

---

# Seeking Female Sexual Emancipation and the Writing of Women's History

Elizabeth H. Pleck

*One of Louise Tilly's most widely cited articles was "Women's Work and European Fertility Patterns" (1976), coauthored with Joan Scott and Miriam Cohen. The subject of the article was a major increase in female illegitimacy at the time of the Industrial Revolution, which Tilly regarded as an instance of female vulnerability caused by isolation and urban migration. Surveys of recent writings by American and British historians about this subject suggest the impact of contemporary attitudes toward female sexual autonomy. This literature offers a far more positive portrait of the causes and consequences of female illegitimacy than Tilly provided.*

Louise Tilly would never have claimed that she was a historian of sexuality, but in one article, coauthored with Joan Scott and Miriam Cohen, she contributed to a subfield that barely existed in the 1970s. Demographic historians had established that rates of illegitimacy were rising rapidly in the late eighteenth century in North America, England, and continental western Europe, with considerable variation between regions. (Despite the judgmental character of the word *illegitimacy*, it remained the dominant one because it was widely used in the past and in the law.) At the same time, marital fertility was rising, leading to the conclusion that "more people were having more sex leading to the birth of a child, both inside and outside of marriage" (Hitchcock 1996: 75). Louise Tilly, Joan Scott, and Miriam Cohen's "Women's Work and European Fertility Patterns" in the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* in 1976 offered an important explanation for this development, insisting on continuity rather than change in women's sexual attitudes and desire to marry.

Their article was a lengthy refutation of another one by Edward Shorter in *The American Historical Review* in 1973. In "Female Emancipation, Birth Control, and Fertility in European History" Shorter claimed to have found the roots of women's emancipation not in woman's suffrage, with its special appeal to educated and middle-class women, but in a sexual revolution among working-class women almost a century before. In moving to the city from the European countryside, Shorter argued that women cast off the surveillance of parents and adopted values that matched the marketplace, such as individualism, personal fulfillment, and autonomy. Instead of simply looking for a marriage partner, urban employed women were seeking sexual pleasure. In the absence of effective birth control, many of these adventuresome young women became pregnant. Shorter was applying modernization theory to his evidence, believing that the changed circumstances of a wage economy created new values, which affected all domains of life including the sexual. He used deliberately provocative language to describe a "process of the transfer of values that gave the proletarian subculture its libertine moral caste" (Shorter 1973: 621). His emphasis on women's sexual desires and values represented a departure from much demographic history, which largely focused on "households" or "families" rather than

questions about gender, power, agency, and sexual practices. Moreover, in his account, poor women, not their male partners, were both the agents and emblems of change.

Tilly et al. thought migrating to cities was risky for young women and viewed urbanization and industrialization as disruptive. They acknowledged that illegitimacy was rising in many rural areas as well, which they attributed to high rates of geographic mobility, especially among men. They believed that most paid work for women of this time was “not liberating” and that women took jobs away from home in order to be able to contribute to their families. Newly located in cities, many women, they asserted, were not living with relatives, and were thus lacking “social protection.” Young women engaged in sexual relationships with men, they argued, trusting in the traditional courtship bargains of the countryside, that a woman granted sexual intercourse only when she was promised marriage. Many male partners were less willing or able to uphold their end of the bargain, they argued, because they were concentrated in highly transient occupations like seafaring or unskilled migrant labor or were soldiers and sailors. There were no familial protectors of young women in cities who could force a young man to marry his pregnant partner. Tilly et al. ended their article by noting that fertility fell by the middle of the nineteenth century because of “economic prosperity” and conscious efforts to limit the number of children.

Explaining her argument to an interviewer many decades later, Joan Scott recalled that she and her coauthors were claiming that “illegitimacy might well result from a loss of family protection, or an attempt to recreate a family in a new urban context rather than be a sign of a newfound desire for sexual self-realization” (Banner and Gillis 2009). Tilly et al. also claimed that there were two subgroups producing a large share of illegitimate children, cohabiting couples holding themselves out as if they were married, and prostitutes, most of whom were runaways and abused girls who had few options available to them. The extensive literature that followed this debate revealed the strength of social science history: that scholars sought to resolve a debate about economics versus values by creating hypotheses testable with data. My purpose here is not to thoroughly review this literature but rather to offer sufficient background for assessing the distance traveled from Louise Tilly’s views on the subject of illegitimacy, and indirectly, about women’s power, consciousness, and aspirations for marriage to those in recently published history.

