a tribute to the Haymarket martyrs. Crispin Sartwell (2005) describes her lucid writing style as “prosaic and practical observations interrupted by flashes of poetry and radical intuition.”²⁷ Although a long battle with illness ended her life at the age of forty-five, de Cleyre, as Marsh (1981) suggests, was “one of the best minds among the American anarchists,”²⁸ and her contribution to the development of anarchist-feminist thought, in particular, was significant. In an essay in praise of de Cleyre’s commitment to the anarchist cause, Goldman recognized her as an “unusually gifted” orator and writer.²⁹

Florence Finch Kelly (1858–1939) was a one-time anarchist who later disassociated herself from the cause. While her contribution to

anarchist-feminist thought is limited and there is little evidence of her interactions with other anarchist women, her example illustrates the variety of women who were drawn to anarchism. Kelly grew up on a farm in Kansas and, in defiance of her father's wishes, went on to complete a degree at the University of Kansas. In the late 1880s, she launched a pioneering career in the male-dominated profession of journalism at the *Boston Globe*, where she maintained a weekly column called "The Woman's Hour." After marrying fellow journalist, Allen Kelly, and raising two sons, she continued to write and expanded her work to include short stories, novels, and an autobiography—the last completed not long before her death at the age of eighty-two.³⁰ It was during her early career, when she was in her twenties while working at the *Globe*, that she became interested in anarchism and associated with Benjamin Tucker, fellow *Globe* writer and publisher of *Liberty*. Unlike many of her comrades who called for direct and immediate action as the instrument for realizing freedom, Kelly envisioned anarchism as a gradual process where the authority of "reasonable and intelligent conviction from within" replaces "compulsion from without."³¹ Kelly published essays on the principles of anarchism, sexual freedom, and other topics in Tucker's *Liberty*. She also produced a free-love novel titled *Frances: A Story for Men and Women* (1889) and "an avowedly anarchist novel," *On the Inside* (1890). Yet, according to Marsh, she later came to reject anarchism and "carefully played down" her involvement in the movement in her autobiography, *The Flowing Stream* (1939).³² Perhaps this is the reason Melvin Mencher's biographical sketch of Kelly's contributions to journalism in *Notable American Women, 1607–1950* (1971) does not mention her involvement in the anarchist movement or her anarchist writings as part of her career development.³³

Lucy Parsons (1853–1942) was "a recognized leader of the predominantly white male working-class movement in Chicago," where the Haymarket Square tragedy took place.³⁴ Her husband, Albert Parsons, was one of four anarchists executed on charges of conspiring in the bombing, and her lifetime of activism was shaped by the injustice he suffered. Biographer Carolyn Ashbaugh (1976) notes there is little information available about Parsons's early life except that she was born in Texas and is believed to be the daughter of parents of African-American, Native-American, and Mexican ancestry (and most likely slaves). Even though Parsons was outspoken about the injustices and violence of racism, including publishing essays on racial inequality

and lynching,³⁵ she did not acknowledge her racial identity.³⁶ Rejecting property relations and the abject poverty that stems from them, her approach to anarchism instead underscored class struggle and the necessity of supplanting capitalism. She was also outspoken about the economic exploitation of women, whether it be in the context of the factory, marriage, child labor, or sex trafficking. Unlike her contemporaries, however, she did not view "sexual varietism" to be critical to the anarchist cause; instead she considered monogamy to be more natural to human relationships—and without the risks of unwanted pregnancy and venereal disease.³⁷ Like Goldman, Parsons delivered speeches across the nation and Europe. Yet the two women were known to be political rivals with Goldman viewing Parsons as an opportunist who took advantage of her husband's notoriety and Parsons accusing Goldman of being driven more by ego than by commitment to the cause of freedom.³⁸ As a writer, Parsons contributed articles to various radical publications and served as editor of *Freedom: A Revolutionary Anarchist-Communist Monthly* and *The Liberator*. In 1879, while pregnant with the first of her two children, she wrote articles for *The Socialist*, a publication that her husband edited, and she gave speeches to the Working Women's Union.³⁹ When Albert lost his job, she worked as a seamstress to support the family while continuing with her own activist work. One of the founders of the Industrial Workers of the World, established in 1905, she insisted that it be an inclusive union of workers that made no exclusions based on sex, class, ethnicity, or race.⁴⁰ Parsons's activism continued into her eighties, a testament to her uncompromising commitment to the pursuit of freedom.

