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Nathan Moon

Georgia College & State University

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**Emma Goldman and Birth Control:
Honest Goals or Ulterior Motives?**

Nathan Moon

Emma Goldman proved herself to be a powerful force on American society during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For many years, the activist had the uncanny ability to seize the mass consciousness of America and never let go. Though she was often criticized, even reviled during her career as an anarchist, her reputation became rehabilitated over the years. Today, few people recall the “Red Emma” of long ago, a persona that many Americans scoffed at. Instead, she has become an icon and folk hero for many people, perhaps because the American public has finally seen and understood her many contributions to society. One of those important contributions made by Emma Goldman was her ardent support of the birth control movement between the years 1914 to 1916, crucial years in which the American public began to embrace the possibility and need for birth control in American society. Without doubt, Emma Goldman played a pivotal role in this movement. For two years of her long and varied career, birth control became the primary focus of Goldman’s efforts. Despite the anarchist’s deep convictions regarding the need for birth control, Goldman’s role in the movement was only limited to a few years’ involvement. Her tremendous efforts, followed by seeming apathy, have led many to ask why Emma Goldman became involved in the birth control movement, only to lose interest several years later. Unquestionably, Goldman truly believed in the necessity of birth control for America, but it seems probable that Goldman also had ulterior motives for supporting birth control. This paper puts forth the proposition that Emma Goldman saw birth control as a means of gaining an audience for her greater ideas of anarchism. The idea that Goldman supported and even believed in birth control on its own merits is not contested, but there is some evidence that suggests she had undisclosed motives in championing the movement—

Goldman saw birth control as an indirect means to bolster her ideals of anarchism.

For a brief time, the birth control movement was symbolic of Emma Goldman's struggles as an anarchist. As such, her support of contraception offered her the opportunity to obtain greater interest in the anarchist movement from an otherwise hostile public. The birth control movement contained several elements that coincided with Goldman's personal beliefs as a social revolutionary. First of all, Goldman earnestly believed in the use of civil disobedience as means to change laws that she opposed. Birth control offered her the chance to educate the public on the importance of suffering at the hands of the government for something in which one believed. Additionally, while Goldman supported birth control on its own merits, one of the reasons for involving herself in the movement probably dealt with the Comstock laws, which prohibited the interstate mailing of obscene publications, especially those containing birth control information. Goldman frequently viewed these laws as a greater evil than the suppression of birth control information, and many of her arguments concerning birth control support were placed in the context of these laws. Goldman also framed many of her arguments championing birth control in a Marxist slant. She relied heavily on arguments put forth by Malthus and Marx to defend birth control. Finally, letters between Emma Goldman and Margaret Sanger suggest that the activist's support of birth control was based on the fact that people attended Goldman's meetings on contraception more than any other subject. It is probable that Emma Goldman's discourses on the matter may have permitted her to indoctrinate her audiences with her other anarchist beliefs. While it may seem unimaginable that "Red Emma" did not support birth control solely on its own merits, there is a great deal of evidence that upholds her defense of the movement as a means to gain greater support for her anarchistic ideals.

As an anarchist, Emma Goldman was a strong believer in the use of civil disobedience to criticize laws she despised. She ardently believed that people should be willing to endure hardship in opposing these laws, as these protests would provide the neces-

sary catalyst to bring about fundamental changes in society's rules and regulations. As more people went to prison for something in which they believed, the more enlightened society would become concerning the problems with laws that repressed birth control information. Birth control offered Emma Goldman the opportunity to present her greater beliefs concerning civil disobedience to a greater public.

