

**‘Not a domestic utensil but a woman and a citizen’:
Stella Browne on Women, Health and Society**

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Old and New Feminism

Women and citizenship and women’s relation to the state have been abiding concerns of the movement for female political emancipation since its first stirrings. While it has been argued that there was a transition, subsequent to the achievement of the (limited) suffrage in Britain in 1918, from an ‘Old’ feminism of equality to a ‘New’ feminism of difference, these far from clear-cut monolithic camps represented two strands which had been present in the movement for women’s emancipation for much longer. There were pre-existing tensions between the ‘humanist’ case for feminism derived from Enlightenment political philosophy and nineteenth-century liberal thought, most notably expressed in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) and John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and a more biologically based ‘essentialist’ case conflating sex and gender. While there were differing interpretations of liberalism, its implicitly gender-neutral concept of citizenship could seem wanting when addressing issues involving specifically sexual abuse and exploitation of women. These were the focus of several campaigns from the mid-nineteenth century, including attempts to improve the position of woman within marriage (e.g. the struggles for the Married Women’s Property Act, or greater rights of mothers to custody of their children) or to abolish the Contagious Diseases Acts which gave the force of law to the Double Standard of sexual morality by penalising prostitutes in port and garrison towns but not their male partners.

There was also a strategic use of the doctrine of innate difference to claim that men could not legitimately represent women and moreover that women would, because of their specific womanly attributes, bring something new to the political process and state-creation. This did not include acceptance of the existing hierarchical valuing of gender difference or even the idea of separate spheres of

activity. Suffragists challenged the existing delineation of the private and public spheres by envisaging taking the values of the home out into the world, rather than the home providing a haven from a cruel (masculine) public domain.

The idea of motherhood and maternal nurturance was central to this vision. Indeed, the feminists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century often wholeheartedly accepted stereotypes of gender that defined women as caring, nurturant, altruistic and above all, *motherly*. Even if not personally and physically mothers, women could position themselves as taking on a maternal role towards the larger community or specific groups within it. This view of woman's role and the claims to political representation it implied was seldom distinctly differentiated from the discourse of rights and many advocates of women's suffrage moved between the two as specific situations and campaigns required.¹

From the beginning of the twentieth century, concerns over national fitness and population issues focussed increasing attention on actual motherhood. Women who were already mothers were, in the lower classes, subjected to various interventions aimed at improving the ways in which they brought up their children and cared for their health, while those in higher classes were the audience for growing numbers of books on the right methods of child-rearing. There was pressure to ensure the competence of future mothers by incorporating suitable lessons into the education of girls. Many of the strategies that were aimed at elevating the quality of mothering focussed on the failings of the individual mother rather than the social factors (poverty, inadequate housing, lack of access to health care, etc) which rendered child-raising a constant struggle against adverse conditions.²

Some women, it was conceded, would not marry. Therefore they might need remunerative occupations although of course they could seldom expect to be paid as much as a man, since they did not have to support a family (that they might be supporting aged parents or dependent relatives was usually ignored). Martha Vicinus has suggested that in Britain (and some other countries) there emerged during the nineteenth century a class of women who constituted a third term to the usual dichotomous representation of women as either married mothers or whores. The social and economic circumstances of the time admitted of the possibility of the existence of unmarried women living independently, on their own earnings, outside both heterosexual domesticity (either as mothers themselves or as subordinate helpers of their married relatives) and religious

governance. However, this freedom was won at the cost of an adherence to celibacy (at least its appearance): as Vicinus points out, 'the spinster had purity thrust upon her.' These women also often had a self-sacrificing dedication to working for others, engaging in various political, educational and moral campaigns aiming at elevating women's position in society (at least for future generations) and applying themselves to the emerging 'caring professions'.³ Unmarried women were ideally expected to work for others rather than their own direct gratification (except for a sense of duty well done) and fulfil, as already suggested, the task of 'social motherhood' as recompense for failing to achieve the physical actuality. Women who had succeeded, as they were increasingly doing in the early years of the twentieth century, in gaining professional qualifications or entry to relatively secure and well-rewarded jobs in the civil service, local government or business, could only pursue these if they were committed to celibacy, since formal and informal marriage bars operated.

There was thus a definite but rarely explicitly articulated division of respectable female citizens (as opposed to various categories of 'outcast') into married mothers who did not engage in paid work and unmarried women who might undertake remunerative labour but who had to lead a chaste and respectable life. This was contradicted on all sides by social actualities: married but childless women, women with children but invalid, absent or dead husbands, and the many women who combined some form of paid work with the duties of marriage and motherhood. Nonetheless law, convention and the general social culture of Britain in the early twentieth century decreed this dichotomy.

The camps of 'Old' and 'New' feminism have been characterized as on the one hand representing unmarried career women demanding workplace equality and, on the other, married women (or their champions: Eleanor Rathbone, campaigner for family allowances, was herself unmarried) concerned with the more traditionally womanly areas of mother and child welfare. This dichotomy is, however, false, as can be seen not only in the feminist concern over issues of marriage and maternity well before the winning of the suffrage (and indeed, as central reasons for demanding the vote), but by mapping the involvement of specific women with specific causes. Cicely Hamilton, for example, is sometimes seen as an 'Old', equal-rights, feminist because of her involvement with the Open Door League which campaigned against restrictions on women's employment but she was also active in the 'New' feminist struggles for birth control and legalized abortion.⁴

Stella Browne

A very radical direction in which debates on women's citizenship could be turned can be seen in the writings of Frances Worsley Stella Browne (1880–1955) (always known as 'Stella'), socialist and radical feminist, probably best remembered as a vigorous campaigner for birth control throughout the twenties and for abortion law reform during the thirties, when she became one of the founders of the Abortion Law Reform Association. However, she has perhaps been too narrowly seen by historians as a campaigner for women's rights to reproductive control: for her, these particular issues were located in a context of a much wider concern for women's health and their place within society.

