

ISSUE 13

Did the Industrial Revolution Lead to a Sexual Revolution?

YES: Edward Shorter, from "Female Emancipation, Birth Control, and Fertility in European History," *The American Historical Review* (June 1973)

NO: Louise A. Tilly, Joan W. Scott, and Miriam Cohen, from "Women's Work and European Fertility Patterns," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (Winter 1976)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Historian Edward Shorter argues that employment opportunities outside the home that opened up with industrialization led to a rise in the illegitimacy rate, which he attributes to the sexual emancipation of unmarried, working-class women.

NO: Historians Louise A. Tilly, Joan W. Scott, and Miriam Cohen counter that unmarried women worked to meet an economic need, not to gain personal freedom, and they attribute the rise in illegitimacy rates to broken marriage promises and the absence of traditional support from family, community, and the church.

Historians agree that between 1750 and 1850, the illegitimacy rate rose across Europe. In many of the European countries this time period coincides with industrialization. Did the arrival of capitalism change the living and working habits of unmarried women and introduce new attitudes that made them more interested in sex? When the results agreed upon, what matters most is the evidence offered to explain the cause.

In the selection that follows, Edward Shorter asserts that a nineteenth-century sexual revolution that had its roots in industrial capitalism occurred. In his view the market economy, with its values of self-interest and competitiveness, changed the value system of the proletarian subculture—the young men and women working for wages in industrializing countries. Earning their own money, says Shorter, gave these workers the means to live independently. Young women in particular, he argues, declared their independence from family control, struck out in pursuit of personal freedom, and began to enjoy sex as a way of finding individual self-fulfillment. The predictable result was a rise in illegitimacy rates.

Louise A. Tilly, Joan W. Scott, and Miriam Cohen, in reply, fault Shorter for offering little or no hard evidence for his hypothesis. Citing the work of

other historians, they assert that family interest rather than self-interest led women to work. Women moved very slowly into industrial work, and, even by the end of the period (1850), most women who were employed were doing domestic service, dressmaking, laundering, and tailoring, not factory work. Many women earned far too little to permit them to live independently. Those who did probably kept the traditional assumption that premarital intercourse with an intended bridegroom would be followed by marriage. Tilly, Scott, and Cohen argue that what changed was not the attitudes but the external context. In the absence of traditional pressures, young men moved on to other work or better opportunities, leaving the women they had impregnated behind.

As you read these two conflicting interpretations, look for the explanation offered by each essay and, most important, at what evidence is offered to support the interpretation. It may seem logical to assume that an increase in rates of illegitimacy must be due to a sexual revolution. But is that the only or the best explanation that existing information can support? There is a real temptation to use our "common sense" to fill in the gaps, but the historian insists on evidence.

For centuries history was written exclusively from the point of view of the rich, the powerful, and the literate. For some, understanding the "great man"—Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, and Napoleon, for example—was the key to understanding the age in which he lived. This is often called history "from the top down." Many scholars, however, have begun to uncover the lives of the poor, the powerless, and the illiterate—what some call history "from the bottom up." Borrowing the methods of the social sciences, such as archaeology, anthropology, sociology, and psychology, and using quantitative analyses of economic and demographic data, historians are trying to fill in the missing pieces of the past. The essays in this issue take on the challenge of assessing the motives of people who left few, if any, written records. Since we cannot read their diaries and letters, we must use the evidence that we do have about the lives these women led and attempt to imagine how they might have seen the world.

In this issue, the chief question concerns continuity versus discontinuity. What changed? What remained the same? Did the attitudes of working women change as they entered the capitalist labor force, as Shorter states? And did these attitudes lead them to pursue personal pleasures such as sex, which, in the absence of birth control, resulted in higher rates of illegitimacy? Or, as Tilly, Scott, and Cohen argue, did the attitudes stay the same (premarital sex, as usual, in the context of courtship and with the expectation of marriage), while the context changed, leaving women pregnant and with no expectation of marriage?

FEMALE EMANCIPATION, BIRTH CONTROL, AND FERTILITY IN EUROPEAN HISTORY

The conventional wisdom about female emancipation is that it originated among upper-class women in the mid-nineteenth century, surfacing first in tandem with the movement for emancipation of the slaves, then moving forward independently as the suffrage movement. While this account may be substantially correct as involves women's participation in national political life, it is, in my opinion, inapplicable to family history. I suggest that the position of women within the family underwent a radical shift starting late in the eighteenth century; furthermore, the change progressed from young and lowly women to older women of higher status. The logic of this chronology sees involvement in the economy of the market place as the principal motor of emancipation.