Born in Lithuania, **Emma Goldman** (1869–1940), the principal subject of this study, was one of three daughters and two sons in a household that abided strictly by Russian-Jewish traditions. At the age of seventeen, she immigrated to the United States in 1886 to flee a restrictive Orthodox life that would have included an arranged marriage. While living with her sister and her husband in Rochester, New York, and working at the Garson Company textile factory, she was subject to grueling labor conditions and exposed to the world of labor organizing. She and her coworkers were enraged by the wrongful conviction and hanging of Albert Parsons, Adolf Fischer, August Spies, and George Engel in Chicago on November 11, 1887, a day that came to be known as "Black Friday." In 1889, following a brief and unhappy marriage to a fellow factory worker, Goldman moved to New York

City, where she immersed herself in the anarchist community. The combination of the Haymarket tragedy and the mentoring provided by anarchist activist and lecturer Johann Most, whom she met at a Lower East Side café frequented by radicals, inspired Goldman to pursue her own path as a speaker, writer, and agitator.⁴¹ Through her years working full-time as an anarchist agitator, writes Marsh, Goldman “personified anarchism to Americans.”⁴²

As noted in the introduction, Goldman delivered speeches across the country and abroad on a wide variety of topics, including anarchism, birth control, sexuality, marriage, atheism, conscription, childhood education, and modern drama. She published the radical journal *Mother Earth* (1906–17) and a bound collection of selected lectures and writings, *Anarchism and Other Essays* (1910). She was repeatedly arrested and imprisoned, for example, for delivering a speech that allegedly inspired the assassination of President William McKinley (1901),⁴³ for inciting to riot (1893), for lecturing and distributing information about birth control (1916),⁴⁴ and for advocating against conscription (1917).⁴⁵ Her free-speech struggles contributed to the formation of the National Civil Liberties Bureau, which later became the American Civil Liberties Union.⁴⁶ After years of being tracked by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Goldman and her lifelong friend and occasional lover, Alexander Berkman, were deported to Russia in 1919 for being in violation of the Sedition Act. They were among the hundreds of victims of the “Red Scare,” a nationalistic political climate that identified immigrant radicals as potential government threats. Following some years of activism in Europe and Canada, Goldman died of a stroke in 1940 at the age of seventy and was buried along with Voltairine de Cleyre, Lucy Parsons, and the Haymarket martyrs in Chicago’s Waldheim Cemetery.

Working both independently and cooperatively, Austin, de Cleyre, Kelly, Parsons, and Goldman contributed to the formation of an anarchist-feminist counterpublic, a peripheral discursive space where female anarchists stood apart from their male comrades and from the mainstream women’s and labor movements because of their advocacy of sexual freedom—the freedom to have intimate relationships outside of marriage, to have access to birth control, and to choose to have children (or not)—in other words, sovereignty over their own bodies. Their audiences and readers included workers, immigrants, artists, writers, intellectuals, bohemians, and folks who were simply curious to see what

must have surely been a spectacle—a woman speaking in public *and* calling for the demise of government authority *and* sexual revolution. Despite their differing public personas and philosophical approaches to anarchism, these women shared in an “anarcho-feminine rhetorical style” that was sympathetic to the plight of workers, authoritative in tone, analytical in justifying anarchist principles, and emotional in arousing audiences to act.⁴⁷

As a network of women, Austin, de Cleyre, Kelly, Parsons, and Goldman included a complicated mix of shared ideals, friendships, collegial partnerships, clashing interests, and competition for audiences and readers. Each struggled to live out her ideals for free love in a period of American history when women’s influence was restricted to marriage, child-rearing, and related domestic duties. But they did not believe that gaining access to the world of politics, education, or business would lead to equality and independence. Instead, they urged women to take control of their bodies—a power that is required *a priori* to engaging in the body politic. Passionate for the greater cause of human liberation, they provided a blistering critique of hegemony and called for direct action; and some were willing to be arrested and imprisoned and resort to violence, if necessary, to bring about meaningful change.