Except for a few Scandinavians who believed that their countries had long traditions of sexual liberation, most scholarly entrants to this debate sided with Tilly et al. (Frykman 1975; Tomasson 1976). A significant early contribution shed light on the attitudes of unwed mothers. French law required pregnant unwed women in the last months before giving birth to describe the circumstances under which they became pregnant to the local mayor, hospital administrators, or judges. Cissie Fairchilds found that such women presented themselves as disgraced and without work, often the victims of rape. Whether women were actually the victims of rape was less important than the fact that presenting oneself as a rape victim was the only way a woman at this time could hold herself out as respectable. Fairchilds wrote, “[I]t is hard to

imagine that they would cherish romantic illusions about illicit sex, or use it as a means of self-expression" (1978: 659). Women's history turned away from historical demography and social history by about 1980, but some women's historians (such as Leslie Moch, a student of Tilly's at the University of Michigan) continued to write about the vulnerability of poor urban women. Rachel Fuchs and Leslie Moch expanded on the theme of the lack of social protection of young women in their research about poor women migrants to Paris. Fuchs and Moch described married men who claimed to be single or two-timing fiancés. Even if young women had relatives in the city, they often went into domestic service where they were preyed upon by a male servant or the master's son. Fatherless girls were the most vulnerable because they lacked a social protector. In Paris unwed mothers often ended up on charity or in homeless shelters, their infants in foundling hospitals (Fuchs and Moch 1990).

Historical demographers in England as well as continental Europe continued to research and write about illegitimacy and fertility during the Industrial Revolution. Peter Laslett summarily dismissed Shorter's thesis, noting that "higher levels of illegitimacy were often reached in the less industrialized regions of Europe," which cast "grave doubts on the assumption that illegitimacy was directly correlated with modernization." In addition, he thought that major changes in registering illegitimate births could have increased the number of births considered as illegitimate (Laslett 1980: 284). Among the most important refinements of Tilly et al. were about the lack of parental social control among women living apart from their parents. George Alter found that women migrants in a Belgian town were more likely to become unwed mothers than natives. Nonetheless, such women often moved to the city in the company of their parents or other relatives. Still, he aligned himself with the view that illegitimacy was largely thwarted courtship (Alter 1988). By contrast, Jan Van Bavel determined that local girls in a Belgian town were more likely to become unwed mothers than immigrants; he concluded that urban native girls, eager to escape home and younger siblings, engaged in secret assignations with their beaux. Social integration, not social isolation, raised the likelihood of illegitimacy, he argued (Van Bavel 2001). Scholars differ as to whether domestic servants had a higher rate of illegitimacy (Fairchild 1978; Fuchs and Moch 1990; Schumacher et al. 2007).

The major scholarly monographs in British history in the 1990s, based on painstaking methods of family reconstitution, rejected Shorter's thesis. Richard Adair in *Courtship, Illegitimacy, and Marriage* pointed out that Shorter's thesis could not explain high rates of illegitimacy in some sections of the countryside. He concluded that Shorter's "theory is seriously flawed and has little to recommend it" (Adair 1996: 17). Andrew Blaikie, who studied a rural region with a high rate of illegitimacy, announced that "capitalism wrought no great cultural transformation in northeastern Scotland" (Blaikie 1998: 235). The revival of interest in the subject of illegitimacy, around 2004 with a conference in Cambridge, England, led to the publication of a major anthology, *Illegitimacy in Britain, 1790–1920*, edited by Alysa Levene, Thomas Nutt, and Samantha Williams (Levene et al. 2005). Levene offered her explanation for the "mortality penalty," the higher infant mortality rate of illegitimate children.

She argued that unwed mothers weaned their children early in order to return to work, which deprived them of the nutritional feeding they needed to survive (Levene in Levene et al. 2005: 34–40). The anthology also included several articles about the men who fathered illegitimate children, not all of whom absented themselves. Nonetheless, most of the contributors to this anthology upheld the Tilly et al. view that illegitimacy was “thwarted courtship.”