The distribution of contraceptives and information on birth control was illegal in much of early 20th century America. In order for people to gain a right that is taken for granted today, many would have to suffer at the hands of an indifferent legal system before necessary changes would be made. Emma Goldman put her beliefs concerning passive resistance to the law into effect by violating laws that prohibited birth control. Writing to Goldman in 1914, Margaret Sanger proposed the idea of creating "Neo-Malthusian leagues" to support the burgeoning birth control movement. In order to avoid legal troubles, Sanger believed that the leagues should be conducted in secret, an idea to which Goldman responded, "it ought to be started openly and that people ought to be taught to go to prison if need be". Goldman used the birth control movement to further her beliefs as an anarchist by asserting, "If I can speak about the subject openly why can people not organize openly?" A couple of years later, Margaret Sanger would be arrested for violating the laws that suppressed the dissemination of birth control information. Sanger received many letters from associates who advised her to plead guilty to the charges. She was often reminded of "her duty to her children" in much of the advice she received. Goldman rebuked such opinions. Instead, the anarchist sought to console Sanger, writing that her imprisonment would serve to further her work. Also, if Sanger were to recant and relent, Goldman warned her that all of her progress would be severely jeopardized.

Like any true social revolutionary, Emma Goldman had no qualms about putting beliefs about civil disobedience into practice herself. On February 11, 1916, Goldman was arrested for a lecture she had given on a "medical question," a violation of Section 1,142

of the New York Penal Code. Goldman was arrested right before she was to give a lecture on the Philosophy of Atheism at Vorwart Hall in New York City. It is reported that the police had waited until there were about 1,000 people present at the hall to arrest the anarchist. Following the arrest, "some 500 followed, cheered Miss Goldman, and scoffed at the police." Goldman quickly posted her bail and continued to lecture on the topic of birth control until her trial almost two months later. Of course, Goldman took precautions in her speeches, referring to her subject as "the greatest social problem confronting the United States today."

On April 20, 1916, Goldman was tried and found guilty for distributing birth control information in New York. Goldman made a stirring defense of her beliefs at her trial. Toward the end of her defense, Goldman repeatedly asserted that she was willing to be considered a criminal and go to prison for what she believed in. In a dramatic fashion, typical of Emma Goldman, she chose a prison sentence over a fine, even though she had the means to pay. Goldman was sentenced to fifteen days in the Queens County Jail at Long Island City, better known as the Workhouse. As she was led out of the courtroom, Goldman was met with applause from hundreds of supporters.

Following her brief imprisonment in 1916, Goldman began to publicly assert her faith in the power of civil disobedience to change oppressive societal policies. The birth control movement not only gave her the opportunity to make these convictions publicly known, but publicly accepted also. In the June 1916 edition of *Mother Earth*, Goldman scoffed at the notion that her imprisonment "reformed" her. Instead, she adamantly declared, "my imprisonment has advanced our cause as nothing I could have done had I gone up and down the county for a whole year lecturing before large audiences." Goldman contested that her confinement brought new supporters to the movement, thus lending a great deal of credence to her belief in civil disobedience as a revolutionary force. She further expressed these sentiments by stating that her imprisonment had "not lessened, but intensified, my devotion to our cause." About this same time, Goldman's close friend, Dr. Ben

Reitman, received a two-month sentence for violating similar birth control laws. As a retort to his incarceration, Goldman responded, "If the authorities were foolish enough to think that they could stop it...they'll find themselves mistaken." A few months later, Goldman organized the "birth control committee" to combat the laws prohibiting birth control. The committee had over 100 committed women who distributed pamphlets concerning birth control. As soon as one was arrested, another would start, all in order to "get that old, obsolete law repealed."

Without doubt, Emma Goldman saw herself as an anarchist before anything else. As such, she used the birth control movement to help her cause as an anarchist. Her belief in civil disobedience had finally found a practical outlet in the struggle for birth control. No statement better conveyed Goldman's belief in civil disobedience in the movement than an article she wrote in *Mother Earth* stating:

This dread of going to prison for one's ideas so prevalent among American radicals, is what makes the movement so pale and weak. I have no such dread. My revolutionary tradition is that those who are not willing to go to prison for their ideas have never been considered of much value to their ideas.

Indeed, Goldman's ideals as an anarchist and social revolutionary found a willing audience among those suffering for their support of birth control.