Most anarchists viewed direct action, also known as “propaganda by the deed,” as a fitting response to the coercive power of the state, which for them was symbolized in cold blood by the Haymarket executions. De Cleyre understood direct action to encompass a wide range of tactics, both nonviolent and violent, and argued that the use of violence was sometimes a necessity. In “Direct Action” (1912) she defends a history of direct action in all its forms—including strikes, boycotts, marches, demonstrations, sabotage, expropriation, and rebellion—as “spontaneous retorts of those who feel oppressed by a situation.”⁴⁸ Parsons frequently advocated the use of explosives and other violent means of overthrowing power. Ashbaugh suggests that the suffering Parsons experienced in life due to poverty and discrimination was channeled into an anger directed against the wealthy.⁴⁹ In 1884, the front-page essay in the first issue of *The Alarm*, edited by Albert Parsons, was Lucy Parsons’s article, “To Tramps, the Unemployed, the Disinherited, and Miserable,” which ended with her famous line, “Learn the use of explosives!”⁵⁰ In “The Psychology of Political Violence” (1910), Goldman offered the sympathetic explanation that those who suffer

will inevitably resort to violence out of desperation and zeal for the cause of freedom.⁵¹ Some police reports on Goldman's lectures indicate that she occasionally threatened the use of violence, although the authors of such reports may have exaggerated or fabricated her words to justify the case for her deportation. A government transcript of the speech "We Don't Believe in Conscription" (1917), delivered in New York City, quotes her as stating: "We believe in violence and we will use violence. . . . [I]f it's their [the government's] intention to make us quiet they may prepare the noose, they may prepare the gallows, they may build more prisons for the spread of revolt and conscience."⁵² During her career as an anarchist activist, Austin grew increasingly more militant in her writings. According to Miller, she evolved into a "bloodthirsty" rhetor who was "infatuated with violence" as a necessary tool for bringing about revolution, as she urged her readers, "Let the workers retaliate, give blow for blow, take life for life."⁵³ By contrast, Kelly, who was drawn to anarchism primarily for its focus on rational thought and its rejection of feminine virtue, was less committed to class struggle and likewise less inclined to address the issue of violence.⁵⁴ Taken together, the differences in persona, philosophical perspective, rhetorical strategy, and activism among anarchist women point to a fluid, dynamic counterpublic. As a collective of women who espoused anarchist ideals, they imagined a society where personal liberty in its most radical sense applied to women and men equally.

ANARCHIST-FEMINISM

As a category of political thought, anarchist-feminism is not a singular concept insofar as anarchism and feminism themselves represent a plurality of ideas. Anarchist political philosophy is grounded in the basic principle of radical individualism or a society without hierarchical order; however, it branches out into a variety of forms that reveal different approaches, including "mutualists, collectivists, communists, federalists, individualists, socialists, syndicalists, feminists, as well as many others."⁵⁵ Modern feminist political philosophy is just as varied, encompassing liberal, conservative, radical, ecofeminist, Marxist, postcolonial, among other ideological positions. Of course, the term "feminism" was not a commonly used word at the turn of the century, and anarchist women most likely would have associated it with the

reform efforts of middle-class activists, which centered on obtaining suffrage, access to education, and entry into professions.⁵⁶ Contemporary scholars have adopted the term "anarchist-feminism" (or "feminist-anarchism") to signify the fusion of the two "isms" and draw attention to how they modify each other. In the course of my research, I have found that the philosophical foundation of anarchist-feminism centers on three intersecting ideas: the liberating potential of exercising individual autonomy, the centrality of sexual freedom in unleashing individuality and creativity, and the belief that women's liberation can be achieved only within a larger framework of human liberation.

