



Research Article

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Talking about Birth Control in 1877: Gender, Class, and Ideology in the Knowlton Trial

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Abstract: This article explores the debate around widening access to birth control information in the late nineteenth century through a case study of Annie Besant's participation in the 1877 Knowlton Trial. Examining Besant's rhetoric at the trial and in related publications, it highlights the public and performative nature of her campaign to facilitate access to birth control information for working-class married couples. With reference to the representation of issues of gender and social class and the shifting focus from the private to the public in Besant's rhetoric, the article argues that the late nineteenth-century debate around birth control access was a middle-class debate about working-class life and experience.

Keywords: birth control, family planning, Annie Besant, neo-Malthusianism, feminism, Knowlton Trial

Although rarely openly and publicly discussed, various forms of contraception and family planning were in widespread use across nineteenth-century British society. As early as 1977 Patricia Branca suggested that birth control was not only recognised during this period as “the most practical means of coping with the unresolved problems of maternal mortality,” but that family planning was acknowledged to have an economic role, contributing significantly to increasing the wealth of middle-class families. She explains: “As manager of the household the middle-class woman, confronted with limited means, was acutely aware of the expenses involved in maintaining her children in the new fashion,” and having fewer children increased the chances of providing each child with optimal opportunities (114). Limiting family size, then, could be seen as benefiting the whole family's physical and economic well-being, and helping women and families to do this was the stated aim of many nineteenth-century publications offering information on birth control. The distribution of contraceptive information was constrained, however, as high prices meant publications were more readily available to wealthier families.

In 1877, the birth control debate was placed firmly in the public eye when Freethinkers Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh were tried for selling *Fruits of Philosophy* (1832) by Charles Knowlton, a pamphlet containing birth control information. Although it had been in circulation for decades, *Fruits* had recently been banned in Britain under the Obscene Publications Act of 1857. With their defence of the pamphlet, Besant and Bradlaugh staged a public and highly performative protest based on the neo-Malthusian argument that working-class families should have access to birth control information in order to limit the size of their family according to their income. Besant's role in the campaign was public and personalised: she spoke in her own defence in court and went on to publish her own birth control information pamphlet, *The Law of Population* (1877).

S. Chandrasekhar described Besant's role in the Knowlton Trial as “the spectacle of an educated and prominent woman, running the risk of ostracism and imprisonment, stoutly defending the right to discuss birth control” (46), an image in keeping with Besant's own representation of herself and her motivations both at the trial and in subsequent publications. A range of scholars have hailed the trial as “the beginning

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of the democratisation of birth control knowledge” (Chandrasekhar 46): Loralee MacPike credits Besant with causing a “mass revival” of the birth control debate (373), and Kristin Kalsem describes the trial as “a victory for birth control” as well as “a personal triumph for Besant” (550). These analyses recognise the importance of social class in the birth control debate: terms like “mass revival” and “democratisation” echo Besant’s own argument that she wished to share birth control knowledge, already widely available to middle-class women, with working-class women by making it available at a low cost.

I would like to take up Chandrasekhar’s reference to “spectacle” to suggest that the performance of class and gender roles was particularly relevant to this campaign. The case revolved around a conflation of the public and the private, as Besant deliberately brought what were considered private matters into a public domain; Kalsem states that she introduced the “neglected perspectives [of working-class women] into the courtroom and insisted on their legal relevance” (535). As working-class women did not themselves speak at the trial, however, and Besant and Bradlaugh’s neo-Malthusian arguments were socio-economic rather than personal, I suggest here that the birth control debate at the Knowlton Trial constituted the middle class talking to itself about working-class life and experience. As Besant submitted her arguments regarding the lives and bodies of working-class women to the scrutiny of middle-class men, she adapted her arguments to her audience. This article examines Besant’s arguments and rhetoric during the campaign as a conscious performance for the benefit of a middle-class and predominantly male audience seeking to influence working-class life and behaviour.