What exactly is meant by "female emancipation"? General statements about the position of women within early modern European families are uncertain in the extreme because, at the same time, so many impressions of individual famous women are to be found in the literature and so little is known in a systematic, quantitative way about the cultural rules and norms of women in the popular classes. Yet one might fairly characterize the situation of most women as one of subordination. In the first place, both young men and women were subordinated to the authority of their parents, so that parental intervention in the mating market customarily replaced romantic love in bringing young couples together. In the second place, both social ideology and the force of events conspired to make the husband supreme over the woman in the household, his obligation being merely to respect her, hers, however, to serve and obey him. In most matters of sex, economics, or family authority the woman was expected to do the husband's bidding. Clearly individual exceptions existed, yet the rule seems to have been powerlessness and dependency for the woman.

Thus female emancipation involves, quite simply, the replacement of this subordination with independence. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

From Edward Shorter, "Female Emancipation, Birth Control, and Fertility in European History," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 78, no. 3 (June 1973). Copyright © 1973 by The American Historical Association. Reprinted by permission. Notes omitted.

married women acquired for themselves first, practical leverage on household political power, and second, a family ideology stressing their own rights to sexual gratification and emotional autonomy. And unmarried women became increasingly convinced of the impropriety of family and community restraints upon social and sexual relations, so that they came to ignore the strictures of both parents and community in order to gratify their own personal needs. Therefore women's emancipation at the popular level means disregarding outside controls upon personal freedom of action and sexuality for the sake of individual self-fulfillment.

What evidence exists that the years 1750-1850 saw a movement toward female emancipation among the popular classes? We are, alas, at the beginning of the investigation rather than the end, and so I can merely anticipate the findings of future research. Yet even within the existing literature strong hints may be found that crucial changes in the status and authority of women were underway after 1750 and that these changes were linked in some way to economic modernization. The search for evidence may be aided by considering the nature of the change in the relationship between married woman and husband as well as that between the young, unmarried woman and parental and communal authority. To demonstrate that there is in fact an *explicitum*, let us briefly review some previous findings on these questions.

Least studied to date has been the family life and authority relationships of lower-class women in the years before 1900. Save for tiny pinpricks of information here and there the subject is uncharted, yet those studies that exist con-

verge to demonstrate a radical upheaval in popular family life in the wake of capitalism. Neil Smelser in a classic study of the British cotton industry describes "the reversal of traditional age and sex roles as wives and children went to the factory." Industrial growth fragmented the customary "family economy" by making individual producers of its separate members. And, for the children at least, independence accompanied wage labor. Peter Stearns has recently reviewed the German literature, finding toward the end of the nineteenth century (a period inconveniently late for the case I wish to present here) "recognition of greater independence for the woman.... There is suggested here a new sentiment within the family, the possibility of greater affection for the children, who were not understood all the time, and greater sensuality and equality in the relationship between man and wife." And Rudolf Braun, in his sensitive reconstruction of life among cottage and factory workers in the Zurich highlands, notes massive shifts in family patterns, starting with the eighteenth century. While Braun is silent on specific changes in the relationships between married men and women, he pulls back the canvas for a brief instant to reveal, for example, women forgetting how to cook. Why, Braun asks, were ready-made foods in such great demand in factory towns?

It was not merely the pressure to eat at the workplace that accelerated the demand for prepared dishes, nor the lack of time at home, but also the woman factory worker's lack of skill in cooking. Bound to the machine and the factory since earliest childhood, she inadequately learned the arts of cooking and homemaking. We have seen these complaints since the woman cottage workers of the ancient régime, but with

factory workers they become even more urgent.

One can imagine that the authority patterns among traditional petit-bourgeois families were as different from those of worker couples out on the frontier of economic advance as night is from day.

Evidence is more abundant that young unmarried women were rebelling against parental and social authority in the period from 1750 to 1850. To draw upon my own research, I noted in early nineteenth-century Bavaria an absolute squall of outrage from middle-class observers of popular life, sealed for the most part in lower levels of the governmental bureaucracy, about a new spirit of independence among young women in agricultural labor and domestic service. Through this chorus of complaints ran the themes of escape and experimentation, of throwing off old superordinates and codes, and of, in general, what a much later generation of emancipators was to call "liberation."

There was the theme of escape from old jobs. Young women wanted, when possible, to forsake domestic service for employment that would safeguard personal independence. The unpopularity of service may be seen in the cries about a shortage of rural labor (*Dienstbotenmangel*) that became a constant theme in social criticism from the mid-eighteenth century onward. Or, to take another sort of example, Munich's police chief noted in 1815:

It is sad, and most difficult for the police to prevent, that so many young girls leave service when they grow tired of waiting on people and under one pretext or another take a room somewhere, living from their own industry. But they do little real work and let themselves be supported by boyfriends; they become pregnant and then are abandoned.