First, anarchist-feminism embraces the ideal of realizing individual autonomy, or personal freedom, through everyday practice—that is, by willfully living one's life free from the influence of institutionalized thought and authority. Anarchist women extended this core anarchist belief by applying it to gender/sex in a way that male anarchists were generally not inclined to consider. Indeed, male anarchists, who tended to focus on the plight of workers, often showed indifference toward the sex question. Some went as far as to outright reject any social change that would remove women from their "natural" domestic duties and argued that women's work is not worthy of equal pay.⁵⁷ For example, in a *Liberty* editorial regarding the question of equal pay for printers, publisher Benjamin Tucker argues:

Apart from the special inferiority of woman 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. In the absence of these qualities they cannot be as successful as men industrially. That they will never acquire these qualities I by no means dogmatically assert. I only know that at present they lack them. Should these deficiencies be overcome, they would command the same wages as men, and I should be heartily glad to see such a result.⁵⁸

While Tucker attempted to avoid a deterministic view of women's inferiority by casting their lack of skills as a matter of acquiring the appropriate training and experience, the tenor of his argument reveals

that he still doubted women's ability to succeed as workers and professionals. In another essay titled "The Woman Question," also featured in Tucker's *Liberty*, anarchist writer Victor Yarros went further to argue that women's inferiority is inborn, a product of their reproductive function. "Nature having placed woman at such a decided disadvantage in the path of life, of what avail are her protestations and cries for equality with man? In order to enter into one of her strongest natural desires," explains Yarros, "she is compelled to enter into relations with a man of which the burdensome and painful consequences she alone has to bear."⁵⁹ Many anarchist men believed that women were intrinsically unequal because of their "essential" role as mothers and that women have no choice but to be dependent upon the fathers of their children in order to have the necessary economic support for raising them.

In contrast to their male comrades, anarchist women viewed equality between the sexes as a fundamental assumption of anarchist thought. As Marsh writes, "Attacking marriage, often urging sexual varietism, insisting on both economic and psychological independence, and sometimes denying maternal responsibility, they argued that personal autonomy was an essential component of sexual equality and that political and legal rights could not of themselves engender such equality."⁶⁰ Yet, it is important to recognize that beyond functioning as a political ideology, anarchist-feminism also represented a state of mind and a way of acting in the world that resisted the "cult of true womanhood." That is, anarchist women attempted to actualize their beliefs in their life's work and in their relationships and interactions with others. For this reason, Marsha Hewitt (1986) argues that anarchist-feminism "forces us to re-think the nature of revolution as *process*, as transformative praxis of thought, feeling and collective social activity."⁶¹ Anarchist women realized that inequality was rooted in the psyche of both women and men and therefore changes in law or policy—or "external tyrants," as Goldman put it—as a means of generating equality were futile; only by engaging in a personal revolution—a revolution of the body and mind—could women and men experience true freedom from systemic power, including socially inscribed gender roles and the family structure. Writing for *Liberty*, Kelly called upon women to "learn to be self-supporting. Else, they will always be slaves."⁶² Arguing more pointedly, de Cleyre writes, "I would strongly advise every woman contemplating sexual union of any kind, never to live with the man you love . . . never to have a child unless you want it, and never to want

it (selfishly, for the pleasure of having a pretty plaything), unless you, yourself alone, are able to provide for it."⁶³ The same vision of anarchism as a way of being and acting in the social world is echoed by Goldman, who declares that "it has always been the individual, often alone and singly, at other times in unity and co-operation [*sic*] with others . . . who is the parent of the liberating thought as well as of the deed."⁶⁴