Browne was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia, the daughter of Daniel Marshall Browne, a former officer in the Royal Navy who had transferred to the Canadian Marine Service and his second wife, Anna Dulcibella Mary Dodwell, the daughter of a clergyman, in 1880. She was brought up within what was effectively a single parent family following her father's death in a maritime accident when she was three. Her mother kept a genteel boarding house in Halifax until Stella herself was around thirteen.⁵ The family then, it seems probable, moved to Germany: Browne's maternal aunt had married Sir Alexander Siemens, of the distinguished Anglo-German engineering dynasty. After some years in Germany she was sent to the pioneering girls' school, St Felix Southwold, and thence to Somerville College, Oxford.⁶ She never returned to Canada and indeed seems to have defined herself as British, alluding to herself as a '(female) Briton'.⁷

Browne's writings are fragmentary and scattered but are copious enough and consistent enough in their arguments for it to be possible to deduce the kind of thinking which underlay her career of activism. While she fits into a British tradition of utopian thinking on health and social issues, she brought to this tradition a worked-out gender analysis which drew attention to the particular plight and needs of women and to the necessity of women being given the knowledge and means to manage their own health. By 1911 (she later wrote) she reached the position to which she adhered for the rest of her life and never retreated from, as a 'Socialist and "extreme" Left-Wing feminist'.⁸ While she responded to various specific issues and campaigns, the underlying logic of her agenda never faltered.

Her views, especially on abortion and women's rights to sexual pleasure, were extreme for the period. They were nonetheless put forward to a wide variety of audiences, although their actual

influence is not easily calculable. She was an early member of the British Communist Party, from which she resigned in 1923 over its refusal to consider contraception a proletarian question. She continued to be active in the Labour Party, supporting the Workers' Birth Control Group set up by Labour women determined to change the party's policy on the subject and harrying the party leadership for its pusillanimity during the twenties campaign for the right for birth control advice to be given in publicly-funded welfare clinics. A leading figure in the Chelsea Labour Party during the twenties, she was actively involved with the Fabian Society from 1924 to 1946.

She was a vigorous and articulate member of the Malthusian League, probably because it was the only British body, at the time she joined it around 1912, explicitly committed to advocating the artificial limitation of births and providing information on the subject. *The Malthusian*, renamed *The New Generation* in 1922, was a major forum for her views that were anathema to an older generation of Malthusians. The leaders of the League at the time Browne joined were the second generation of Drysdales, Charles Vickery ('C. V.') Drysdale and his wife Bessie, who generally preferred to confine their arguments to the economic advisability of family limitation and in particular were anti-socialist in their views.

However, a distinct feminist strand is discernable within the British Malthusian movement: a tradition going back at least to Francis Place and Richard Carlile suggested that preventive checks would benefit women's health not merely by limiting pregnancies but by permitting regular and unworried sexual intercourse. Later in the nineteenth century, relatively well-known figures such as Annie Besant (prior to her conversion to theosophy), Alice Vickery, Lady Florence Dixie, Jane Clapperton and less prominent female League members, gave a specifically female slant to the sometimes rather austere economic arguments of contemporary male Malthusians for the employment of contraceptives, publicly arguing that contraception was vital to women's health and well-being and should be made more widely available, especially to less fortunate women. Some of their writings and contributions to debates hint at the employment of contraception outside strictly marital sex, although the rhetoric tended to be about protection of vulnerable women rather than erotic empowerment.⁹ The suffrage movement at large tended to ignore birth control, given the continuing stigma of the practice, as politically contentious (and still repugnant to many in the movement). However, some committed suffrage campaigners (e.g. Edith How-Martyn, Eva Hubback and Cicely Hamilton), as

well as other progressive pre-First World War thinkers, such as H. G. Wells, who had no particular sympathy for its political agenda, were involved with the Malthusian League.¹⁰ Browne's continued involvement with the League, even after other more overtly feminist birth control organisations began to spring up during the twenties, was therefore not incongruous with her passionate feminism, as it might superficially seem, but relates her to a long and somewhat occluded tradition of female sexual radicalism which can be traced back at least as far as the Chartists and Owenites.¹¹

In 1916, Browne wrote that she had 'observed the Suffrage movement in England, from within and without, for some years'.¹² Assuming that the Miss S. Browne, Mrs Stella Browne, Miss Stella Browne and Miss Browne who thus variously appear in the Annual Reports of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), 1907 to 1913, were all the same woman and that this was the same Stella Browne who was a vociferous participant in debates in the correspondence columns of *The Freewoman* in 1912, she was a veteran of the militant suffrage campaign.¹³ She seems to have resigned as a result of the increasing Pankhurst autocracy: like a number of other activists, somewhat disenchanted with the 'towering spiritual arrogance' she had perceived in the WSPU leadership and the 'dogmatic and tyrannical' bureaucracy within the movement as a whole.¹⁴ From personal experience, therefore, she criticized in 1915 the 'self-advertising *arrivisme* and snobbery' of 'arrant humbug[s]', whose behaviour towards other women and men in a 'less advantageous social position' formed an 'illuminating commentary on [their] incessant protestations of feminism and democracy'.¹⁵ Browne was strongly influenced by the German feminist movement, in particular the radical wing associated with Dr Helene Stöcker, which concentrated less on specifically political rights and more on issues of reproduction and maternity. Browne nonetheless did not decry the importance of the struggle for political enfranchisement, arguing in 1912 on behalf of 'the moral value of this active and articulate revolt against *tradition as well as present conditions*' embodied in the militant suffrage movement, and the claim it advanced for women's right 'to full expression and experience'.¹⁶ Her personal style was powerfully shaped by the movement: in later years she was recalled by colleagues in abortion law reform during the thirties as 'what we used to call a war-horse, a sort of militant suffrage type, rather untidy, careless about her looks and appearance. Quite irrepressible at getting up and interrupting a meeting or asking questions.'¹⁷