Fruits of Philosophy and the Knowlton Trial

A range of texts containing birth control information had been available in Britain throughout the nineteenth century, with some, such as Francis Place’s 1823 pamphlet “To the Married of Both Sexes of the Working People,” explicitly aimed at a working-class readership. As Kalsem points out, however:

While the actual practice of birth control was not illegal in England, ... it was highly dangerous to advocate it in print. ... [T]he threat of being charged with obscenity and immorality ... effectively silenced much public discourse on this important and pressing social issue. (533-34)

This awareness that birth control was a tacitly acknowledged fact of nineteenth-century life but that there was a continued risk in discussing it openly contextualizes the fact that Besant’s campaign developed around a pamphlet that had first appeared in 1832 and had since remained in print. *Fruits of Philosophy, or The Private Companion of Young Married People* by American physician Dr Charles Knowlton was a medical treatise providing contraceptive advice. The pamphlet had been controversial at the time of its publication, as its author had been convicted for writing it by a US court; but while Knowlton was prosecuted, “[t]he book ... had not been suppressed and enjoyed a steady sale,” and a British edition also appeared (Taylor 102).

Although it had been sold with impunity for decades and was acknowledged to have become outdated, *Fruits* again became the subject of controversy in Britain in 1876 when one bookseller, Henry Cook, sold an edition containing what Besant herself called “some improper pictures” (Autobiography 206). Anne Taylor adds that Cook’s decision to “rais[e] the price from 6d. to 1s. 8d. was taken as a hint to the salaciously minded that they would find their money’s worth inside” (103). In other words, Cook was thought to have transformed the pamphlet from a private aid to family planning into a pornographic text. Charles Watts, the publisher who owed the plates of the original British edition and who was therefore ultimately responsible for the publication of *Fruits* in the UK (Taylor 103), was a close associate of Bradlaugh and Besant who published and sub-edited Bradlaugh’s periodical the *National Reformer*. Watts, unwilling to defend Cook’s edition, ceased the publication of *Fruits* and pleaded guilty when indicted under the Obscene Publications Act; as a result, “Knowlton’s pamphlet stood convicted of an offence against the law” (Taylor 107).

Bradlaugh and Besant resisted the banning of the pamphlet as a legal restriction of the freedom to distribute birth control information. They decided to publish it themselves through their newly established and jointly run Freethought Press and embarked on a carefully planned campaign offensive. Besant wrote

in her autobiography: “We took a little shop, printed the pamphlet, and sent notice to the police that we would commence the sale at a certain day and hour, and ourselves sell the pamphlet so that no one else might be endangered by our action” (206). Their arrest and trial followed. From the beginning, then, Besant and Bradlaugh’s campaign relied on public and performative actions to publicise the birth control debate that they felt the Knowlton pamphlet had come to represent.

Taylor’s description of the development of Besant and Bradlaugh’s campaign makes clear that Besant was the driving force behind it, and that the accessibility of birth control information across social classes was a central concern for her. She states that Besant “was carried away by the idea of promoting a noble cause—the Knowlton book could deliver the working class from the scourge of poverty inflicted by too many children” (104). Both Besant and Bradlaugh were strong and public supporters of the doctrine of neo-Malthusianism, i.e. the voluntary limitation of population growth in proportion to available resources, and this was the reason they repeatedly cited for their defence of the pamphlet and the information it contained. In addition, Besant already had various explicitly feminist publications to her name, and her arguments for broadening access to birth control were also informed by her views on sexual double standards. While her own underlying ideas on gender, social class and ideology were essentially constant, however, a survey of some of her campaign writing shows her readiness and ability to adapt the presentation of her arguments to her audience.

Besant’s Feminism

Louise Raw states that “Besant’s writings [on birth control] do not reveal any conscious agenda beyond the desire to give women exhausted by constant reproduction some control over their own fertility” (106). There is a clear sense here of gendered identification and solidarity across class lines in Besant’s recognition of the impact of repeated pregnancies on women’s health and wellbeing. There is also a feminist agenda implicit in making reproductive health a public issue rather than a private concern for women, however. Like many nineteenth-century works of birth control advice, including *Fruits* as well as Place’s pamphlet, Besant represented family planning as the responsibility of both parents and showed that her campaign had wider social implications as well. Besant argues throughout her feminist writings that women’s rights, autonomy and wellbeing affected society across divisions of class and gender, and therefore deserved public representation.