Anarchist women believed that exercising personal autonomy is the only possible way of breaking free from socially constructed roles and conceptions, including norms of femininity and masculinity. They took this idea even further to argue that exercising sexual freedom, in particular, cultivates individuality and creativity—a second central idea of anarchist-feminist thought. Anarchist women understood sexuality to be a fundamental mode of human expression that had been denied to women because of the social pressures imposed by religion, morality, and government. Identifying marriage as a significant form of gender oppression, in "Marriage and Love" (1910), Goldman likens it to prostitution, an "economic arrangement" that commits a woman to lifetime service to her husband and "condemns her to life-long dependency, to parasitism, to complete uselessness, individual as well as social."⁶⁵ In "They Who Marry Do Ill" (1908), de Cleyre recognized the injustice of sex in marriage, which she describes as "a physical torture" for women while pleasing for men.⁶⁶ Parsons likewise critiqued marriage as an exploitative institution linked to capitalism. In "Cause of Sex Slavery" (1895), she asks, "How many women do you think would submit to marriage slavery if it were not for wage slavery?"⁶⁷ Austin calls upon her colleagues to see free love as essential to the anarchist cause: "The sexual question can no longer be passed over in silence. . . . Sexual liberty constitutes part of general liberty. . . . Liberty in all things, liberty to live and liberty to love—such must be the password of anarchists."⁶⁸ It is interesting to note here that it was not unusual for anarchist women to marry and live with the apparent ideological tension of advocating an ideal that didn't quite match up with their personal choices. Of the five women profiled here, de Cleyre was the only one who did not marry, although she did have a child whom she left to be raised by the father and other family members.⁶⁹ Because of infertility, Goldman was the only one who did not pursue motherhood, although she did express a deep desire to have children and believed in the social value of free motherhood.⁷⁰ Her commitment to reproductive

freedom and knowledge of reproductive health issues included formal training and work as a nurse-midwife in the 1890s.⁷¹

In their vision of free love, anarchist women emphasized and practiced open sexual relationships—outside of marriage and with more than one partner. Instead of seeing such relationships as immoral or abhorrent acts, they considered sex to be natural, healthy behavior that was not limited to the purpose of procreation. More than this, they understood sex to be a source of pleasure. Parsons was the only one who did not advocate free love as a form of self-expression, nor as an essential component of the anarchist cause. She denounced “poverty stricken, care-worn, child-bearing-to-excess”⁷² in marriage while also critiquing free love for the risks of venereal disease and pregnancy. Parsons further insisted that, “Variety in sex relations and economic freedom have nothing in common. Nor has it anything in common with Anarchism, as I understand Anarchism; if it has then I am not an Anarchist.”⁷³ To the contrary, Austin believed the pleasures of sex outweighed the dangers, arguing that women and men alike are “varietist[s] at heart,”⁷⁴ in other words, their sexual desire is most fulfilled by non-exclusive relationships. On the occasion of an anarchist meeting in Paris, she further explained, “As long as the Church and the State continue to exercise control . . . upon the desires and passions resulting from sexual appetite, for that long will their dominion last.”⁷⁵ In “The Tragedy of Woman’s Emancipation” (1910), Goldman identified the primary obstacle that prevented women from experiencing “true love” as the “internal tyrants, whether they be in the form of public opinion or what will mother say, or brother, father, . . . busybodies, moral detectives, jailers of the human spirit” and called upon all women to experience “unrestricted freedom, to listen to the voice of her nature.”⁷⁶ Likewise, de Cleyre advised her readers to “[n]ever allow love to be vulgarized by the indecencies of continuous close communion” because permanent and long-term relationships stifle growth and freedom.⁷⁷ Kelly’s contributions in the form of her free-love novels, *Frances* and *On the Inside*, featured independent female characters and their love affairs with men, absent of moral judgment of their actions.⁷⁸ Most of the published speeches and writings of anarchist women reflected a focus on heterosexual relationships, as implied by the above examples; however, as Marsh notes, within the context of the period, “Their unconventionality varied from divorce or marital separation, which constituted a relatively mild separation from the norm, to sexual promiscuity or open homosexuality . . . [and]

reflected nonconformity to accepted values of chastity and fidelity to a spouse.⁷⁹ A reading of archival manuscripts and correspondence authored by Goldman shows that she recognized heterosexual and homosexual relationships equally, a point explored in chapter 2.