Around 1913 she was trying to initiate a movement for the alteration of the laws on illegitimacy, along the lines of Stöcker's 'Bund für Mutterschutz' (the German Association for the Protection of Mothers), and the plight of the illegitimate child and the single mother continued to be a cause of concern to her.¹⁸ She joined the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology (BSSSP) soon after its inception in 1914 and gave her perhaps best known paper, 'On the Sexual Variety and Variability of Woman, and its Relation to Social Reconstruction' in the course of the following year. In 1916, she was invited to join the executive committee. Browne was a perennial and lively contributor to its debates and although she resigned from the committee in 1923, she continued to speak at and participate in its meetings well into the thirties.¹⁹ At this time, she was also active in the Federation of Progressive Societies and Individuals (FPSI) and co-chair of its Sex Reform Group.²⁰

It might be supposed that Stella Browne had nothing like the influence which Marie Stopes, for example, enjoyed between the wars. She never attained the kind of public media guru status that Stopes did but she was rather more than a lone voice somewhere out on the wilder fringes of sexual radicalism with an audience restricted to tiny vanguard bodies. Browne was involved in other organisations of a left-liberal progressive consensus sympathetic to an agenda of sexual liberation besides the BSSSP: she was active in the Promethean Society, Cosmopolis and the FPSI, and a patron of the post-Second World War Society for Sex Education and Guidance. Throughout the twenties and thirties, Browne was addressing numerous and often large meetings of local Labour Parties (both women's groups and mixed), Women's Cooperative Guilds and secular and ethical societies, as well as making her voice felt within the birth control movement. She spoke on a range of topics, including giving lecture series on health issues in general – as well as practical birth control instruction – for women. She also wrote articles, reviewed books and contributed letters to editors across a wide range of publications. One reason for her relative neglect may be that her thinking was complex and did not lend itself to being summed up in a few simple sentences. She did not posit any single cause or remedy for the ills of women and society.

Reorganizing Society

What women's place was in society, how society needed to be reorganized for women's benefit, were abiding concerns of Browne's writings and, we may hypothesise, of her talks as well. In her earliest

known public statements in the correspondence columns of the short-lived feminist periodical *The Freewoman* during 1912, Browne was already dealing with the subjects that would concern her for the rest of her life. Her debate with Kathlyn Oliver on whether women were naturally more chaste than men and her pleas for the female right to sexual experimentation have been much discussed by feminist historians.²¹ However, she voiced a range of other concerns in her contributions to this vanguard publication that were repeatedly addressed by her in subsequent years.²²

Birth control was of course a constant concern and always seen in the context of a woman's right to self-determination. Browne argued in 1917 that the advent of the socialist millennium (the Russian Revolution which took place in the very same year must have made this appear more than a utopian dream) would not render the question of women's reproductive choice redundant, but that women would always 'prefer to experience maternity at their own choice of times, circumstances, and father of their child.' She foresaw that 'in the finer social order for which some of us are working (in however insignificant and piecemeal a fashion), abortion will be very rare. But it will be recognised, and respected as an individual right.'²³ She 'never held that family limitation would *alone* abolish poverty' but argued in 1925 that 'No state which had socialised production and distribution ... would be able to cope with an unrestricted and indiscriminate growth of population.' On a more individual level, 'conscious control of parenthood' was 'absolutely necessary, if equal relationships are to be responsible and selective, and to achieve the dignity and beauty to which they can attain; and if the child-bearing half of humanity is ever to be on anything like an equality with man.'²⁴ Browne's commitment to women's interest and what she perceived as their truly equal status made her a thorn in the side of the Labour Party throughout the twenties, harassing a leadership which persistently ignored overwhelming majorities within the Women's Section for resolutions demanding birth control advice in maternal welfare clinics. Among those who felt the lash of her contempt were women such as Ethel Bentham and Marion Phillips (personally named and shamed in the pages of *The New Generation* in 1924) who had achieved power within the Labour Party but obsequiously followed the Ramsay Macdonald line and ignored or rebuked the agitators for birth control.²⁵

Browne also castigated leaders of feminist organisations. They were, she said in 1927, 'women of the most expensively educated and publicly active type, whose initiative and independence on the

private side of their lives as well as on Committees could be in no manner of doubt', who ignored the pressing needs of working women.²⁶ In the previous year she had suggested that feminist bodies apparently considered 'Lady Rhondda's right to sit and vote in the Upper House more urgent than working women's right to refuse to bear children they do not desire and cannot support.'²⁷ She condemned the feminist periodical *Time and Tide* during the same year for concentrating on political equality, defining its hostile attitude towards the birth control campaign as 'sexphobia' and 'hardly honest' for women 'themselves exceptionally energetic, articulate [and] fortunate.'²⁸ However, she did pay tribute to the 'persistent agitation' by the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC) and the Six Point Group which by 1927 had obtained the 'tardy and grudging concession' by the Government of franchise on the same terms to women as men.²⁹ While referring in 1928 to the franchise (which had finally been granted on equal terms) as an 'overrated but often helpful weapon', she paid homage to predecessors who 'believing that we were really human beings, worked and suffered in that cause'.³⁰

When the NUSEC finally swung over to support birth control in 1927 Browne commended their 'logical and effective synthesis of the demand for birth control knowledge with that advocacy of Family Endowment which Councillor Eleanor Rathbone has made her life work'.³¹ However, her general approval of Rathbone's fight for family allowances was by no means uncritical. In particular Browne protested about the central place Rathbone accorded to married women in her formulation of endowment of motherhood. Condemning Rathbone's 1925 suggestion that the children of unmarried mothers should be handed over to the Poor Law unless their parents were willing to 'stabilise their union', Browne expressed her profound hope that maternity endowment would 'never be used to bolster up stereotyped and outworn forms of marriage' by turning 'a brief – though possibly worthwhile – illusion into a permanent incompatibility'.³²