Publications such as Besant’s 1874 pamphlet *The Political Status of Women* show that she considered the issue of women’s human rights to be an explicitly political matter. Arguing for women’s right to vote, she states:

You [men] do not really represent us [women] at all; what you represent is your own interests, which, in many cases, touch ours. The laws you pass are passed in the interests of men, and not of women; and naturally so, for you are made legislators by men, and not by women. There are few cases where men are really the representatives of women. (9, original emphasis)

A case is made here for a shared experience of gender, cast literally in terms of “you” and “us,” as Besant argues that the lack of representation for women meant that the law failed to safeguard women’s personal rights. Her 1878 pamphlet *Marriage* presents the sexual double standard as the basis for a violation of human rights. Evoking Thomas Paine’s arguments regarding the existence of “natural” human rights in *Rights of Man* (1791), she states:

the Rights of Man have become an accepted doctrine, but, unfortunately, they are only rights of *man*, in the exclusive sense of the word. They are sexual, and not human rights, and until they become human rights, society will never rest on a sure, because just, foundation. (4, original emphasis)

She goes on to make very clear that:

to deny these rights to women, is either to deny them to humanity *qua* humanity, or to deny that women form a part of humanity; if women’s rights are denied, men’s rights have no logical basis, no claim to respect ... “either all human beings have equal rights, or none have any.” (4)

The issue of legal and political representation is crucial to both pamphlets, and I argue that it also informs Besant's participation in the birth control debate. Besant's argument that men did not represent women implied that women must represent women. The impression created, however, is that women are a subject-class in themselves, with all women facing the same oppression – and that it follows that any woman could represent other women as they shared a gendered experience. This assumption fails to take into account the differences in experience based on social and economic position that were central to her representation of working-class women at the Knowlton Trial.

Besant's campaign did have roots in her awareness of a classed double standard where access to birth control information was concerned. Kalsem describes how Besant made a point in her argument to the jury at the trial of illustrating economic bias:

She explained that birth control information was available in more expensive books such as Dr. Chavasse's *Advice to a Wife*, a book she had been given by her doctor as a young wife, and thus brought the class implications of this lawsuit to the forefront by claiming that since that book had not been deemed obscene, no fair-minded English jury would suggest that the problem with the Knowlton book was that it was sold for sixpence, and thus made available to the poor. (543)

Precisely the fact that Besant did have access to birth control information, however, shows that her arguments were based rather on sympathetic understanding on a gendered basis than on shared experiences. This idea of sympathetic understanding played a significant part in Besant's strongly gendered performance at the trial. Her neo-Malthusian arguments, grounded in middle-class views of economics and social welfare, were combined with deliberate evocations of her own gendered identity in order to lend authority to her claim that she represented working-class women. Her personalised performance of femininity allowed her to show the relevance of what were considered private feminine matters to the male public sphere, but also show the limits of her ability to represent female experience that differed from her own.

Neo-Malthusian Arguments

While personal experience formed an important part of Besant's campaign rhetoric, moreover, the primary focus of her arguments was on the public impact of the birth control debate. Her autobiography explains why she and Bradlaugh chose to reprint *Fruits* although they were aware that the information it gave was outdated. She states that “had it been brought to us for publication, . . . we should not have published it, for it was not a treatise of high merit; but, prosecuted as immoral because it advised the limitation of the family, it at once embodied the right of publication” (206-7). The pamphlet became representative of their advocacy for the wider discussion of the neo-Malthusian ideas they advocated as it allowed them to “test the right of discussion on the population question” (206).

The “population question” related to the probability of population growth outstripping available resources. This large socio-economic question was scaled down to household level, as working-class couples, in particular, were held responsible for the size of their families. Chandrasekhar explains:

During this period [the 1870s and 1880s] the social reformers went about preaching that couples had no right to have children unless they could adequately support them. This action countered to some extent the evangelical doctrine that “it is God who sends children and He will in due course provide for them.” (47)

The solution suggested by many commentators was an extension of Robert Malthus's reasoning in *An Essay on the Principles of Population* (1798) that working-class people should abstain from sexual relations where pregnancy was a possibility unless they could afford to take care of any children that might result. Besant and Bradlaugh's neo-Malthusian doctrine advocated the use of birth control as preferable to encouraging sexual abstinence.