And there was the theme of escape from old residences. Young women wanted to live alone, in their own quarters and away from the oppressive supervision of either parents or employers. In the late 1830s the indignant provincial government of Würzburg observed:

In our province the so-called practice of *Eigentümerei* is quite customary, according to which the deflorated daughter leaves the parental house and rents a room elsewhere, not necessarily to avoid the reproaches of the parents for her misdeeds, but in order to move more freely, to accommodate the visit of the boyfriend [*Zuhälter*] and with him to live in concubinage [*Insulte Ehe*].

On the matter of escape from old personal styles, let Joseph Maria Johann Nepomuck Freiherr von Frauenberg, archbishop of Bamberg, speak:

A most detrimental alteration in the character of the female gender [has taken place]. Earlier, women distinguished themselves through their soft, withdrawn, modest, and chaste being, while nowadays they take part in all public entertainments, indeed providing some, set the tone [*sien Ton angeben*], and so have entirely departed from their natural situation. Thus has female morality disappeared.

The archbishop noted this development had occurred principally in the cities. There were other complaints about how female servants and hired hands would squander their entire wages in buying expeditions to the cities, returning to the farm with clothes alien to native folkways. Still other laments were voiced about feminine indifference to pastoral authority and about newly grasping, calculating female attitudes to wage matters. All these threads led back in the

opinion of contemporaries—and rightly so I think—to sexuality and thus ultimately to fertility: "In the countryside a young girl who has preserved her virgin purity until age twenty is exceptional, and moreover encounters even among her girlfriends no recognition."

Perhaps Bavaria was not typical of the rest of Europe, though I believe that it was, for within its frontiers the kingdom harbored a remarkable diversity of social and economic arrangements. Perhaps, even more serious for the case I wish to make, male complaints about "moral breakdown" among young women reflected sooner the beholder's own hidebound preoccupations than a change in objective social conditions. Perhaps, too, nostalgia is close to being a historical constant, so that most men who search their own memories invariably see behind the outlines of a gray, disorganized present the golden harmony of an idealized past. Yet in this case I doubt it. And I suspect that future research will verify that this particular set of social critics at this particular point in time—the years 1800–40—were onto something. The objective order of the real world was in fact changing, and a shift in the position of women was moving the ground directly from under the feet of these "patriarchs."

* * *

These changes in the mentalities and sexual comportment of women may ultimately be linked to a variety of changes in economic structure that one might summarize under the label "capitalism." Three salients of industrial advance mattered to fertility, and two of the three made more of a difference to women than to men....

First, capitalism meant the formation of a proletarian subculture. Large num-

bers of people who had in common the fact that they were wage laborers found themselves living together in the same communities. Because the material conditions of their lives differentiated them clearly from the surrounding social order of small proprietors, these newly aggregated workers in both agriculture and industry began to develop their own rules for doing cultural business, which is, after all, the essence of a subculture. A way of life specific to the working classes began to elaborate itself within the large farm areas of modernizing agriculture, upon the upland slopes where the putting out of textiles and nail manufacture was thriving, and within the newly blossoming industrial cities themselves.

The subculture would sooner or later matter to fertility by providing alternative sets of rules for sexual comportment, target family sizes, and new techniques for contraception and abortion. But subcultures are especially important in the area of legitimization of behavior about which the individual might otherwise feel uneasy. It is now common knowledge that the charter culture of traditional Europe had internalized within young people a host of restraints against intercourse. So that if before 1750 there was relatively little premarital intercourse, it was not necessarily because external supervision was totalitarian in its strictness but because most people within the culture shared the belief that premarital sex was wrong. When in later years sex before marriage became commonplace, it was because a new generation of sexually active young men and women felt their behavior was socially accepted, at least by their peers. The point is that if an individual is going to bend the operating rules of the dominant culture, he must feel that members of his own group,

whose good opinion he treasures, will support his venturesomeness.

The proletarian subculture was, of course, indulgent of eroticism. Yet this particular indulgence must not be attributed without further argument to the industrial origins of the subculture. The fact that a subculture exists does not automatically mean that its specific operating rules must be libertine. Indeed many subcultures with quite repressive sexual values have flourished in the past, such as the colonies of nineteenth-century pietists in the United States. Some additional aspect of industrialism must therefore be adduced to explain the expressly permissive sexual content of the European proletarian subculture.

The second important dimension of capitalism lay in the mentality of the market place. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the market economy encroached steadily at the cost of the moral economy, and the values of individual self-interest and competitiveness that people learned in the market were soon transferred to other areas of life. It was this process of the transfer of values that gave the proletarian subculture its libertine moral caste.