Although often characterized as a sex reformer above all, Browne did not believe that sex could be reformed in isolation from other social ills, nor that getting sex right would solve all the problems of individuals and society. All sorts of social pressures, she argued, militated against individuals feeling comfortable with their sexuality and being capable of having rewarding erotic lives. In her well-known study on *Sexual Variety and Variability Among Women* (1917) she began by asserting that 'I do not think that any intelligent, humane

and self-respecting attitude towards sex is generally possible, without great economic changes; and a responsible education in the laws of sex'.³³ As she saw it, existing 'sexual institutions [were] founded on the needs and preferences of a primitive type of man alone ... creditable and satisfactory to neither sex.'³⁴

While praising 'the admirable advice and badly needed instruction, gracefully and happily expressed' in Marie Stopes's *Married Love* (1918), Browne had two insistent criticisms. The book was quite frankly addressed to 'the educated, prosperous and privileged classes', and Stopes 'does not seem to admit 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, sufficiently to follow her suggestions.' Stopes's ideal of life-long monogamy, furthermore, overlooked 'the fact that the present legally sanctioned patriarchal monogamy rests on the subjection of women' and implied prostitution as a male 'safety-valve'. A 'tragic amount of misery and misunderstanding' grew out of the ignorance associated with women's economic dependence.³⁵

Browne had a solid feminist objection to the regulation of prostitution and the ways in which prostitutes were pervasively deprived of civil rights as well as being stigmatized. Josephine Butler was one of her heroines for her 'proclamation of individuality and individual worth and choice' and 'enormous courage against odds'. Browne claimed that there was not 'so much steadfast courage or so much honest sex pride or solidarity among women, that we can afford to forget Mrs Butler's work', even if the "Equal Moral Standard" is not being worked out along the lines many of her colleagues and followers anticipated.' But those (like Browne herself) who believed that 'no sexual acts should take place which are not desired and enjoyed by both partners' were, she felt, surely among those who owed Butler a tribute in her centenary year of 1928.³⁶

Browne was a passionate critic of the contemporary sexual system which divided women into 'two arbitrary classes, corresponding to no psychological or ethical differences: as a) The prospective or actual private sex property of one man. b) The public sex property of all and sundry.'³⁷ As she pointed out in 1917 in *The Sexual Variety and Variability of Woman*, 'the promiscuously polyandrous class of women ... are the necessary concomitants of a system of patriarchal marriage – especially monogamous marriage; and of compulsory chastity for most women before marriage.'³⁸ But in her view, '[t]he existence of prostitution is a great wrong to women and love, in

subtle as well as in obvious ways: it not only debases the whole view of sex, but ... it favours a mechanical facility of the sexual process in men.³⁹

Browne never took the existing state of knowledge about sexual matters as given but always considered this as provisional and likely to be revised in the light of ongoing study. She was interested in the investigation of the problem of prostitution and its causes and possible remedies: in *The Malthusian* of July 1916 she heartily recommended the volume *Downward Paths. An Inquiry into the Causes which Contribute to the Making of the Prostitute* (1916) as 'an exceedingly sound and careful piece of work, avoiding all slapdash generalisations' with 'a real wish to *understand*, instead of the usual cheap cant.'⁴⁰ She praised the American volume *The Unadjusted Girl* (1924), especially its conclusions that the social system, as well as the delinquent girl, was in need of adjustment. Browne suggested that too often '[i]nvestigation and "preventive" work among prostitutes and criminals may so easily become a wholesale interference on lines of condemnation, a secret flattery of the "investigator's" own sanctity, a salve to her own repressions.'⁴¹

She was less impressed by the report of the League of Nations Commission on the Traffic in Women and Children which appeared in 1927. She considered that the members' report, possibly bowing to political pressures, only referred

very briefly and casually to the economic causation of the facts they recount, and the whole vast network of psychological and physiological motives, the effects of ignorance, of the hideous boredom of much modern work, of the increased mechanisation of much modern leisure, of the inadequacy and disharmony of most modern marriage, of the vast individual range of sexual tastes and 'twists', of the fear of the unwanted child

and instead demanded simply 'still more regulation and control – police control'. In addition she linked the ongoing demand for prostitution and in particular *maisons tolérées* to militarism and 'the system of huge military establishments' which the League's constituents were unlikely to abandon or even reduce.⁴² In commending the major recommendation of the report of the British Government's Street Offences Committee in 1928, Browne remarked that 'A modern community cannot with any logic, decency or comfort accept the theory of a rightless class or a rightless sex.' But she believed, perhaps optimistically, that 'the two stereotyped feminine patterns of the sheltered wife and the chivvied outlaw are

merging into a more various and spontaneous humanity', although adding acerbically 'the woman of the transition so often wants to have it both ways – to enjoy the privileges of subjection and the rights of freedom!'⁴³

Browne did not overlook the problem of venereal diseases which she saw as very largely the outcome of a social system orientated towards the needs of a 'primitive type of male', profoundly resistant to sexual enlightenment.⁴⁴ She considered various ways in which this peril could be handled which were equitable to all concerned. In 1915, 'A Warning to Women: The Venereal Diseases Peril in Everyday Life' appeared in *Beauty and Health*, a popular women's magazine published by American physical culturist Bernarr MacFadden. This dealt predominantly with the perils of innocent infection rather than sexual transmission: she argued that '[t]he most chaste life will not always safeguard a woman who is ignorant or careless, or unable – as is the case with so many under present social conditions – to observe scrupulous personal cleanliness.' However, Browne did emphasize the importance of knowledge. She pointed out that both syphilis and gonorrhoea were amenable to treatment, but that there was 'need for legislation, for proper facilities for treatment, and for education on sound scientific lines and the utilisation of scientific knowledge.'⁴⁵ In her 1917 paper in *Socialist Review*, 'Women and the Race', in response to an anti-feminist article by the socialist S. H. Halford, Browne made a more forthrightly feminist statement: 'a large percentage of sterility in women is due to venereal infection by their husbands ... a tremendous indictment of men's government of society.'⁴⁶