Besant, in her autobiography, depicts Knowlton's 1832 pamphlet in these neo-Malthusian terms, as if to suggest that it anticipated her own philosophy. She states:

Dr. Knowlton's work was a physiological treatise, advocating conjugal prudence and parental responsibility; it argued in favour of early marriage, with a view to the purity of social life; but as early marriage between persons of small means generally implies a large family, leading either to pauperism or to lack of necessary food, clothing, education, and fair start in life for the children, Dr. Knowlton advocated the restriction of the number of the family within the means of subsistence, and stated the methods by which this restriction could be carried out. (205-6)

Her reference to allowing sex within the context of marriage to safeguard “the purity of social life” represents birth control advice as limiting both extramarital sex and prostitution; early marriage allowed for the gratification of sexual desire within socially and legally sanctioned monogamy, but also allowed married couples to take responsibility for their families, limiting them according to their means. Birth control, then, would prevent both sexual immorality and economic irresponsibility. It is clear that these social arguments were intended as a response to middle-class concerns about working-class life and behaviour: the autonomy implied in the practice of “conjugal prudence and parental responsibility” is represented in terms of its social, rather than personal, advantages.

Casting *Fruits* as a neo-Malthusian text created a precedent and a context for a wider campaign for birth control as socially and economically beneficial. Besant and Bradlaugh made no secret of the fact that they saw this text as an entering wedge for the birth control debate. Their key concern was that the prohibition of a medical text like *Fruits* would affect further publications on the subject. In their own account of the trial, published by the Freethought Press in 1877 as *In the High Court of Justice*, they point out:

Many a better book than that of Dr Knowlton might be written on the same subject to-day . . . ; until, however, the judgment against Knowlton is reversed, no better book can be published, for doctors will not write, and publishers will not sell, a work which may bring them within the walls of a gaol. (i)¹

In other words, in the forty-five years since the publication of *Fruits*, medical science had discovered more effective forms of birth control, but a ban on this text would also expose any medical professional who attempted to make new contraceptive knowledge public to prosecution. In the performance of their protest, then, the role of *Fruits* was acknowledged to be primarily symbolic, and Besant herself went on to write a new and updated birth control pamphlet, *The Law of Population*, for the Freethought Press. Priced at sixpence, as *Fruits* had originally been, *The Law of Population* was designed to be affordable to those who were financially unable to support too many children. While its readership was therefore different from Besant's audience at the trial, I suggest that both are part of the same performance to illustrate the wide social benefits of birth control for working-class families.

Performing Middle-class Femininity in the Knowlton Trial

One crucial difference between Besant's rhetoric during the trial and in *The Law of Population* is her representation of her personal and moral position with regard to the question of birth control access. While her own identity was central to her appearance at the trial, her subsequent pamphlet sidestepped the issue of the gender of its readership or its author. At the trial, Besant represented herself as a woman speaking on behalf of other women and invoked contemporary middle-class ideals of femininity in her depictions of motherhood and of her capacity for sympathetic understanding. *The Law of Population*, on the other hand, situated family planning in a socio-economic rather than a personal or gendered context, and focused primarily on economic arguments, seeking to move the debate over birth control away from a gendered arena into one of rational and scientific discussion with a sound practical basis. Her arguments at the trial and in the pamphlet show similarities such as the emphasis on the social benefits of limiting population growth as well as the association of the campaign with respectability, but there are significant differences in her presentation of them.

Appearing at the trial as the female half of a duo of atheist, neo-Malthusian Freethinkers, Besant showed herself strongly aware of the implications of her gendered identity and made repeated and deliberate

1 My analysis of the trial will draw on this verbatim account.

reference to it in order to persuade the male jury. Crucially, her personalised approach at the trial relied on identifying the cause of birth control access with her own respectability. Opening her address with a carefully balanced combination of modesty and confidence, she stated:

I might feel less hopeful of success did I pretend to rival the learned Solicitor-General in legal knowledge, in force of tongue, or in skill of dialectic. But, gentlemen, . . . I rely on a far mightier power; I trust to the goodness of my cause, and I am sure that, when you have heard the evidence which I shall lay before you, you will feel that to give a verdict of “guilty” would be to give a verdict against the weight of the evidence, and would have a most unfortunate effect upon the public outside . . . (*High Court 27*)

Besant’s seeming corroboration of the idea that, as a woman with no access to legal training, she ought not to speak in court at all, serves here to emphasise the importance of her cause: from the beginning, she suggested that she was willing to risk her own reputation in the interest of others. Comparably, she would write in her autobiography that embarking on the campaign

meant the loss of the pure reputation I prized, the good name I had guarded – scandal the most terrible a woman could face. But I had seen the misery of the poor, of my sister-women with children crying for bread; the wages of the workmen were often sufficient for four, but eight or ten they could not maintain. Should I set my own safety, my own good name, against the helping of these? Did it matter that my reputation should be ruined, if its ruin helped to bring remedy to this otherwise hopeless wretchedness of thousands? (208)

