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'Arrows of Desire'
***British Sexual Utopians of the Late Nineteenth and Early
Twentieth Century and the Politics of Health***

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This paper is taken from a longer piece of work in progress on a group of left-wing utopian thinkers, with the focus on Edward Carpenter, Havelock Ellis, and Stella Browne. They are usually categorised as sex reformers, but had a much wider vision of social transformation, of which sexual liberation was only one facet. They can be categorised as individualistic rather than collectivist socialists, believing that only under a socialist regime would the individual spirit be truly able to flower: as Havelock Ellis put it in 1912:

It is only by social cooperation in regard to what is commonly called the physical side of life that it becomes possible for the individual to develop his own peculiar nature. The society of the future is a reasonable anarchy founded on a broad basis of Collectivism.¹

Their views on what constituted healthy sexuality within society formed part of this much broader vision of what the healthy society was or could be.

There was a persistent tradition of sexually radical utopianism in Britain throughout the nineteenth century, which became increasingly influenced over the decades by developing ideas about public health. M. L. Bush's recent study of Richard Carlile, whose *What is Love?* was first published in 1825, recovers an often-occluded tradition of freethought, free love, and alternatives to accepted authority not only in the political sphere but in matters of health and personal relations. While Carlile argued that sexual activity was healthful and desirable for both sexes, and was strongly critical of orthodox medicine, his arguments were largely based on concerns over the well-being of the individual rather than framed within a discourse about social and public health.²

The utopian socialism of Robert Owen and its strong feminist strand have been classically elucidated in Barbara Taylor's well-known *Eve and the New Jerusalem* (1983). Women had a powerful voice within the Owenite movement. Taylor emphasises the rather different slant to the free love debate given by women themselves speaking on the subject. The complete transformation of social organisation, family life and sexual attitudes offered by Owenism would free women but until that day there was some caution about too great emphasis on free love.³

There was some sympathy in Owenite and related freethought circles for neo-Malthusian arguments on the benefits of employing 'preventive checks', i.e. contraceptives. Arguments that smaller families would be beneficial to women's health and their functioning as mothers were advanced alongside the case for their economic benefits. The neo-malthusian movement gained new stimulus from the 1854 publication of George Drysdale's *Physical, Sexual and Natural Religion*, better known as *Elements of Social Science*. Drysdale regarded contraception as not beneficial merely to the health of women by preventing too many and too frequent pregnancies and to both sexes by permitting sexual intercourse without the fear of untimely conception, but on the wider social level by enabling earlier marriage, obviating the need for prostitution and therefore diminishing the epidemic levels of venereal disease. This was the beginning of a convergence between this agenda of radical sexual reform and concerns about public health, although at first only in this strictly delimited area of venereal diseases. George's brother Charles Robert lived in what their biographer Miriam Benn plausibly claims was a free union with early woman doctor Alice Vickery - however, far from making a

¹ Havelock Ellis, *The Task of Social Hygiene* (London: Constable, 1912), p. 55.

² M. L. Bush, *What is Love?: Richard Carlile's Philosophy of Sex* (London: Verso, 1998).

³ Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, p. 55.

gesture against convention they seem to have taken great pains to conceal this.⁴

Issues of 'free love' continued to be debated, but less openly and with the focus on an essentially private monogamous heterosexual relationship with which church and state had no right to interfere, alongside a critique of the propertarian nature of the contract and women's legal disabilities within marriage. The mid nineteenth century women's rights activist Elizabeth Wolstenholme entered a 'free union' with Ben Elmy but was prevailed upon by colleagues to regularise the union once she became pregnant. Perhaps the most famous Victorian 'free love' couple were the novelist George Eliot (Mary Anne Evans) and George Henry Lewes: Lewes was unable to divorce his adulterous wife Agnes, having 'condoned' her adultery with Thornton Hunt on ideological free love grounds.