She was even more outspoken about the whole problem in a 1920 private letter to Janet Carson, the paid secretary of the BSSSP. Commenting on literature of the recently formed Society for the Prevention of Venereal Disease (SPVD) which Carson had sent her, Browne wrote:

It is perfectly free from the hideous barefaced sex-injustice involved in 'regulation', – though I fear for unavoidable reasons of comparative sex anatomy it must always be much easier for a man to disinfect his (external) organs than a woman hers, which are so largely internal. Still the S.P.V.D. *does* give explicit instructions to women as well as men, as to how to disinfect, and I think we should recognise this. We have no right to deny to any man, even if he *does* resort to prostitution, *protection from v.d.* – which *does not* involve the *slavery and additional degradation of women*. You know my feeling

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about 'regulation' is as strong as anyone's, but self-disinfection *does not* involve regulation. I should intensely resent any attempt to keep the knowledge of such a possibility from me or any woman friend I was interested in, and we have no right to deny it to men either. Of course I also advocate working *from the roots*, but as we know that is a lengthy process.⁴⁷

In 1918 she tried to persuade the BSSSP to pass a resolution against Regulation 40D under the Defence of the Realm Act that was widely considered to be sneaking the Contagious Diseases Acts back into practice under the guise of war time necessity.⁴⁸ In 1922 she was scathing about the report of the National Council of Public Morals Special Committee on Venereal Disease, *The Prevention of Venereal Disease*, which, she wrote, inadvertently revealed 'the entire breakdown of bourgeois morality in the face of venereal disease, the result of ignorance, poverty and prostitution – the three pillars of bourgeois society – and proves up to the hilt the need for sanitary and contraceptive knowledge among the mass of people, as part of the new civilisation.'⁴⁹

As late as 1943 Browne was moved to write to the *Tribune*, concerning the denial of prophylactic instructions to recruits to the women's services, wanting to know why not:

it is an adult right and an adult duty to know how to prevent disease, and the duty of any civilised contemporary government to supply the knowledge and the means. Venereal diseases cannot be extirpated by knowledge for men only, supplemented by chivying the poorer prostitutes. Both these methods have been tried and failed.⁵⁰

As in her demands for the availability of birth control and the development of improved methods, Browne's approach towards the problem of sexually transmitted diseases was one of providing women (in particular) with information and the means of protecting themselves. They were to be neither stigmatized and penalized nor to be 'protected' by the imposition of ignorance.

The Health of Women

Browne considered that women's health needs were in general grossly neglected, the refusal to provide birth control information being only the most egregious example. On the generally unhealthy conditions under which so many women were doomed to live, she praised Leonora Eyles' *The Woman in the Little House* (1922) in a review in *The New Generation* for depicting the 'disharmony, insufficiency and

waste' that constituted the working woman's life: 'housing, insufficient wages and economic dependence, adulterated food, shoddy unhygienic clothing, the methods of small retail tradesmen, and household routine.'⁵¹ She had particularly trenchant things to say about the defects of housing from the perspective of the woman who had to manage a household. '[P]resent domestic construction' (as at 1916, when conditions were perhaps particularly grim due to wartime stringencies) entailed 'the waste of women's time, energy, and very life.' While condemning 'cramped, evil-smelling rooms ... foul sleeping arrangements ... heart-breaking, back-breaking stairs that women climb with water and coal', Browne saw the problem as not simply one of poverty but of the wider neglect of women's domestic needs. 'Not even [in] the most finely-equipped and organised household' had she ever found 'a convenient and well-planned kitchen sink; while as for shelf and cupboard room ...'⁵² Concerns such as these were to be directly addressed in the planning of Kensal House in the 1930s, as Elizabeth Darling shows in her chapter.

Browne was unlike those of her contemporaries who idolized a rustic, arcadian vision of England and who, like the writer H. V. Morton, contrasted the domestic cosiness of the cottage with the squalor of industrial environs. Browne did not see bad housing as only an urban phenomenon: in a 1923 article she referred to 'cottages ... whitewashed outside and fragrant with honeysuckle and rose ... within ... full of the degradation and diseases of loathsome overcrowding.'⁵³ While she had a fondness for the country and natural beauty, she did not subscribe to the pastoral myth of the superiority of the country cottage to the town house. In 1929 she reported on a visit to 'one of the historic Cathedral towns of England', depicting its 'thousand glories of history and poetry, wealth and security, and green English turf and trees.' These were juxtaposed with 'a winding street that writhed down to the Severn, like a slimy reptile: a street of the most inhumanly indecent and insanitary slums I ever beheld', a mere 'stone's throw' from the cosy Trollopean vista.⁵⁴ Depictions of such vistas, as Michael Bartholomew shows in his chapter, were much in demand by the inter-war public.