Besant, here, casts her decision in the light of idealised feminine self-sacrifice. As Kalsem puts it: “She understood that her reputation was on the line, but she underscored that in keeping with the ideal of Victorian womanhood—or the sake of others—she decided to put her own interests aside,” and thus appeared as a “model of the proper and caring woman” (547). Lynda Nead shows that this conception of femininity was an avowal of class identity as well, as “[s]ocial pity characterised the feminine ideal; it was a sign of class position and social status” (201). This approach, then, allowed Besant to emphasise her own moral identity even as she addressed a tabooed topic.

While this representation of her own vulnerability thus worked to strengthen her position, Besant’s words also reflect confidence in her own authority to speak on the subject of working-class family planning. Addressing the jury, she referred to the “weight” of her evidence; in her autobiography, too, she describes her experience and thorough knowledge of the subject as giving her the authority to speak publicly about it. The nature of the evidence she presented evoked gendered concepts of philanthropic and sympathetic understanding: she personified poverty through descriptions of hungry children in overcrowded houses and created a sense of authority by suggesting that she had seen these scenes for herself. In a dynamic almost echoing the gendered notion of “you” and “us” that she used in *The Political Status of Women*, she implied that it was her business, as a woman, to understand the personal suffering involved in poverty, in order to be able to relay it to her own class. She demanded of the jury:

Gentlemen, do you know the fate of so many of these children? – the little ones half starved because there is food enough for two but not enough for twelve . . .—gentlemen, your happier circumstances have raised you above this suffering but on you also this question presses; for these overlarge families mean also increased poor rates, which are growing heavier year by year. (*High Court 28*)

Besant’s astute reference here to the public and private middle-class purse that funds the poor rates is couched in images of sympathy and social responsibility in an expanded domestic sphere; she invites the jury similarly to combine economic and social prudence with personal sympathy.

By using the fate of living women and children to show the desirability of family planning in working-class families, Besant avoids the suggestion that she seeks to subvert socially conservative ideals of family and motherhood. Again, a sense of gendered identification as the basis for representation is central; she informs the jury that “these poor for whom I plead” (28) include “mothers who beg me to persist in the course on which I have entered—and at any hazard to myself . . .—they plead me to save their daughters from the misery they have themselves passed through during the course of their married lives” (29). This

evocation of sentiment allows Besant to give practical illustrations of the moral rightness of birth control; arguments that she subtly places in a wider socio-economic context. This understanding of both the public and personal aspects of the question, Besant implies, is what prompted her to embark on a course personally dangerous to her, but also what gives her the authority to speak publicly about it.

Besant's performance of class and gender identity here draws both on the conception of women as a subject-class that appeared in her feminist publications and on ideals of femininity likely to appeal to the jury. Besant's performance connected herself personally with the campaign in a variety of ways: a shared gendered experience identified her with the working-class women for whom she claimed to speak; and the fact that her decision to defend a good cause exposed her to social danger echoed her view that birth control was unjustly tabooed in spite of its social and economic benefits. The jury's verdict, however, suggests that this conflation of Besant and her reputation and aims with the campaign itself caused confusion. The jury decided: "We are unanimously of the opinion that the book in question is calculated to deprave public morals but at the same time we entirely exonerate the defendants from any corrupt motive in publishing it" (Taylor 119). While this showed a recognition of Besant and Bradlaugh's good intentions, then, the jury appears to have been unwilling to adopt the notion that *Fruits* served a representative function in a wider debate of socio-economic significance. In *The Law of Population*, by contrast, Besant brought her socio-economic arguments in favour of birth control to the fore. I suggest that this, too, was a performative decision still aimed at convincing the middle class of the importance of working-class access to birth control knowledge.

Social Arguments in *The Law of Population*

In *The Law of Population*, Besant continues to emphasize the morality and respectability of the campaign but no longer associates them explicitly with herself or her own gender. The full title of the pamphlet, *The Law of Population: Its Consequences, and its Bearing upon Human Conduct and Morals*, presents birth control as a social, rather than a personal question; and the emphasis on morality anticipates any accusation of obscenity. The structure of the text works to reinforce this premise: only in the third chapter does Besant begin to give practical advice; the first thirty pages of the pamphlet are devoted to neo-Malthusian theory, followed by social and moral arguments for birth control.