Historians of sexuality did not test hypotheses, but instead tended to emphasize intellectual traditions that changed attitudes toward sexual practices. They emphasized a major change in the eighteenth-century courtship, as bundling declined and penetrative sex without withdrawal became the norm. Bundling probably included foreplay, sometimes involving mutual masturbation, but not as a first step toward heterosexual intercourse; if heterosexual intercourse did occur, the man was expected to withdraw before ejaculation. Pregnancy outside of marriage was considered shameful and women resorted to abortion if they became pregnant, or, if they gave birth, to infanticide. Historians of sexuality have argued that heterosexual intercourse became a more central feature of courtship sexual practice in the eighteenth century. Impregnating a woman was seen as proof of virility and manhood. In sum, the sexual culture of the eighteenth century was a culture on men’s terms, in which women became more vulnerable to pregnancy than before (Abelove 1989; Hitchcock 1996; Laqueur 1993; Trumbach 1998). Tim Hitchcock writes, “Men, newly concerned about their penises, were in a very restricted sense, liberated; while women, biologically redefined in order to deny them a sexual role, were repressed and their sexual activity was more heavily policed” (1996: 80).

In two major books published since 2006, historians of eighteenth-century Britain or the United States express views akin to those of Shorter. Both books have an upbeat tone, in part because they claim to have discovered a previous era of female sexual freedom and autonomy; they share the view that one of the aspects of freedom for women was that they could raise children without having to marry. Clare Lyons’s *Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730–1830* (2006) traced the rise and decline of a sexual revolution in Philadelphia. Lyons argued that Quaker attitudes toward sexuality, restraint in sexual practice, and punishment of wayward members did not dominate Philadelphia because of its ethnic diversity; abundant bawdy literature and traveler’s accounts confirm tolerant, sexually permissive attitudes, which she termed “a pleasure culture.” This culture consisted not only of sexual practices of the public but of an erotic, widely read print culture.

Lyons identified several indicators of a sexual revolution: “When women engaged in relations that resulted in bastardy, established affairs, left their marriages for new men, or participated in sex commerce, they affirmed their sexual independence, that is, created sexual lives independent of marriage” (Lyons 2006: 256). She recognized that many women were the victims of rape, but she claimed that male sexual privilege and female sexual independence coexisted. Many unmarried mothers, she found, preferred not to trade their freedom for the restrictions of patriarchal marriage; they did not want to wed the child’s father but rather wanted to force him to pay child support. Doing

so was not difficult in Philadelphia because its outdoor relief system provided charity to all pregnant women in need. Instead of failed courtships, she described women having casual affairs, and raising children out of wedlock. The engine of change for Lyons was the Enlightenment and the American Revolution, which challenged "illegitimate authority" and thus "lent legitimacy to the quest for personal autonomy and fulfillment" (Lyons 2006: 188). Lyons lamented that a postrevolutionary backlash followed the sexual revolution, which was largely directed at lower-class whites and African Americans.

Lyons told a story of declension in the wake of the revolution, whereas Emma Griffin presented an optimistic narrative, in which the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain brought far more freedom and opportunity than immiseration (Griffin 2012; Griffin 2013a; Griffin 2013b). She effectively summarized the abundant demographic literature that has demonstrated the growth of nonmarital pregnancy in the late eighteenth century. But she turned to autobiographies to provide personal accounts of the impact of the Industrial Revolution. She found the emergence of a new value of "seeking pleasure" in reading autobiographies, namely, twenty English autobiographies published between 1750 and 1850, two of them by women. Extracting stories of women's sexual encounters and decision making from these autobiographies led her to generalize about the opportunities for a female sexual revolution in industrial areas.<sup>1</sup> Griffin concluded that in factory towns single motherhood could be a legitimate choice for a woman who could earn relatively high wages and had a mother or sister who remained at home and could care for her child. Women's wages and child care provided by relatives, not intellectual ideas, she argued, shaped women's consciousness and sexual choices.<sup>2</sup> She argued that because women knew they could raise a child on their own, they were willing to engage in sexual intercourse and risk getting pregnant. Aware that the scholarly tide had turned away from Shorter, she nonetheless observed that "Shorter identified a fundamental change in sexual behaviour that needs to be explained, and for all the resistance that historians have displayed towards his thesis, it remains open to question whether they have succeeded in putting any more compelling account in its place" (Griffin 2013a: 140-41).