During these years of activism, Goldman displayed a great deal of disdain for the methods employed by the police. She had clashed with the police in previous years over many of her activities as an anarchist and would clash with them in the years to come, especially over the anti-conscription movement. The birth control movement gave Goldman the perfect opportunity to voice her opposition to police methods and tactics. She repeatedly denounced them on the grounds that they often made arrests without warrants. Furthermore, Goldman accused police of perjury on witness stands. In her trial in April 1916, Goldman attacked the police's methods in her arrest. She had delivered birth control

speeches many times in English without incurring the wrath of the authorities, but she was arrested after delivering the speech in Yiddish. Goldman accused the authorities of waiting for such a moment in order that they might misconstrue the context of the speech. Furthermore, Goldman made the observation that the arresting officer had no knowledge of Yiddish. The anarchist's involvement in the birth control movement gave her excellent an excellent opportunity to make such legitimate attacks against the police. After her first conviction for distributing birth control information in April 1916, Goldman was arrested later that year on similar charges. Of course, Goldman vehemently protested these charges on the grounds that she was not present when the supposed incident took place. The charges were eventually dropped on the grounds of insufficient evidence.

By using the birth control movement, Goldman finally had a chance to openly confront the police without incurring harsh public scrutiny. In fact, the anarchist made extensive use of the birth control movement in order that she might "point out the utter stupidity of the law." She attacked many of the practices that the police and courts used to repress the dissemination of birth control information. Entrapment was one of the most common methods employed by authorities to apprehend those who violated birth control laws. The Comstock laws made it illegal to send birth control information through the mails. As such, authorities, using a false name, would write to a person, asking for information on birth control information, and they would then arrest the violator. Goldman asserted that such methods used by authorities justified her anarchism. Such statements were brilliant masterstrokes for Goldman, allowing her to defend her anarchism in the context of police and court suppression of birth control. No doubt did Goldman see this as a perfect opportunity to make her anarchistic beliefs more palatable to an otherwise hostile public.

Goldman also made effective use of the birth control movement to criticize prominent political figures of the time. In a speech entitled, "The Child's Right Not to Be Born," Goldman went so far as to make a vehement attack against a former American president.

The anarchist asserted, "if every one followed the injunction of *The Bible* and Theodore Roosevelt to 'Be fruitful and multiply,' every tenement house would be turned into a lunatic asylum by the excessive number of children." In another speech, Goldman took President Wilson to task on the matter of birth control, citing letters that had been written to him by Rudyard Kipling and H. G. Wells "in advocacy of free dissemination of knowledge." Once again, Emma Goldman had made adept use of the birth control movement to air her opinions on more political matters.

The birth control movement also gave Emma Goldman an excellent opportunity to protest a set of laws that she utterly despised, the Comstock laws. The laws were passed in 1873, banning obscene materials from being sent through the United States Postal Service. The Comstock laws applied to birth control information, which were considered obscene by most Victorian standards. In fact, the laws expressly declared birth control information to be obscene. As such, leaders of the birth control movement, including Goldman and Sanger, were often prosecuted under this law. Goldman's *Mother Earth* publication would later suffer greatly at the hands at "Comstockery." Goldman's support of birth control provided her an excellent opportunity to oppose the Comstock laws on the grounds of repression against a much-needed good, all the while defending her anarchist publication for the future.

Much of Goldman's hostility toward the Comstock laws was quite apparent in correspondence between the anarchist and Sanger. When she was on tour, Goldman often promoted and sold Sanger's publication, *The Woman Rebel*. Because it was often sent through the mails, Sanger endured a great deal of harassment from legal authorities over the matter. Goldman had nothing but vituperative words for the authorities and their "damnable seal," referring to the Comstock laws. The anarchist sought to confront the law head on by defying it in the hopes that "the backbone of the stupid postal law [would] be broken when there [was] enough intelligent determined opinion against it."