The years after 1750 saw the intrusion of the principles of the market place into popular life. In early modern Europe trade in foodstuffs and in most non-agricultural products was tightly regulated by communal and corporate bodies, so that the Continent was fragmented into countless tiny local markets, kept through a complot of regulation and poor transportation as hermetically sealed compartments. Of course long-distance trade existed, yet most of the labor force was involved in local production along noncapitalistic lines. German political

economists made a classic distinction between *Export* and *Localgewerbe*, and most of the population lived from the latter. Then late in the eighteenth century these locally administered economies began to be engulfed by free markets of vast territorial scope. The struggle over free trade in grain in France has been often told; the losing battle of German guilds against pack pedlars, retail merchandise shops, unlicensed competitors, and the Customs Union is similarly familiar. Everywhere the moral economy regulated by the village fathers lost out to free competition regulated only by the invisible hand of the price mechanism.

Contact with these new labor markets was the most direct source of personal autonomy. As women became immersed in the market, they learned its values. I have elsewhere suggested that capitalism's mental habits of maximizing one's self-interest and sacrificing community goals to individual profit transfer easily to other thought processes. It seems a plausible proposition that people assimilate in the market place an integrated, coherent set of values about social behavior and personal independence and that these values quickly inform the noneconomic realms of individual mentalities. If this logic holds true, we may identify exposure to the market place as a prime source of female emancipation, for women who learned autonomy and maximization of self-interest in the economy would quickly stumble upon these concepts within the family as well. Men would also have learned these values, but then it was men who had traditionally been the dominant sex; a more sensitive attunement to questions of individuality left men, if anything, less able to defend themselves against the demands for autonomy of their wives and daughters.

The moral authority of traditional society was of a piece, the same communitarian principles that held together the moral economy also maintained the authoritarian family. And they crumbled together as well.

Thus a second crucial consequence of capitalism for women came in the area of personal values: an unwillingness to accept the dictates of superordinates and a new readiness to experiment with personal freedom and gratification. The reader should at this point bear in mind that we have to juggle simultaneously three different effects of capitalism: the first dimension of subculture weakened traditional moral taboos and destroyed internalized antisectional values; the second dimension, which we have just considered, quickened interest in intercourse as an aspect of personality development; and the third dimension of capitalism, to which we now turn, removed many of the external controls upon female sexual emancipation.

This last principal salient of industrial advance worked in the interest of women by modifying with wage labor the balance of power in the family. Paid employment meant that women would bring a distinct, quantifiable contribution to the family's resources, and accordingly would probably be entitled to a greater voice in the disposal of these resources. As many sociologists of the family have noted, the wife's (or daughter's) influence within the conjugal unit is a direct function of the status she enjoys in the outside world and of the resources she is able to import from that world into the family circle. Richard F. Tomasson has convincingly explained the historical development and the present-day international singularity of the Swedish family with such an approach, arguing also

that, "Where females have greater equality and are subject to less occupational and social differentiation, the premarital sex codes will be more permissive than where the female's status is completely or primarily dependent on the status of her husband." Altogether, capitalism entailed a quite material source of female independence and autonomy, increasing vastly the leverage formerly obtained from customary, dependent, unpaid, "women's work."

Popular involvement in the market economy started with the young and the poor and ended with the older and the prosperous. It was the most marginal whom capitalism could first detach from their traditional economic moorings, and so in the eighteenth century the young members of the proletarian classes that population growth had been creating went first to the cottage looms and spinning wheels. Thereafter ever more prosperous groups of the traditional economy found themselves pulled into the flux of the market, so that by the late nineteenth century even the most isolated sectors of the old middle class had been plunged into price competition and profit rationality. Immersion in the market progressed by stages.

Early in the eighteenth century the putting-out system began its conquest of the countryside, drawing in the landless poor. Then, in the course of the century agricultural capitalism began to encroach upon traditional subsistence and manual farming, recruiting from among the landless and especially from the youth, for often unmarried laborers would live in the farmer's house, or newly married couples in nearby cottages. Next came migration to the newly rising factories and mills. The timing varied from one region to another, but normally it was

the youth whom the fresh modern sector pulled from small farms and craft shops into factories.

In the nineteenth century industrial growth created a prosperous new middle class of administrators and clerks, of technicians and professionals. Because these people had often to endure long delays before marriage, women entered their childbearing periods at relatively advanced ages and largely abstained from intercourse beforehand. Finally, in the nineteenth century capitalism tore at the heart of the traditional old middle class itself, rather than merely at the supernumary poor. Across the Continent the masters of craft shops had to accommodate themselves to industrial capitalism, either by servicing the new factories or by going to work in them. And the depopulation of the countryside on the threshold of the twentieth century is an oft-told tale. It was frequently as mature men and women that these families were forced out of the traditional sector, of which they had constituted the backbone.