Karen Hunt has indicated that 'free love' was debated within the Marxist left-wing organisation the Social Democratic Federation, and some SDF couples did choose to live in free unions. The most notorious of these was probably that of Karl Marx's daughter Eleanor with Edward Aveling which ended in her suicide. Such 'free unions' were seen as equivalent to monogamous marriage but unconsecrated by church or state, and ideas about sexuality were strongly inflected by the model of male and female sexuality as active and passive respectively.⁵

Malthusians of the 1880s and 90s were involved in broader questions of marriage reform, and vigorous in opposition to a sexual system based on prostitution and resulting in the widespread prevalence of venereal disease.⁶ Several were involved with the Legitimation League, initially set up in 1893 to campaign against the penalties and injustices to which the illegitimate were subject. In 1897 it became explicitly connected with promoting free relationships. It was a mixed organisation, with women strongly represented both as members and officers. *The Adult*, its journal, provided a space for discussion of sexual relationships.⁷

Besides debates, there were various actual life-style experiments going on in the final decades of the nineteenth century, though it is difficult to retrieve much detail about them. One of the best-known was the Fellowship of the New Life, some members of which eventually went on to found the Fabian Society, and which included Ramsay Macdonald, later first Labour prime minister. Its cooperative living experiment in Bloomsbury ('Fellowship House') was described by Edith Lees, later the wife of Havelock Ellis, as 'Fellowship is Hell'.

However, in spite of the difficulties in living out new agendas for human relationships, there was a ferment of ideas about these, increasingly inflected by concerns around public health and the nature of the healthy society. In particular it is probable that at some level (if not explicitly) they were strongly influenced by the debates about the state and health generated by the successful campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts which had legislated the forcible examination of women identified as prostitutes in certain garrison and port towns to protect the health of the army and navy, and also by the less successful campaigns against compulsory vaccination for smallpox, and against the practitioners of

⁴ J. Miriam Benn, *Predicaments of Love* (London: Pluto Press, 1992), pp. 147-151.

⁵ Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists: The Social Democratic Federation and the woman question, 1884-1911* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 86-94.

⁶ Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality, 1885-1914*, (London: Penguin, 1995), pp. 205-17.

⁷ *Ibid*, 156-9, 172.

'scientific medicine' who vivisected animals and experimented on hospital patients. Furthermore, were the failures of the sanitarian project for the control and eradication of disease - endemic diseases such as tuberculosis, cancer, and syphilis - outward manifestations of an unjust - but reformable - capitalist patriarchal society?

Edward Carpenter (1844-1929) is a relatively well-known figure, widely read within the late nineteenth and early twentieth century socialist movement. Initially educated for the church, he resigned his curacy and became a socialist, anti-imperialist, pacifist, humanitarian, vegetarian and advocate of the 'simple life'. He is probably best remembered these days for being a very early champion of the rights of homosexuals (of which he was himself one).

His ideas about the health of society were most explicitly expressed in *Civilisation: its cause and cure*, first published in 1889, although similar ideas can be seen to underlie his other writings. He identified health as unity and wholeness - a positive ideal,⁸ adumbrating a vision of 'a return to nature and community of human life'. He argued for a radical simplification of lifestyle, emphasised the open air, the need for rational dress. He made a strong plea for a healthy diet based on 'fruits, nuts, tubers, grains, eggs, etc... and milk in its various forms'.⁹ And in the utopian communities he envisaged 'mutual help and combination will... have become spontaneous and instinctive'.¹⁰

In *Civilisation* Carpenter was relatively silent about the sexual arrangements of the ideal society he posited. However, in *Love's Coming of Age: a series of papers on the Relation of the Sexes* (1896) he suggested that stifling conventional monogamous marriage would be replaced by different arrangements. 'The conditions of high civilisation' he argued, induced 'an overfed masculinity in the males and a nervous and hysterical tendency in the females' among the middle and well to do classes, while 'want of self-control' was 'liable to make the proletarian union brutish enough'.¹¹ He envisaged future unions as open attachments which would permit 'wide excursions of the pair from each other' pursuing 'objects of work and interest', and the reaching out to bestow 'some boon of affection to those who need it more'.¹²

He claimed that there was 'an immense diversity of human temperament and character in matters relating to sex and love'.¹³ Given the 'hundreds of thousands' of different kinds of men and women and therefore the different kinds of union possible between them, 'there are no limits of grace or comeliness, or of character or accomplishment, within which love is obliged to move; and... there is no defect, of body or mind, which is of necessity a bar--which may not even... become an object of attraction'¹⁴ Carpenter seems to be taking the pathological discourse of deviations of desire and fetishistic cravings put forward by sexologists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing in his *Psychopathia Sexualis* and turning them into a beneficent proliferation of desires which could, however unlikely it seemed, find

⁸ Ibid, pp. 14-15.