Goldman labored tirelessly to have the Comstock laws repealed, and the birth control movement gave her a sympathetic

audience with which to confront the law. The repeal of the laws would be of great use to Goldman in her other fields. *Mother Earth* was an anarchist publication that criticized many policies and laws of the United States. As such, it could and later would be deemed an obscene and dangerous publication by the government. Many people were not willing to support Goldman's unpopular anarchistic stances, but they were more likely to support a more popular concept such as birth control. Support of the birth control movement would have undoubtedly given Goldman the ability to confront the Comstock laws without alienating potential followers due to her anarchist beliefs. Again, it is quite plausible that Goldman's support of the birth control movement had some ulterior motives.

While Emma Goldman fancied herself an anarchist, she was a very passionate and ardent defender of Marxist beliefs. The birth control movement gave Goldman the perfect opportunity to frame the birth control controversy in the context of Marxism. It seems likely that Goldman believed that her assistance to the fledgling movement might bring about support for her Marxist ideals. Had followers of the birth control controversies understood Goldman's Marxist arguments behind the movement, they might have been swayed to accept Marxist dogmas in other facets of social, political, and economic life. It is possible to conjecture that Goldman supported birth control in the hopes that it would win converts to her Marxist ways of thinking.

Emma Goldman's strongest defense of the birth control movement stems from a speech, also published as an article in *Mother Earth*, entitled "The Social Aspects of Birth Control." The article defends birth control on the grounds that "all sponsors of the capitalistic regime, are in favor of a large and excessive race and are therefore opposed to Birth Control." Goldman argues that ignorance of Thomas Malthus' explanations for the need for birth control have resulted in a society of underfed, malnourished, and overworked masses. The anarchist goes on, contending:

Nothing so binds the workers to the block as a brood of children and that is exactly what the opponents of birth control want. Wretched as the earnings of a man with a large fam-

ily are, he cannot risk even that little, so he continues in the rut, compromises and cringes before his master, just to earn barely enough to feed the many little mouths. He dare not join a revolutionary organization; he dare not go on strike; he dare not express an opinion. Masses of workers have awakened to the necessity of Birth Control as a means of freeing themselves from the terrible yoke and still more as a means of being able to do something for those already in existence by preventing more children from coming into the world.

Though quite a long-winded piece of writing, this declaration effectively demonstrates Goldman's beliefs concerning the necessity for birth control in America. It is very Marxist in its tone and conveys the belief that capitalism is to blame for the suppression of birth control rights in America. Goldman argues that children are as "millstones" around the necks of workers, binding them in oppression and fear against the upper classes of society, who maintain an iron fist over this exploited worker class. Goldman was also very quick to blame a relatively small middle class of women for opposing birth control, arguing that they were not forced to suffer the lot of the working mother.

During Goldman's trial, the anarchist made it a point to convey her Marxist sentiments behind her support of birth control. She made numerous references to the effects that birth control suppression had on poverty. She blamed much of the obstruction for birth control on "our economic grinding mill, which places a premium on poverty, and upon the laws which make a conspiracy of silence a virtue." Goldman pleaded an eloquent Marxist defense of birth control, maintaining:

Statesmen, politicians, men of the cloth, men who own the wealth of the world, need a large race, no matter how poor in quality. Who else would do their work, and fight their wars? But the people who toil and drudge and create, and receive a mere pittance in return, what reason have they to bring hapless children into the world?

As a social revolutionary, Goldman's Marxist reasoning usually received a cold reception from the American public, but the birth control movement provided her with a rare opportunity to gain some favor for her controversial beliefs. Goldman went to great lengths to make effective use of this exceptional chance to win converts to her ways.

Perhaps the strongest evidence of Emma Goldman's hidden motivations behind the birth control movement can be found in the correspondence between her and Margaret Sanger. The letters reveal a side to the anarchist that was really never on display to the public, suggesting Goldman's use of the birth control movement to better her efforts as an anarchist. The letters from Goldman to Sanger are usually cold and distanced on the matter of birth control. One would expect letters between two dedicated activists to be quite passionate about the matter at hand, but Goldman's demeanor about birth control is detached, cold, and professional.