Where Besant's evidence at the trial had relied strongly on her representation of the suffering of her working-class "sister-women" and their families, the pamphlet completely evades this sense of gendered understanding; instead, Besant seeks to lend academic weight to her argument by citing male authorities. She devotes several pages to economist Henry Fawcett's description of the exponential growth of the population of Britain, closing with his statement that:

in ten years' time for every hundred who now require food, fuel, and clothing, a similar provision will have to be made for one hundred and twenty. It, therefore, follows that low as the general average standard of living now is, it cannot by any means be obtained, unless in ten years' time the supply of all the commodities of ordinary consumption can be increased by 20 per cent., without their becoming more costly. (*Law* 16)

Besant continues the argument to show its immediate relevance as she states, adopting similar economic terms: "One of the earliest signs of population increasing too rapidly for its accommodation is the overcrowding of the poor" (17). The personal suffering produced by overcrowding is not ignored; but evidence is drawn, not from Besant's own observation, but from the published work of another male researcher, George Godwin. As with Fawcett, Besant includes lengthy quotations from Godwin's descriptions of overcrowded homes in London (17-18). She then goes on to illustrate the social dangers of overcrowding: she cites further evidence regarding the spread of contagious diseases in overcrowded accommodation, but also returns to the notion of morality by addressing the impossibility of "modesty" in these living conditions (18-19).

The inclusion of this background information confuses assumptions about the pamphlet's intended readership: its low price and practical information suggest that it was aimed at working families, but the

representation of the “population question” and descriptions of the experience of poverty align it with performative explanations to middle-class policy makers of the need for birth control. The central question here seems not to have been one of personal independence for working-class parents, who are likely to have had a clearer idea of the reality of poverty: the pamphlet instead submitted its arguments for working-class use of birth control to middle-class approval.

Class and Gender Complications

One key problem produced by this implication that birth control access was a matter for middle-class discussion is that it unavoidably presents working-class people, and working-class women in particular, as in need of rescue by the middle class. Besant’s representation of herself as the advocate of voiceless working-class women plays into a depiction of working-class women as lacking agency as well as bodily autonomy, and the suggestion that they are victims of male desire represents working-class men as irresponsible and worse. The desire to fit the narrative of birth control access into middle-class norms, furthermore, shows a disregard for working-class experience.

The emphasis on the morality of the campaign rather than on the autonomy of working-class (potential) parents is the source of much confusion, particularly where the question of sexual desire is concerned. Besant acknowledged, in *The Law of Population*, that the “bodily needs” of both men and women “require their legitimate satisfaction” (28), but also seemed to suggest that these desires—at least for women—only existed in the context of marriage. Taylor states that Besant “was quick to refute the Solicitor-General’s allegation” during the trial that access to birth control information could encourage women to engage in extramarital sex. She insisted that “[i]t was a calumny upon Englishwomen to suggest they kept chaste only by fear of maternity . . . women who entertained such an idea—sex outside marriage—were already depraved and not to be corrupted by this book” (115).

In the same context of protecting social morals, however, a completely different version of the argument emerges concerning male sexual desire. Besant argues for early marriage as a curb on prostitution, which she seems to regard as the natural outcome if men cannot find gratification for sexual desires within marriage. She states:

The more marriage is delayed, the more prostitution spreads. It is necessary to gravely remind all advocates of late marriage that men do not and will not live single; and all women, and all men who honour women, should protest against a teaching which is the curse of civilisation, and which condemns numbers of unhappy creatures to a disgraceful and revolting calling. Prostitution . . . is the result of deferred marriage, and marriage is deferred owing to the ever-increasing difficulty of maintaining a large family in anything like comfort. (27)

This line of reasoning is complicit in maintaining a sense of division between those working-class women who were deemed respectable according to middle-class norms, and those who were not. The possibilities that married women might work in prostitution, or that women in prostitution might conceive children out of wedlock, are not touched upon.