In order for women to experience sexual freedom, they need to have the capacity to make choices about reproduction; that is, both married and unmarried women need access to contraceptive devices and sex education. Because disseminating information about birth control was illegal under the Comstock Act,⁸⁰ anarchist women treated it as both an issue of freedom of speech and sexual liberty. Aiding women in their access to and educating them about how to use birth control, they also challenged the authority of the medical establishment—male physicians who profited from their regulation of women's reproductive health. Anarchist-feminist advocacy of reproductive freedom also fueled public debates about eugenics—the fear that “race suicide” would result from a decline in the birth rate.⁸¹ Some public officials, including President Theodore Roosevelt, were alarmed by a notable decrease in the US birth rate of Anglo-Saxons in the early 1900s. In turn, hysteria over the perceived birth rate increase among immigrants fueled nativist hostility toward “foreigners” and their children.⁸² Roosevelt warned, “The chief of blessings for any nation is that it shall leave its seed to inherit the land. The greatest of all curses is sterility, and the severest of all condemnations should be that visited upon willful sterility.”⁸³ In this highly charged political atmosphere, Austin defiantly disseminated information about contraception and contraband devices to her neighbors and in her local community in Iowa.⁸⁴ Goldman, who was the most outspoken about birth control, delivered lectures on contraceptive techniques across the country from 1915 to 1916 to female-only audiences, as well as mixed audiences that included physicians, businessmen, and other professionals. She was arrested on two occasions and imprisoned in a New York City jail for the first arrest.⁸⁵ In an open letter to the press following one of her arrests, Goldman justified her actions along with fellow birth control advocates: “We do it because we know the desperate condition among the masses of workers and even professional people, when they cannot meet the demands of numerous children. . . . [W]hen a law has outgrown time and necessity, it must go. . . . [W]hile I am not particularly anxious to go to jail, I should be glad to do so, if thereby I can add my might to the importance of birth control.”⁸⁶

In addition to demanding access to birth control, anarchist women addressed compulsory motherhood and prostitution as forms of sexual oppression that violated women's sovereignty over their bodies and significantly limited their life choices. In defense of free motherhood, in "Sex Slavery" (1890), de Cleyre likened unwanted sex in marriage to rape, "the vilest of all tyranny where a man compels the woman he says he loves, to endure the agony of bearing children that she does not want, and for whom, as is the rule rather than the exception, they cannot properly provide."⁸⁷ Goldman viewed unwanted sex in marriage as a form of prostitution: "[I]t is merely a question of degree whether she sells herself to one man, in or out of marriage, or to many men."⁸⁸ Each faulted the capitalist system in which women, as Parsons put it, are "obliged to live with a man whom she does not love, in order to get bread, clothes, and shelter"⁸⁹ and are reduced to "a thing fit only to cater to his pleasures and passions."⁹⁰

Finally, because anarchist-feminists viewed liberation from institutionalized power and its internal "outposts" as their ultimate goal, they did not separate the struggle of women's freedom from men's. Reflecting on men's relative lack of support for women's equality in "The Economic Freedom of Women" (1888), Kelly writes, "Even the best of men and those most imbued with a desire for justice and equity and best able to apply individualist ideas to actual life—even these still have something of the tyrant left in their feeling toward and their treatment of women."⁹¹ A free society, argued Parsons in "The Principles of Anarchism" (n.d.), will yield "a higher and truer standard of manhood and womanhood";⁹² that is, "There can be no privileges bought or sold, and the transaction kept sacred at the point of the bayonet. Every man [*sic*] will stand on an equal footing with his brother in the race of life, and neither chains of economic thralldom nor metal drags of superstition shall handicap the one to the advantage of the other."⁹³ Anarchist women understood that both men and women are victims of capitalism and religious morality, and that they are equally deluded by the mental constructs and dogmas associated with them, all the while recognizing that women were oppressed *differently* than men because of the hegemony of masculine and puritan values.

Additionally, many anarchist women, like their male comrades, held on to the ideal that society should be organized on the basis of voluntary association or the "free grouping of individuals"⁹⁴—an argument