⁹ Ibid, pp. 42-46.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 51.

¹¹ Edward Carpenter, *Love's Coming of Age: a series of papers on the Relations of the Sexes* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1930, first published 1896), p. 99.

¹² Ibid, pp. 122-123.

¹³ Ibid, p. 132.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 157.

their counterparts. Thus variety and variation were seen as natural, and ultimately healthful, rather than sick excrescences.

Carpenter's friend and colleague, Havelock Ellis (1859-1939), took a somewhat different line in his thinking on issues of social health. He was himself a medical man, having obtained the Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries as a necessary preliminary to devoting himself to his life's work of investigating sex. He did, however, give attention to broader issues concerning human well-being, and in 1892 published a volume on *The Nationalisation of Health*. Like Carpenter, he considered that 'a great civilisation is ill built up on the bodies of men and women enfeebled and distorted by over-work, filth and disease'.¹⁵ Like Carpenter, he had a glowing holistic vision of Health: 'Fresh air and reasonable garments, cleanliness in the full sense of the word, pleasant work and varied exercise, the healthful play of the secretions and the excretions'.¹⁶

His later writings laid perhaps more emphasis on the benefits of education and encouragement than on state intervention and continued to manifest an ideal of diversity. His continuing commitment to human variety was embodied in the suggestion that 'queernesses and defects' that diverged from the apparent norm should 'be cherished for their sake of their stimulating reactions on the rest of the personality'.¹⁷ The inspiring utopianism of his vision was recognised by his younger contemporary, Stella Browne, who commented in a review of his *Little Essays of Love and Virtue*, that 'direct action of the most thoroughgoing description is necessary, before the lessons he teaches can be assimilated and his ideals "made flesh"'.¹⁸

Stella Browne (1880-1955) was a generation younger than these two figures. She had been a militant suffragette, was a life-long socialist, and a campaigning pacifist. She was also profoundly committed to the rights of the individual. She is probably best known as a vigorous campaigner for birth control throughout the 1920s, and as a founder of the Abortion Law Reform Association. In spite of her strong socialist views, she resigned from the Communist Party in 1923 because of its refusal to consider contraception a proletarian issue. Though she 'never held that family limitation would *alone* abolish poverty', in her view nor would the advent of the socialist millennium render the question of women's reproductive choice redundant.¹⁹

Like them, she did not believe that sex could be reformed in isolation from the other ills of society, commenting that in *Married Love*, Marie Stopes had failed to realise

that immense industrial, social and legislative changes are necessary, before the majority of her fellow citizens are able even approximately to develop and refine their erotic nature.

Stella Browne consistently depicted the factors that made for ill-health and suffering as structural, innate by-products of the way in which society was organised on all levels, from the planning of kitchens to the highest emotional and

¹⁵ Havelock Ellis, *The Nationalisation of Health* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1892), p. 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 142-143.

¹⁸ *The New Generation*, May 1922, p. 7.

¹⁹ F. W. Stella Browne, 'Women and Birth Control', in Eden and Cedar Paul (eds.) *Population and Birth Control: A Symposium* (New York: The Critic and Guide Company, 1917).

spiritual concerns. She rejected 'a social order which puts necessary work, justice, creative art and science, love and breeding on a cash basis',²⁰ and demanded instead:

revolutionary changes in all departments... the development of hitherto isolated human harmonies, or intense and vivid variations of faculty and type.²¹

For Stella Browne, as for Carpenter and Ellis, variety and diversity were the symbols of the truly healthy society.