Both women working in prostitution and married working-class women are here represented as passive victims of working-class male desire. As Ellen Ross makes clear, however, working-class women, even without pamphlets such as *Fruits*, showed

anything but universal resignation to repeated pregnancies. Women took many steps—many of them unsuccessful, to be sure—to control their bodies and to avoid motherhood at the several points where this was possible: keeping away from sex or making sex “safe”; aborting pregnancies; and even . . . killing newborns or letting them die. (98)

While these were clearly not ideal solutions, and many of these women would doubtless have benefited from cheaply and easily available advice on birth control, the representation of working-class women as subjected to sex and pregnancy, lacking the knowledge or confidence to take preventative measures, is unrealistic. The notion that birth control access was a question for middle-class debate, with working-class women passively and anxiously awaiting its outcome, appears to have been something of a performance in itself.

Conclusion: Debating Inequalities

The victory Besant and Bradlaugh claimed in the Knowlton Trial was a complicated one, legally as well as morally. As Taylor sums up, the jury's ambiguous verdict left the Lord Chief Justice with little choice but "to pronounce the defendants guilty" (119), but Rosemary Dinnage notes that the debate did not end there. When Besant and Bradlaugh returned to the court to be sentenced, she writes,

argument followed counter-argument. After a long day of struggle, the Lord Chief Justice delivered his verdict: they were to pay fines—and they were to go to prison for six months. . . . Besant and Bradlaugh had almost reached the door when the judge spoke again: if they would agree at least temporarily not to sell the book, they would be set free on their own recognizance of £100 each. They accepted the terms, and at the Court of Appeal the indictment was quashed on a technical point. (45)

This quiet legal resolution hardly seems compatible with a resounding victory for birth control access. Rather, again, this verdict and the events that followed seem to reflect the middle class talking to itself about the question; certainly the jury showed themselves more preoccupied with the reputation and good intentions of the defendants than with the arguments for birth control—either socio-economic or emotional—that the trial was intended to publicise.

Although Besant had made repeated reference to having the support of working-class women in her decision to represent them in court, furthermore, there is little indication that the Knowlton Trial marked a widening of access to birth control to increase the independence and autonomy of working-class women and parents. In fact, Ross points out that "[b]y the later decades of the nineteenth century, sex was a mysterious and forbidden arena for working-class girls . . . whose mothers were struggling to keep them sexually ignorant and thus 'respectable'" (99). This is confirmed by Hera Cook, who states that "[b]y the early twentieth century women were profoundly ill at ease with sexuality" (67).

For Besant personally, the trial had a damaging outcome in spite of her efforts to safeguard her reputation. When she had separated from her husband, Frank Besant, in 1873, he had retained custody of their son (Dinnage 23); and he went on to use her appearance in the trial to gain custody of their daughter Mabel as well. Dinnage reveals the precariousness of Besant's reputation in the custody battle:

It was claimed that Besant had propagated the principles of atheism through lectures and writings, that she had associated herself with an infidel lecturer and author named Charles Bradlaugh, and that she had published an indecent and obscene pamphlet. She was therefore not a fit person to be in charge of her daughter. Though the first and last of these accusations were the grounds on which she lost Mabel, the hint of scandal about her relationship to Bradlaugh no doubt played a covert part in the proceedings. (46)

Although the jury at the Knowlton Trial had shown concern for Besant's reputation, this episode reveals the personal risks she ran in challenging the legal and political ramifications of the sexual double standard she had addressed in her feminist publications.

The birth control debate in 1877, then, was a conversation marked by inequality, in which representation was coded by dominant ideologies. Besant felt that she was in a position to take up the cause of birth control on behalf of working-class women and families who had no legal representation, but she did not relay working-class voices: what evidence there is of working-class testimony both in the trial and in *The Law of Population* is mediated by others. Yet Besant herself was also constrained from speaking freely by her gender: she performed at the trial in the role of a caring and self-sacrificing woman representative of others more vulnerable than herself; and her court appearance still laid her open to attack regarding her morals and suitability as a mother.

During the trial, and later in *The Law of Population*, Besant found ways of navigating the hierarchies at play in the birth control debate, alternately emphasising her conformity to contemporary ideals of femininity and her ability to master and muster social and economic arguments likely to sway male middle-class opinion. While she thus presented herself to her male middle-class audience as able to represent an issue pertaining to working-class families and working-class women's bodies, however, her framing of the debate as the socio-economic "population question" reinforced the idea that birth control access was a

matter of middle-class debate on social conditions rather than an issue pertaining to working-class people in which working-class voices should be heard. While Besant found a way of talking about birth control in 1877, it seems that the only way of discussing the private in public was to compromise the personal experience and autonomy at the heart of the debate.

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