Popular culture and contemporary sexual attitudes can be discerned in the language and the interpretations in these two books. Lyons titled part two of her book, "Sex in the City in the Age of Democratic Revolution." Historians routinely pepper scholarly monographs with phrases from popular culture to interest or attract readers. But there is more than a coincidence between the sexual liberation of women on this television program and the sexual independence Lyons applauds in republican

1. Readings of French or German autobiographies have not confirmed the idea of a sexual revolution and instead emphasize the importance of Catholic ideas about the sinfulness of sex outside of marriage or of sexual respectability. See Maynes (1992) and Heywood (2007). One of the few consistent findings is that there are very few autobiographies written by women that discuss their sexual attitudes or experience.

2. Employment for women could lead to rejecting marriage or earlier marriage because a woman could amass a dowry on her own rather than reject marriage. Richard Adair says as much when he writes, "much of the difficulty obstructing clear theoretical progress in this field lies in the fact that diametrically opposed conclusions can often be drawn from the same set of data" (Adair 1996: 20).

Philadelphia. Women historians publishing books in the last ten years know educated women who raise children on their own and recognize that some poor women consider single motherhood preferable to legal marriage with an undesirable partner. They grew up in a world with effective birth control and legal abortion; the stigma attached to unmarried motherhood and cohabitation has largely disappeared; very few mothers die in childbirth. The language of choice, employed in making the case for legal access to abortion, is more widely used to denote decision making in sexual matters. Young women engage in heterosexual intercourse for pleasure, without exacting or expecting a promise of marriage, even a promise of any kind. To Louise Tilly the portrait of the emancipated poor woman defied common sense. She wrote to Joan Scott, “I just can’t see how he [Shorter] can imagine that it is in the rational interest of a working class female to rush around being a sexual libertine for pleasure—who gets stuck with the illegitimate children anyway?” (Scott 2013: 116). The male historians of sexuality agree with her; Griffin and Lyons do not because they can imagine that poor women might choose unwed motherhood. In the words of Clare Lyons, choice is an affirmation of individualism. “When the women themselves directed their sexual lives, they exercised unprecedented female sexual autonomy, that is, sexual choices unmediated by the interests or directions of others” (Lyons 2006: 256).

Mark Abrahamson, a sociologist, suggested a way of combining the opposite viewpoints in this 1970s debate, that increased tolerance, permissiveness, and decreased punishment might follow an upsurge in nonmarital births, an accommodation in values to a new social reality (Abrahamson 2000). Griffin sees herself as offering such a compromise, in that only in factory towns where family infant care was present was unmarried motherhood possible. She is careful to distinguish between liberation of women (which she argues did not exist) and her view that “sexual freedom” did exist. By sexual freedom she means that women could shake off the patterns of female sexual unfreedom—not having to be virgins, not having to fend off a partner’s advances, not having to corral a partner into marriage if she got pregnant. In fairness, this definition of sexual freedom is not a contemporary one, in that young women today have a much broader definition. As to whether Griffin’s definition can be documented from the historical record is an open question. Still, the most striking absence in Griffin’s article is that the phrase *female vulnerability* is never used.<sup>3</sup> In Tilly et al. vulnerable women needed male protectors who could make and enforce demands on their behalf that they could not undertake on their own. Griffin recounts stories from autobiographies of women’s pain during childbirth, postbirth complications, and infant deaths; some women were tricked by men, some deserted—female vulnerability is described but not named. The most obvious logic in this way of thinking about the first sexual revolution is that women were not liberated, but that they were not vulnerable either because they enjoyed sexual freedom. Because that was so, they were the beneficiaries of changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution.