Thus the market started with the youngest and lowliest on the age-status

spectrum and concluded with the most established and mature. It was also in this order that, I suggest, the spirit of female emancipation spread, from young and poor to well to do and middle-aged.

* * *

How, precisely, did these massive shifts in economic structure, culture, and individual mentalities affect either marital or nonmarital fertility? The linkages between emancipation and the increase in illegitimacy seem crisp and strong; those between capitalism and marital fertility are largely artifacts.

For the unmarried woman capitalism meant personal freedom, which meant in turn sexual freedom. The young woman could withstand parental sanctions against her sexual and emotional independence because the modern sector promised employment, economic self-sufficiency, and if need be, migration from home to another town. Such independence meant often, as we have seen, a paramour and therewith, in the absence of birth control, illegitimacy.

NO Louise A. Tilly, Joan W. Scott, and Miriam Cohen

WOMEN'S WORK AND EUROPEAN FERTILITY PATTERNS

According to [Edward] Shorter, a change in fertility rates can only mean a change in sexual practices, which has to mean a change in attitudes, particularly of women. The sequence must be linear and direct. As Shorter argues:

It seems a plausible proposition that people assimilate in the market place an integrated, coherent set of values about social behavior and personal independence and that these values quickly inform the noneconomic realm of individual mentalities. If this logic holds true, we may identify exposure to the market place as a prime source of female emancipation.

This statement, as its language clearly reveals, is based on a claim of reasoning, not on evidence. Shorter offers nothing to prove that mere "women worked in the capitalist marketplace in this period. He merely assumes that they did. Similarly, he assumes that women at the end of the eighteenth century had different family roles and attitudes from their predecessors. And he assumes as well that changes in work opportunities immediately changed values. Ideas, in his opinion, instantly reflect one's current economic experience. Shorter employs a mechanistic notion of "value transfer" to explain the influence of changes in occupational structure on changes in collective mentalities: "In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the market economy encroached steadily at the cost of the moral economy, and the values of individual self-interest and competitiveness that people learned in the market were soon transferred to other areas of life."

For Shorter, sexual behavior echoes market behavior at every point. "Emancipated" women gained a sense of autonomy at work that the subordinate and powerless women of pre-industrial society had lacked. That work, created by capitalist economic development, necessarily fostered values of individualism in those who participated in it, and individualism was expressed in part by a new desire for sexual gratification. Young women working outside the home, Shorter insists, were by definition rebelling against parental authority. Indeed, they sought work in order to gain the independence and individual

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fulfillment that could not be attained at home. It follows, in Shorter's logic, that sexual behavior, too, must have been defiant of parental restraint. As the market economy spread there arose a new, libertine, proletarian subculture "independent of eroticism." Once married, the independent young working women engaged in frequent intercourse because they and their husbands took greater pleasure in sex. Female "emancipation" thus began among the young and poor. In the absence of birth control, the sexual gratification of single working girls increased the illegitimate birthrate; that of married women (who worked or had worked) inflated the legitimate birthrate. In this fashion Shorter answers a central question of European historical demography: The fertility increase in the late eighteenth century was simply the result of the "emancipation," occupational and sexual, of working-class women....

It is now time to examine the historical evidence that Shorter neglected on women's role in pre-industrial society; on the effects of industrialization on women's work and on their attitudes; and on the motives which sent young girls out into the "marketplace" at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. None of the evidence that we have found supports Shorter's argument in any way. Women were not powerless in "traditional" families; they played important economic roles which gave them a good deal of power within the family. Industrialization did not significantly modernize women's work in the period when fertility rates rose; in fact, the vast majority of working women did not work in factories, but at customary women's jobs. Women usually became wage earners during the early phases of industrial-

ization not to rebel against their parents or declare independence from their husbands, but to augment family finances. Indeed, women in this period must be studied in their family settings, for the constraints of family membership greatly affected their opportunities for individual autonomy. No change in attitude, then, increased the numbers of children whom working women bore. Rather, old attitudes and customary behavior interacted with greatly changed circumstances—particularly in the composition of populations—and led to increased illegitimate fertility.

Women eventually shed many outdated priorities, and by the end of the nineteenth century some working women had clearly adopted "modern" life styles. But these changes involved a more gradual and complex adaptation than Shorter implies. The important point, however, is that the years around 1790 were not a watershed in the history of women's economic emancipation—despite the fact that the locus of women's work began to move outside the home. These were the crucial years for the increases in fertility in Europe. All of the evidence is not in, by any means; what we offer, however, indicates that in this period, women of the popular classes simply were not searching for freedom or experiencing emancipation. The explanation for changed fertility patterns lies elsewhere.