Given the importance society assigned to women's role as mothers, Browne in 1917 deplored 'the disgrace of the maternal death and damage, and the insufficient and unskilled care provided for the poorer women of this country during childbirth.'⁵⁵ While generally associated with the prevention of births, she also advocated single motherhood for those with an intense maternal instincts and was concerned over the management of childbirth, keeping up with

the latest developments in obstetric analgesia.⁵⁶ In 1916, she asked 'When will the great discovery ... [of] twilight slumber ... be as much at the disposal of British women as skilled care and anaesthetics at the service of our wounded soldiers?'⁵⁷ A convinced pacifist, she later suggested similarly that 'the synthetic chemistry which can give Governments a choice of 300 different poison gases ... might achieve *one* reliable contraceptive.'⁵⁸

She was extremely critical of existing health provisions, often alluding to the Ministry of Health as the 'Ministry of Disease', and persistently attacking its 'sinister and treacherous incompetence'.⁵⁹ It was, she said, 'relentlessly exposed and condemned by its own testimony' as laid out in official reports and statistics.⁶⁰ Browne worked for some while in the early twenties at the Ministry's Insurance Department, which she described as 'The House of Bondage'.⁶¹ In an attack on what she described in 1917 as the 'fevered propaganda in favour of what some reactionaries already term "the normal family"', Browne suggested that if the bearing of children was really 'women's supreme duty to the state', this postulated reciprocal duties by the state to guarantee tolerable conditions under which they could bear and rear children. The desiderata which Browne outlined included '[a]n efficient public health service, including a free supply of all appliances, drugs, and services necessary for the care of pregnancy, child-birth and infancy, and equitable and thorough measures for combatting venereal disease.'⁶² She did not find that this characterized contemporary public health administration. In 1925, she pointed out that specialist maternity hospitals offered a bare 2000 beds for lying-in and that provision was completely uncoordinated. While praising the work of Infant Welfare Centres in 1925, Browne suggested that being forbidden to give contraceptive advice, they were 'working at some disadvantage'. Infant mortality was actually increasing and maternal mortality declining only very slightly.⁶³

Browne was strongly rooted in a Left-wing critique of orthodox medicine that was inspired by alternative health ideas. Orthodox medicine she perceived as riddled with vested interests and in 1926, she protested against 'medical monopoly under pretext of "safeguards", hygienic or "moral"'. Her opinion of the medical profession was not high and she suggested that the doctors' 'reputation for general fair play and disinterested *expertise*' was not of the highest, adding 'quite apart from sexual matters, on which the majority of the profession in Britain are *either* very timid or very uninformed.'⁶⁴ Denouncing the Labour politician Dr Ethel Bentham's own 1924 attack on birth control, Browne reminded her

'that the medical profession as a whole derives considerable "private benefit" from unrestricted child-bearing and its consequences.'⁶⁵ On various occasions she alluded to the fact that doctors had the smallest families of any class or profession, even while refusing or condemning birth control advice.

She was in no awe of medical science, pointing out in 1924 that 'Official medical opinion has changed its mind very often in the past, and will doubtless do so again!', citing its reversals 'about anaesthetics in childbirth, about asepsis, about psychotherapeutics, about osteopathy'. In addition she pointed to the conflicts between orthodox medical thinking and ideas held by many in the Labour movement (the Labour Party, of course, had recently come to power) on such subjects as 'a diet including flesh meat and the moderate use of alcohol' and 'the fundamental questions of vaccination and vivisection' (Browne had been a member of the Humanitarian League until its demise in the early twenties).⁶⁶ While hopeful that the increasing number of women entering medicine might work changes, Browne cautioned that this was only likely if they had 'the courage to refuse ... masculine mythology.'⁶⁷

She referred to herself in 1926 as 'for years extending to the poor the information which their accredited healers mostly refuse.'⁶⁸ While in that particular instance she was alluding specifically to birth control, in the following year she made a far broader case against the 'vested interests in women's ignorance and helplessness'. '[I]ll-health, inefficiency and misery' resulted from the ignorance in which women had been left by the medical profession about 'normal general hygiene and the wholesome management of diet during puberty, periodicity, pregnancy and the menopause'.⁶⁹ In her lectures on health Browne did her best to alleviate this 'carefully cultivated ignorance of women concerning their own physiology.'⁷⁰ She believed in the dissemination of information: writing in 1931 about the recently-discovered Asheim-Zondek pregnancy test, she commented that this 'could establish the fact of impregnation at an extremely early date' and asked '[b]ut why was this knowledge kept from women who needed it?'⁷¹

Browne was fully aware of and did not ignore the problems of single working women such as herself. In her article 'Women and the Race', which appeared in *The Socialist Review* in 1917, responding to an anti-feminist article by male socialist S. H. Halford, Browne commented dryly: 'Mr Halford seems to me to over-estimate the magnificence and scope of women's economic prospects!'⁷² This was a subject that Browne, a graduate of Somerville and fluent in at least

two foreign languages, knew a great deal about: she never seems to have held a good job in her life but had to do a lot of things, many quite uncongenial, in order to make a living.

Although on pacifist principles she had eschewed war work during the First World War, she was sensitive to the anomalous position of women who had assisted the war effort. In 1918, the socialist newspaper *The Call* published her poem 'Scrapped: The Women Munition Workers of Britain, Before and After November 1918', which ended with the ironic:

The world is ours! We've won our War for Right!
Now, women, you can go! You've served our Need!⁷³

In an article in *The Communist* in 1922 she reiterated this point: 'the women who were gushed at as "splendid" and "saviours of the country" in war time are now realising that it is once more economically a crime to be a woman.' She additionally noted the way in which the 'economic position of women has been injured ... by the deliberate policy of the Government in playing off the temporary women clerks and the ex-servicemen against one another.'⁷⁴ In 1926, she repeated her cautions against tendencies to be 'far too sanguine about the present conditions and immediate prospects of financial independence for women' not only among many men but even among that minority of women already enjoying 'social and economic security'. Women, she suggested, had 'not advanced halfway towards economic justice'.⁷⁵

The Sexual Life

On several occasions, Browne explicitly condemned the social pressures upon the unmarried woman to live, at least in appearance, a desexualized life with 'no publicly recognised and honoured form of sex union which meets both their needs' for independence and for love. Those who engaged in free unions, she commented in 1917, caught '[b]etween the upper and nether millstones of legal marriage and prostitution', were often broken or degraded by 'ceaseless, grinding, social pressure'.⁷⁶ They were forced to struggle against 'the whole social order' for '[their] most precious personal right'.⁷⁷ There was 'huge, persistent, indirect pressure on women of strong passions and fine brains' to find an emotional outlet with other women. Existing social arrangements, Browne suggested, repressed female sexual instincts and militated against women forming either satisfactory and unstigmatized relationships with men or healthy relationships with one another.⁷⁸ Browne's vision of woman as citizen

did not divide the sex into two acceptable groups of celibate workers and fertile married women but saw the ideal society as having a place for women with lovers but not babies, women with babies but no husbands, even lesbian mothers.⁷⁹ In an ideal society, women would have the opportunity for sexual experimentation as well as for the sexual relationships justified by 'a great love'.⁸⁰ She also conceded that a celibate life might entirely suit some individuals.⁸¹