First of all, Goldman's letters to Sanger were usually very businesslike in tone. They usually began with a notice to Sanger to credit or debit Goldman for a certain amount of money. In fact, one letter is quite astounding as it addresses some very personal matters, but interrupts those to first in order to tend to business. The letters offer evidence that Goldman was very businesslike in all her affairs, and those relating to the birth control movement were no exception. Goldman's letters to Sanger treated the matter of birth control with little passion or ardor, preferring to approach the subject in a subdued, professional matter. Oddly enough, while Goldman took a distant stance on birth control, she exhibited a great deal more emotion when discussing matters of civil disobedience, Comstockery, and the law.

In examining the correspondence between Goldman and Sanger, there seems to be evidence that suggests that Goldman didn't consider the birth control movement her personal struggle. On one occasion, Goldman makes a detached observation about the movement to Sanger stating, "the Birth Control question [sic] has taken hold of the public as never before. That ought to be of tremendous satisfaction to you." Furthermore, Goldman seems to

believe that the birth control movement is not her struggle, but Sanger's. In many instances, the revolutionary advises Margaret to undertake tours and hold meetings to bolster her own movement.

If Goldman took such a detached view toward the movement, then one is forced to ponder why the anarchist still supported it as strongly as she did. This paper does not dispute Goldman's personal beliefs concerning birth control's place in women's rights and other related areas, but it does question the notion that these were Goldman's sole motivations in supporting the movement. It seems highly plausible that Goldman used the birth control meeting as a means to support her personal activities as an anarchist. In much of Goldman's correspondence to Sanger, the anarchist notes that the meetings on birth control brought out more people than any other topic of debate. Perhaps Goldman was somewhat envious that birth control piqued more interest than anarchism, but she still supported the movement, probably in the hopes of winning over more people to her anarchist beliefs. As was previously argued, birth control provided Goldman an opportunity to educate her audience on her personal beliefs concerning civil disobedience, police and court corruption, and the Comstock laws. Furthermore, the birth control movement permitted Goldman to make arguments in a Marxist connotation that would probably be scoffed at in any other context.

By 1916, Goldman began to draw her focus away from birth control and place greater emphasis on conscription of soldiers for World War I. Her change in direction drew much attention and criticism from supporters of the birth control movement. In a letter to *Mother Earth*, Margaret Sanger criticized Emma Goldman's publication for its lack of support to her cause. It is about this time that Goldman's interest begins to turn away from the birth control struggle. During these months, *Mother Earth* begins to concern itself almost totally with the Great War, publishing articles with anti-war and anti-conscription sentiments. Such a change in interest for *Mother Earth* seems to indicate that Goldman and Sanger's mutual interests began to diverge, actually resulting in a fracture in their relationship.

In response to Goldman's withdrawal of support for the birth control movement, Dr. William Sanger, Margaret Sanger's husband, wrote a condescending letter to Goldman. Though he takes a rather acerbic tone with Goldman, it appears that Bill Sanger may have hit the nail on the head in describing the anarchist's fickle attitude toward birth control. Sanger criticizes Goldman's lack of devotion to the cause of birth control. He tells the anarchist, "You, no doubt, have done fine work in other fields, such as the drama, literature, and the general propaganda; but you have never impressed the general movement here as a whole." Instead, he tells Goldman that her work is of no long-term consequence and has only resulted in arrests for petty crimes. While Sanger is most likely judgmental in his analysis of Goldman, he does make an insightful remark. He observes Goldman's irresolute adherence to any one particular movement, noting her many areas of interest. In this respect, he is an astute observer of Goldman's demeanor toward her professional career. In fact, Sanger's statement about the anarchist's fickle ways is a harbinger of things to come. Goldman would shortly leave the birth control movement and devote her energies to the Great War and the anti-conscription movement. Bitterly, Sanger closes his letter with a statement of his attitudes toward Goldman's involvement in the birth control movement, "Between Anarchist judges and Capitalist judges, I might prefer the latter."