This small group of utopians can be contrasted with other manifestations of alternative visions of health in society. In 1922 the Communist doctor Eden Paul made a rather scary, case for a kind of left-wing eugenics: arguing that 'the "artificial" or *economic* man is largely removed from the selective influence of nature' leading to the proliferation of 'persons with grave eye defects, short-sight, astigmatism, etc' he conceded that 'there is a large measure of truth in the eugenicist argument'.²² Two figures perhaps better known for their vision of an organic community are Drs George Scott Williamson and Innes Pearse, the founders of the Pioneer Health Centre Peckham. The Peckham vision was centred on the family and had no place for those who were not at some stage of a biologically defined familial cycle: the thinkers whom I have been discussing had a more widely embracing vision of the community. Stella Browne largely approved of the Pioneer Health Centre, but commented that 'their scale of values seems rather obsessed with Parenthood!'.²³

In the Jerusalem this somewhat marginal group of thinkers I have discussed wanted to build in England's green and pleasant land, health had a wider meaning than reproductive fitness and activity. If Carpenter was a little cagey in *Civilisation: its cause and cure* about the domestic establishments which might exist in the future state, in *Love's Coming of Age* he mooted the possibility of relationships not based on the traditional couple.²⁴ Ellis saw the family as undergoing profound contemporary transformations, but nonetheless considered it to be deeply embedded in the human species. However, he recognised that not all were fitted for marriage or parenthood, yet had their part in human society.²⁵ Stella Browne's utopia included women with lovers but not babies, women with babies but no husbands, and even lesbian mothers.²⁶ By the interwar period a number of couples active in left-wing politics were also trying to live out, with greater and lesser degrees of success, new modes of sexual relationship. The marriage of Bertrand and Dora Russell indicates some of the problems that could arise, but a more benign example was the marriage of novelist Naomi Mitchison and her Labour politician husband Dick Mitchison. However, most theorists and experimenters seem to have been still thinking along lines of a central marital-type

²⁰ F. W. Stella Browne, 'The Philosophy of the Free Spirit', *The New Generation*, Feb 1924, p. 17.

²¹ Browne, 'Women and Birth Control'.

²² Eden Paul, 'Birth Control: Communist and Individualist Aspects', *Medical Critic and Guide* (New York), 25 no 6, Jun 1922, pp. 212-6.

²³ F. W. Stella Browne, 'Achieving Health', *The New Generation*, May 1932, p. 58.

²⁴ Carpenter, 'Marriage: A Forecast', *Love's Coming of Age*, pp. 110-129.

²⁵ Havelock Ellis, 'The Renovation of the Family', *More Essays of Love and Virtue* (London: Constable and Co, 1931), pp. 22-76.

²⁶ Discussed further in Lesley A. Hall, "'I have never met the normal woman": Stella Browne and the politics of womanhood', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 6, 1997, pp. 157-182.

relationship, enlivened by contingent affairs with others.

How influential was this strand within British left-wing thinking? The history of divorce law reform followed a too little too late pattern and relied on the exertions of individuals prepared to introduce Private Member's Bills to Parliament. Throughout the 1920s the Labour Party ignored overwhelming mandates from its Women's Sections on the subject of birth control, surreptitiously introducing a letter to Medical Officers of Health indicating a permissive policy towards advice in cases of major risk to a woman's health in 1930. Birth control was excluded (or rather, ignored) within the 1948 National Health Service until 1967, only being completely incorporated in 1974. Indeed sex, even marital sex, was largely absent from the provisions of the welfare state.

If it had little direct impact on government legislation, the impact of this utopian discourse had an incalculable impact on the individual and local level. Chris Nottingham's recent book *The Pursuit of Serenity* makes a strong case for Ellis as a neglected influence on a whole generation if not more of upwardly socially and culturally mobile members of the upper working and lower middle classes moving into positions of social and cultural influence. Carpenter's works were widely read in left-wing circles and among young intellectuals. Stella Browne spent a lot of time lecturing to Women's Cooperative Guilds and Women's sections of the Labour Party, as well as being active in the Fabian Society and more specifically sex-reforming bodies such as the Malthusian League and the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology. If the realm of the political is not confined to the conventionally understood sphere of political machinations, but is taken to include - as it did for Ellis himself - the transformation of public opinion, the tradition I have discussed played an important part.²⁷

²⁷ Chris Nottingham, *The Pursuit of Serenity: Havelock Ellis and the New Politics* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press), 1999.