WOMEN'S PLACE IN "TRADITIONAL" FAMILIES

In the pre-industrial family, the household was organized as a family or domestic economy. Men, women, and children worked at tasks which were differentiated by age and sex, but the work of

all was necessary for survival. Artisans' wives assisted their husbands in their work as weavers, bakers, shoemakers, or tailors. Certain work, like weaving, whether carried on in the city or the country, needed the cooperation of all family members. Children and women did the spinning and carding; men ran the looms. Wives also managed many aspects of the household, including family finances. In less prosperous urban families, women did paid work which was often an extension of their household chores: They sewed and made lace; they also took odd jobs as carters, laundresses, and street cleaners.

Unmarried women also became servants. Resourcefulness was characteristic of poor women: When they could not find work which would enable them to contribute to the family income, they begged, stole, or became prostitutes. Hutton's work on the Parisian poor in the eighteenth century and Forrest's work on Bordeaux both describe the crucial economic contribution of urban working-class women and the consequent central role which these women played in their families.

In the country, the landowning peasant's family was also the unit of productive activity. The members of the family worked together, again at sex-differentiated tasks. Children—boys and girls—were sent to other farms as servants when their help was not needed at home. Their activity, nonetheless, contributed to the well-being of the family. They sent their earnings home, or if they were not paid wages, their absence at least relieved the family of the burden of feeding and boarding them. Women's responsibilities included care of the house, barnyard, and dairy. They managed to bring in small net profits from marketing

of poultry and dairy products and from work in rural domestic industry. Management of the household and, particularly of finances led to a central role for women in these families. An observer in rural Brittany during the nineteenth century reported that the wife and mother of the family made "the important decisions, buying a field, selling a cow, a lawsuit against a neighbor, choice of future son-in-law." For rural families who did not own land, women's work was even more vital: From agricultural work, spinning, or petty trading, they contributed their share to the family wage—the only economic resource of the landless family.

In city and country, among propertied and propertyless, women of the popular classes had a vital economic role which gave them a recognized and powerful position within the household. It is impossible to guess what sort of sexual relations were practiced under these circumstances. We can say, however, that women in these families were neither dependent nor powerless. Hence, it is impossible to accept Shorter's attempt to derive women's supposed sexual subordination from their place in the pre-industrial household.

WHY WOMEN WORKED

Shorter attributes the work of women outside the home after 1750, particularly that of young, single women, to a change in outlook: a new desire for independence from parental restraints. He argues that since seeking work was an individualistic rebellion against traditionalism, sexual behavior, too, reflected a defiance of parental authority. The facts are that daughters of the popular classes were most often sent into service or to work in the city by their families. Their

work represented a continuation of practices customary in the family economy. When resources were scarce or mouths at home too numerous, children customarily sought work outside, generally with family approval.

Industrialization and urbanization created new problems for rural families but generated new opportunities as well. In most cases, families strategically adapted their established practices to the new context. Thus, daughters sent out to work went farther away from home than had been customary. Most still defined their work in the family interest. Sometimes arrangements for direct payment in money or foodstuffs were made between a girl's parents and her employer. In other cases, the girls themselves regularly sent money home. Commentators observed that the girls considered this a normal arrangement—part of their obligation to the family.

In some cases the conditions of migration for young working girls emphasized their ties to family in many ways limited their independence. In Italy and France, factory dormitories housed female workers, and nuns regulated their behavior and social lives. In the needle trades in British cities, enterprising women with a little capital turned their homes into lodging houses for piece-workers in their employ. Of course, these institutions permitted employers to control their employees by limiting their mobility and regulating their behavior. The point is not that they were beneficent practices, but that young girls lived in households which permitted them limited autonomy. Domestic service, the largest single occupation for women, was also the most traditional and most protective of young girls. They would be sent from one household to another and thus be given security.

Châtelain argues that domestic service was a safe form of migration in France for young girls from the country. They had places to live, families, food, and lodgings and had no need to fend for themselves in the unknown big city as soon as they arrived. It is true that servants often longed to leave their places, and that they resented the exploitation of their mistresses (and the advances of their masters). But that does not change the fact that initially, their migration was sponsored by a set of traditional institutions which limited their individual freedom.