For a final word concerning Goldman's motivations for taking up the birth control movement, it would only be prudent to listen to what she has to say about the matter. Goldman mailed a copy of William Sanger's letter to her friend W. S. Van Valkenburgh and expounded on her feelings toward the Sangers. Goldman gives the impression of regret regarding her relationship with William and Margaret Sanger. Valkenburgh had written some articles about Emma Goldman and birth control for other publications. In her evaluation of the articles, Goldman came to the conclusion that people cared more for birth control than her and her anarchism. The revolutionary tells her friend, "your article...will be construed as being an appeal for the personal[ity] of E. G. and not the cause of birth control, again, who the hell cares?" Goldman's statement

suggests that the public cared much for the movement but little for Goldman. Indeed, it comes as no surprise that Goldman chose to direct her energies toward the War, leaving birth control behind for the Sangers and their followers.

In another letter to her friend, Helen Keller, Goldman comments on the falling out between her and the Sangers. Between this letter and the one written to Valkenburgh, Goldman expresses her fears that the popular press is starting to turn against her involvement in the movement. Furthermore, Goldman shows her disgust for the attention and critical acclaim that the Sangers are receiving. Goldman seems to be quite angry about an article written by Frances Wayne on the roles played by Emma Goldman and Margaret Sanger in the birth control movement. Goldman expresses her reluctant resignation at the prominence of the Sangers. Perhaps such attention on the Sangers and their movement forced her to stake her claim elsewhere. Goldman would undoubtedly find it difficult to compete with other activists for followers, especially when she might have ulterior motives in mind.

A final, yet compelling indication of Emma Goldman's attitudes on the birth control movement can be found in an interview dating back to 1912. Though this interview takes place a full two years before Goldman's extensive involvement in the birth control movement, it offers a great deal of insight into Goldman's thoughts concerning her role in the movement. First of all, Goldman shows a great deal of disdain for the fact that others have come to greater prominence in the movement than she has, despite her intense involvement. Goldman's efforts in the movement had been branded as "anarchistic," while those such as feminists Ellen Keyes and Karin Michaells were hailed as "emancipated." Still, Goldman noted that her "anarchistic" beliefs regarding birth control had become decidedly more conventional over the years, a sure sign that society was becoming more supportive of her beliefs on the matter. The social revolutionary observed, "The pioneer in any movement is bound to be branded by conventionality...and the acceptance of ideas which were regarded as anarchistic, as food for discussion in clubs today shows the slow but sure awakening of the

feminine mind.” In the interview, Goldman public acknowledged that her lectures on “the strike of the sex” brought out a larger audience than any other topic. This fact, coupled with Goldman’s observations concerning the intertwining of her “anarchistic beliefs” with the issues surrounding birth control suggest that she comprehended her potential to gain a large audience for her anarchistic beliefs though the use of “mainstream” subjects, such as the birth control movement.

Emma Goldman was an ardent believer in the necessity for birth control. She had many reasons for supporting the movement, both personal and professional. This paper does not dispute that Goldman supported birth control on its own merits. There is overwhelming evidence that she did believe in its place in American society. On countless occasions Goldman defends its necessity for a better society, arguing her beliefs from the position of women’s rights and sexual enslavement. Instead, this paper questions whether these were Goldman’s only reasons for becoming involved in the movement. In examining her motivations for supporting birth control, one cannot overlook a few important facts. First of all, Goldman’s involvement in birth control was limited to only a few years. She talks little about the subject before 1914 or after 1916. While not always devoted to the cause of birth control, Emma Goldman made the cause of anarchism a lifelong struggle. Another point to consider is Goldman’s personal feelings on the matter of birth control, as evidenced by her correspondence to Margaret Sanger. The revolutionary takes a very dispassionate stance about birth control. She seems to believe that the movement is really not hers, but the domain of others instead. Despite this apparent indifference, Goldman speaks about civil disobedience, the Comstock laws, and the police with a great deal of enthusiasm. Also, many of Goldman’s arguments for the necessity of birth control go far beyond the common arguments of sexual enslavement and women’s rights, usually encompassing strong Marxist sentiments. When one takes these factors into account, Goldman’s support of the birth control movement begins to defy easy analysis. One must question Goldman’s motives for involving herself in the movement.

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