In her rejection of the marriage/promiscuity dichotomy, Browne was in no way opening the door to unthinking license, but can be positioned as part of an English radical and feminist tradition of critiquing marriage and advocating free love from an elevated ethical standpoint. She wrote to Bertrand Russell in 1917:

Certainly a great deal of the newer manifestations of sexual liberty are very far from encouraging or attractive, but I think this is partly due to the hateful war atmosphere & conditions, & to other quite adventitious things – e.g. the ignorance & dependence of many women – which have no necessary connection with sexual liberty in itself. One cannot expect people to develop real responsibility, or refinement & discrimination of feeling, in one generation, especially with prostitution so firmly rooted in our social order, as it is & has been.⁸²

However, her construction of free love, while remote from frivolity and exploitation, did not confine it simply to permanent monogamous unions unrecognised by church or state. She considered that there were many differing types of sexual nature whose needs should be respected, arguing in 1932 that there were:

[T]he people whose attitude to sex was casual and incidental, and those to whom sexual experience was intertwined with imagination and affection and one of the greatest things in their life. Both kinds of people existed and both had a reason to exist, and there were also those who were capable of both light love and deep, according to personality and circumstances. No *one* formula would solve sex problems.⁸³

While Browne was not sympathetic to the kind of feminism which was more interested in restricting men than freeing women, her attitude towards men was very far from deferential.⁸⁴ Indeed, her viewpoint seems definitely that of a sexual subject rather than a sex-object. What a woman required in a man, she believed, was 'splendid physical vitality and virility'. This was 'just as necessary in a sex partner as ideal & intellectual sympathy'.⁸⁵ In 1927, she claimed that men of 'creative vigour and intelligence ... sympathy and

imagination' who did not feel any necessity to 'fetter and further handicap women' but were able to 'attract and satisfy women as mates, without ... bribery or bullying' were an 'interesting and delightful minority'.⁸⁶ She had plenty of criticisms to make of contemporary heterosexual relations: throughout her several articles which appeared during 1916 and 1917, she argued that given a concept of 'conjugal rights' that was outrageous to decency and freedom, the law flagrantly failed to prevent 'exploitation or violation' within marriage.⁸⁷ The vast amount of sexual anaesthesia among married women was caused by 'lack of skill, control and sympathy on the husband's part'.⁸⁸ Thus many women underwent the 'ordeal of parturition' having enjoyed 'very little definite pleasure in the act of intercourse'.⁸⁹

It is somewhat ironic that some historians have defined Browne as an agent of 'compulsory heterosexuality'.⁹⁰ While, in tune with the sexological thinking of her day about 'inversion', she differentiated 'congenital inversion' from an 'artificial tendency to inversion' resulting from 'emotional repression and mismanagement in certain temperaments', she was vigorous in expressing her belief that the 'invert' was entitled to recognition. Browne pleaded for tolerance of deviation: 'Do not persecute or condemn', she demanded in 1928 about the trial of *The Well of Loneliness*, which had come out in July of that year.⁹¹ Indeed, in 1923 she argued that '[w]e are learning to recognise congenital inversion as a vital and very often valuable factor in civilisation, subject of course, to the same restraints as to public order and propriety, freedom of consent, and the protection of the immature, as normal heterosexual desire.'⁹² She was even prepared to defend, indeed to recommend the (possibly even more stigmatized) sexual practice of masturbation, suggesting in her 1917 'Sexual Variety and Variability' paper that 'self-excitement and solitary enjoyment ... [are] inevitable in any strongly developed sexual life'. As a disciple (though never an uncritical follower) of Havelock Ellis, she argued that 'normal sexuality includes the beginnings of most abnormal instincts', such as 'inflicting ... or suffering a certain degree of pain' and 'certain forms of fetishism'. She differentiated such 'minor and occasional aberrations' from the damaging effects on women's sexual development of the 'system of silence and repression'.⁹³

Like other pressing questions bearing on women's health, the study of menstruation in Browne's view had been neglected: 'the whole periodic function has been as much misunderstood and mismanaged as the maternal', she wrote in 1923.⁹⁴ In keeping with the other concepts of women's variety and variability advanced in her

1917 paper, she suggested that there might be diverse types of women who had different experiences in the matter. Browne considered that 'in the social order for which some of us hope and work, provision will have to be made for women's periodic changes' and for the menopause as well as gestation and childbirth. While conceding that 'many experienced medical women ... believe that under fair and healthy conditions, menstruation will gradually become almost negligible', Browne dissented from this view. She agreed that it had been made 'needlessly painful and debilitating' and suggested that 'persistent sexual repression' was one of the 'chief agents in aggravating its symptoms and effects' and that it was often alleviated by sexual relations.⁹⁵ In Browne's thought on this issue, there appears to be a subtext that the idea that menstruation should make no difference was colluding in an assumption that women should participate in society as it was organized by and for men. While she never evolved anything as definite as Marie Stopes's theory of the periodical recurrence of female sexual desire, she was certainly sympathetic to the theory of a 'recurrent rhythm in general health, efficiency and mental poise' put forward by Mary Chadwick in 1933.⁹⁶