In fact, individual freedom did not seem to be at issue for the daughters of either the landed or the landless, although clearly their experiences differed. It seems likely that peasant families maintained closer ties with their daughters, even when the girls worked in distant cities. The family interest in the farm (the property that was the birthright of the lineage and not of any individual) was a powerful influence on individual behavior. Thus, farm girls working as domestics continued to send money home. Married daughters working as domestics in Norwegian cities sent their children home to be raised on the farm by grandparents. But even when ties of this sort were not maintained, it was seldom from rebellious motives. Braun describes the late eighteenth-century situation of peasants in the hinterland of Zurich. These peasants were willing to divide their holdings for their children because of new work opportunities in cottage industry. These young people married earlier than they would have if the farm had been held undivided, and they quickly established their own families. Braun suggests that the young workers soon lost touch with their parents. The process, as he describes

it, however, was not rebellion; rather, the young people went into cottage industry to lessen the burden that they represented for the family. These motives were welcomed and encouraged by the parents. Family bonds were stretched and broken, but that was a consequence, not a cause, of the new opportunities for work.

Similarly, among urban artisans, older values informed the adaptation to a new organization of work and to technological change. Initially, artisans as well as their political spokesmen insisted that the old values of association and cooperation could continue to characterize their work relationships in the new industrial society. Artisan subculture in cities during the early stages of industrialization was not characterized by an individualistic, self-seeking ideology, as Thompson, Hufon, Forrest, Soboul, Gosser, and others have clearly shown. With no evidence that urban artisans adopted the values of the marketplace at work, Shorter's deduction about a "heretofore proletarian subculture" has neither factual nor logical validity. It seems more likely that artisan families, like peasant families, sent their wives and daughters to work to help bolster their shaky economic situation. These women undoubtedly joined the ranks of the unskilled who had always constituted the urban female workforce. Wives and daughters of the unskilled and propertyless had worked for centuries at service and manufacturing jobs in cities. In the nineteenth century there were more of them because the proportions of unskilled propertyless workers increased.

Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century cities grew primarily by migration. The urban working class was thus constantly renewed and enlarged by a stream of rural migrants. Agricultural

change drove rural laborers and peasants cityward at the end of the eighteenth century, and technological change drove many artisans and their families into the ranks of the unskilled. Women worked outside the home because they had to. Changed attitudes did not propel them into the labor force. Family interest and not self-interest was the underlying motive for their work.

WOMEN'S WORK

What happened in the mid-eighteenth century with the spread of capitalism, the growth of markets, and industrialization? Did these economic changes bring new work experiences for women, with the consequences which Shorter describes? Did women, earning money in the capitalist marketplace, find a new sense of self that expressed itself in increased sexual activity? In examining the historical evidence for the effects on women's work of industrialization and urbanization, we find that the location of women's work did change—more young women worked outside the home and in large cities than ever before. But they were recruited from the same groups which had always sent women to work.

The female labor force of nineteenth-century Europe, like that of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, consisted primarily of the daughters of their popular classes and, secondarily of their wives. The present state of our knowledge makes it difficult to specify precisely the groups within the working classes from which nineteenth-century women wage earners came. It is clear, however, that changes in the organization of work must have driven the daughters and wives of craftsmen out of the family shop. Similarly, population growth (a result of

declining mortality and younger age at marriage due to opportunities for work in cottage industry) created a surplus of hands within the urban household and on the family farm. Women in these families always had been expected to work. Increasingly, they were sent away from home to earn their portion of the family wage.

Shorter's notion that the development of modern capitalism brought new kinds of opportunities to working-class women as early as the middle of the eighteenth century is wrong. There was a very important change in the location of work from rural homes to cities, but this did not revolutionize the nature of the work that most women did. Throughout the nineteenth century, most women worked at traditional occupations. By the end of the century, factory employment was still minimal....

Shorter is also incorrect in his assumption that the working woman was able to live independently of her family because she had the economic means to do so. Evidence for British working women indicates that this was not the case. Throughout the nineteenth century, British working women's wages were considered supplementary incomes—supplementary, that is, to the wages of other family members. It was assumed by employers that women, unlike men, were not responsible for earning their own living. Female wages were always far lower than male. In the Lancashire cotton mills in 1833, where female wages were the highest in the country, females aged 16–21 earned 7/3.5 weekly, while males earned 10/3. Even larger differentials obtained among older workers. In London in the 1880s, there was a similar differential between the average earnings of the sexes: 72 percent of the males

in the bookbinding industry earned over 30/- weekly; 42.5 percent of women made less than 12/-. In precious metals, clocks, and watch manufacturing, 83.5 percent of the males earned 30/- or more weekly; females earned 9–12/-. Women in small clothing workshops earned 10–12/- weekly, while women engaged in outwork in the clothing trades made only 4/- a week. In Birmingham, in 1900, the average weekly wage for working women less than age 21 was 10/-, for men 18/-. Women's work throughout this period, as in the eighteenth century, was for the most part unskilled. Occupations were often seasonal and irregular, leaving women without work for many months during the year. Is it possible that there were many single women who could enjoy a life of independence when the majority could not even afford to live adequately on their personal wages?...