3. For a postcolonial critique of discourse about “vulnerable women,” see Scully (2009).

## References

- Abelove, Henry (1989) "Some speculations on the history of sexual intercourse during the long eighteenth century in England." *Genders* 6 (3): 125–30.
- Abrahamson, Mark (2000) "Case Studies of Surges in Nonmarital Births." *Marriage and Family Review* 31 (1–2): 127–51.
- Adair, Richard (1996) *Courtship, Illegitimacy, and Marriage in Early Modern England*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Alter, George (1988) *Family and The Female Life Course: The Women of Verviers, Belgium, 1849–1880*. Madison: University of Wisconsin.
- Banner, James, and Gillis, John (2009) *Becoming Historians*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Blaikie, Andrew (1998) "Scottish illegitimacy: Social adjustment or moral economy?" *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 29 (2): 221–41.
- Evans, Tanya (2005) "'Unfortunate objects': London's unmarried mothers in the eighteenth century." *Gender and History* 17 (1): 127–53.
- Fairchild, Cissie (1978) "Female sexual attitudes and the rise of illegitimacy: A case study." *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 8 (4): 627–67.
- Frykman, Jonas (1975) "Sexual intercourse and social norms: A study of illegitimate births in Sweden, 1831–1933." *Ethnologia Scandinavica* 5: 110–50.
- Fuchs, Rachel G., and Leslie Page Moch (1990) "Pregnant, single, and far from home: Migrant women in nineteenth-century Paris." *American Historical Review* 95 (4): 1007–31.
- Griffin, Emma (2012) "A conundrum resolved? Rethinking courtship, marriage and population growth in eighteenth-century England." *Past and Present* 215 (1): 125–64.
- (2013a) "Sex, illegitimacy and social change in industrializing Britain." *Social History* 38 (2): 139–61.
- (2013b) *Liberty's Dawn: A People's History of the Industrial Revolution*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Heywood, Colin (2007) "Innocence and experience: Sexuality among young people in modern France, c. 1750–1950." *French History* 21 (1): 44–67.
- Hitchcock, Tim (1996) "Sex and gender: Redefining sex in eighteenth-century England." *History Workshop Journal* (41): 72–90.
- Laqueur, Thomas (1993) "Sex and desire in the Industrial Revolution," in Patrick O'Brien and Roland Quinault (eds.) *The Industrial Revolution and British Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 100–123.
- Laslett, Peter (1980) "The bastardy-prone sub-society," in Peter Laslett, Karla Oosterveen, and Richard M. Smith (eds.) *Bastardy and Its Comparative History*. London: Arnold: 217–39.
- Lee, W. R. (1977) "Bastardy and the socioeconomic structure of south Germany." *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 7 (3): 403–25.
- Levene, Alys, Thomas Nutt, and Samantha Williams (2005) *Illegitimacy in Britain, 1700–1920*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lyons, Clare A. (2006) *Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730–1830*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Maynes, Mary Jo (1992) "Adolescent sexuality and social identity in French and German lower-class autobiography." *Journal of Family History* 17 (4): 397–418.
- Schumacher, Reto, Grazyna Ryczkowska, and Olivier Perroix (2007) "Unwed mothers in the city: Illegitimate fertility in 19th century Geneva." *History of the Family* 12 (3): 189–202.
- Scott, Joan W. (2014) "Writing *Women, Work, and Family*: The Tilly-Scott Collaboration." *Social Science History* 38 (2): 113–20.
- Scully, Pamela (2009) "Vulnerable Women: A critical reflection on human rights discourse and sexual violence." *Emory International Law Review* 23 (1): 113–23.

- Shorter, Edward (1973) "Female emancipation, birth control, and fertility in European history." *American Historical Review* 78 (3): 605–40.
- Tilly, Louise A, Joan W. Scott, and Miriam Cohen (1976) "Women's work and European fertility patterns." *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 6 (3): 447–76.
- Tomasson, Richard F. (1976) "Premarital sexual permissiveness and illegitimacy in the Nordic countries." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 18 (2): 252–70.
- Trumbach, Randolph (1998) *Sex and the Gender Revolution, Volume 1: Heterosexuality and the Third Gender in Enlightenment London*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Van Bavel, Jan (2001) "Family control, bridal pregnancy, and illegitimacy—An event history analysis in Leuven, Belgium, 1846–1856." *Social Science History* 25 (3): 449–79.