A Healthy Society

Unlike Marie Stopes, Browne had little sympathy with orthodox eugenics as propounded by the English Eugenics Education Society (EES). She found it class-biassed and misogynistic in its prescriptions, although some writers have rather misleadingly identified her as a eugenicist.⁹⁷ She queried in 1917 'whether the innate superiority in the governing class, really is so overwhelming as to justify the Eugenics Education Society's peculiar use of the terms "fit" and "unfit"' and she deplored its refusal to extend the knowledge of contraception to the 'exploited classes' (reiterating points made earlier in *The Freewoman*).⁹⁸ She makes an interesting contrast to the Communist doctor Eden Paul, who in his contribution to a symposium on birth control in which they both participated in 1922 put a curious, and rather scary, case for a kind of Left-wing eugenics aimed at producing, presumably, the kind of heroic proletarians found on Soviet posters of the period. Paul was particularly virulent about the survival of 'persons with grave eye defects, short-sight, astigmatism, etc, who would, but for spectacles and the absence of a fierce struggle for existence on the biologic plane, be eliminated before they could perpetuate their defective type.'⁹⁹

Browne did not simply replace the desirable racial type as envisaged by the EES with some kind of noble savage or heroic

worker. She questioned the value of the whole concept of 'fitness', pointing out that important contributions to society had been made by many who were far from being prime breeding stock. As early as 1912, in the columns of *The Freewoman*, she suggested that problems worthy of contemplation by the EES were 'the occasional union of genius and deformity ... [and] the close connection ... between genius and insanity'.¹⁰⁰ She also queried the basic theories upon which eugenicists founded their programmes: heredity, Browne suggested in 1934, did not seem such a perfectly 'simple, straightforward matter' since Mendel and Bateson had demonstrated its complexities.¹⁰¹

Browne joined the Eugenics Society in 1938 (probably in the interests of constructing strategic alliances for the Abortion Law Reform Association) but her membership lapsed in 1942.¹⁰² Her views on eugenics do not seem to have materially altered by the thirties. She constantly refused to countenance 'any *wholesale* sterilising or segregating' and deplored in 1924 the 'raucous hounding of the "unfit" by some supporters of things as they are'.¹⁰³ In 1935, during the agitation for legalising sterilization, she also wondered 'why any sane and physically fine adult man or woman should not be able to be sterilised on demand' (i.e. as an efficient form of contraception).¹⁰⁴ In a critique of a 1933 Eugenics Society lecture on 'Race Mixture', she showed herself cognisant of the latest discoveries about blood groups, pointing out the lecturer's neglect of attention to these, 'which are by no means co-terminous with the three primary races', as well as generally dissenting from his conclusions.¹⁰⁵ She was an early admirer of the very different approach to fitness embodied in Innes Pearse and George Scott Williamson's Peckham Experiment of the early thirties, which Abigail Beach discusses in her chapter. Browne however commented that Pearse's and Williamson's 'scale of values seems rather obsessed with Parenthood!'¹⁰⁶

By the thirties Browne was also aware of and concerned about the rise of Fascism. In 1933 she was condemning the 'sweeping away ... [of] all the achievements of opportunity and equality for German women after the war', as well as the 'burning of the books' and the 'persecution of free inquiry'.¹⁰⁷ Later the same year, she published in the *New Generation* extensive extracts from an 'account of exactly how Fascism works as regards the educated, self-supporting, law-abiding women of Germany'.¹⁰⁸ In the following year, she engaged in a debate with William Joyce (later infamous as 'Lord Haw-Haw') of the British Union of Fascists at the Lyceum Club, proposing the motion that 'the relationship of the sexes is better under

Communism than under Fascism.' Fascism, she argued, although 'honouring and providing for mothers', did so 'on traditional lines by exalting their maternity at the expense of their full humanity'.¹⁰⁹

Browne consistently depicted the factors that made for ill-health and suffering as structural, innate by-products of the way in which society was organized on all levels, from the planning of kitchens to the highest emotional and spiritual concerns. This did not mean that she saw individuals as completely devoid of agency. Given her critique of medical authority and her democratic and anti-authoritarian position, she believed that individuals could take measures to improve their own health, although in many cases they were left in dire ignorance of the ways they could do so. For example, she suggested in 1931 that 'If all women had access to the best modern knowledge in medicine and hygiene, if all women had means and leisure, and minds freed from fear and medievalism – *how* different things would be.'¹¹⁰

Browne held before her a utopian ideal of the 'finer state of life' in which health would be the norm and provision for ill-health freely available rather than grudgingly doled out. However, she did not disdain to fight for immediate and often quite small gains, as we can see from her month by month account in *The New Generation* of the struggle for birth control provision in welfare centres. She does not seem to have believed that working for the revolution took priority over ameliorating the suffering of individuals in the here and now: and indeed she argued that raising women out of a state of dumb suffering was likely to render them capable of working for still greater changes. Her commitment to the individual and her ideal of 'the finer state', characterized by variety and diversity, was voiced throughout her career. In 1924 she explicitly rejected 'a social order which puts necessary work, justice, creative art and science, love and breeding on a cash basis.'¹¹¹ What she demanded instead were 'revolutionary changes in all departments ... the development of hitherto isolated human harmonies, or intense and vivid variations of faculty and type.'¹¹²

Notes

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 - 16 F. W. Stella Browne, Review of Havelock Ellis, *The Task of Social Hygiene*, *English Review*, 13 (1912): 157; and see Lesley A. Hall "'What a Lot there is still to Do': Stella Browne (1880-1955) Carrying the Struggle Ever Onward', in *A Suffrage Reader: Charting Directions British Suffrage History*, Claire Eustance, Joan Ryan, and Laura Ugolini (eds), (forthcoming).
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 - 18 Stella Browne to Havelock Ellis, 9 February 1914, Havelock Ellis papers in the Department of Manuscripts, British Library, Additional Manuscript 70539.

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- 19 Minutes and correspondence in the archives of the British Sexology Society, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin (hereafter BSS).
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