Women's work from 1750 to 1850 (and much later) did not provide an experience of emancipation. Work was hard and poorly paid and, for the most part, it did not represent a change from traditional female occupations. Those women who traveled to cities did find themselves free of some traditional village and family restraints. But, as we shall see, the absence of these restraints was more often burdensome than liberating. Young women with inadequate wages and unstable jobs found themselves caught in a cycle of poverty which increased their vulnerability. Having lost one family, many sought to create another.

THE ORIGINS OF INCREASED ILLEGITIMACY

The compositional change which increased the numbers of unskilled, propertyless workers in both rural and urban

areas and raised their proportion in urban populations also contributed to an increase in rates of illegitimacy. Women in this group of the population always had contributed the most illegitimate births. An increase in the number of women in this group, therefore, meant a greater incidence of illegitimacy.

A recent article by Laslett and Oosterveen speaks directly to Shorter's speculations: "The assumption that illegitimacy figures directly reflect the prevalence of sexual intercourse outside marriage, which seems to be made whenever such figures are used to show that beliefs, attitudes and interests have changed in some particular way, can be shown to be very shaky in its foundations." Using data from Colyton, collected and analyzed by E. A. Wrigley, they argue that one important component in the incidence of illegitimacy is the existence of illegitimacy-prone families, which bring forth bastards generation after generation. Nevertheless, they warn, "this projected sub-society never produced all the bastards, all the bastard-bearers."

The women who bore illegitimate children were not pursuing sexual pleasure, as Shorter would have us believe. Most expected to get married, but the circumstances of their lives—propertylessness, poverty, large-scale geographic mobility, occupational instability, and the absence of traditional social protection—prevented the fulfillment of this expectation. A number of pressures impelled young working girls to find mates. One was the loneliness and isolation of work in the city. Another was economic need: Wages were low and employment for women unstable. The logical move for a single girl far from her family would be to find a husband with whom she might re-establish a family

economy. Yet another pressure was the desire to escape the confines of domestic service, an occupation which more and more young women were entering.

Could not this desire to establish a family be what the domestic servants, described by the Munich police chief in 1815, sought? No quest for pleasure is inherent in the fact that "so many young girls leave service.... But they do little real work and let themselves be supported by boyfriends; they become pregnant and then are abandoned." It seems a sad and distorted version of an older family form, but an attempt at it, nevertheless. Recent work has shown, in fact, that for many French servants in the nineteenth century, this kind of transfer to urban life and an urban husband was often successful.

Was it a search for sexual fulfillment that prompted young women to become "engaged" to young men and then sleep with them in the expectation that marriage would follow? Not at all. In rural and urban areas premarital sexual relationships were common. What Shorter interprets as sexual libertinism, as evidence of an individualistic desire for sexual pleasure, is more likely an expression of the traditional wish to marry. The attempt to reconstitute the family economy in the context of economic deprivation and geographic mobility produced unstable and stable "free unions."

... The central point here is that no major change in values or mentality was necessary to create these cases of illegitimacy. Rather, older expectations operating in a changed context yielded unanticipated (and often unhappy) results.... Women's work in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was not "liberalizing" in any sense. Most women stayed in established occupations. They were so

poorly paid that economic independence was precluded. Furthermore, whether married or single, most women often entered the labor force in the service of the family interest. The evidence available points to several causes for illegitimacy, none related to the "emancipation" of women: economic need, causing women to seek work far from the protection of their families; occupational instability of

men which led to *marriages manqués* (sexual intercourse following a promise of marriage which was never fulfilled). Finally, analysis of the effects of population growth on propertied peasants and artisans seems to show that the bifurcation of marriage and property arrangements began to change the nature of marriage arrangements for propertyless people.

POSTSCRIPT

Did the Industrial Revolution Lead to a Sexual Revolution?

In the world of the "great man," women, racial and ethnic minorities, and the poor are nearly invisible. They appear as passive participants in the historical drama; it is as if history happens to them. Revisionist historians, however, insist that even the apparently powerless have the potential to act as agents of historical change rather than as passive victims. Both Shorter and Tilly et al. assume that working-class, European women in the years between 1750 and 1850 made decisions and acted upon them. For reasons that may never be completely clear, there was a rise in illegitimacy rates, evidence that more babies than in the past were being born outside of marriage. What changed? A higher illegitimacy rate can mean that more sexual activity is taking place, but it can also mean that fewer unmarried, pregnant women are marrying.

To help you to make your own decision, you may wish to consider the evidence offered in the following books and essays. For a Marxist interpretation, see Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (International Publishers, 1972). Ivy Pinchbeck, in *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850* (F. Cass, 1969), argues that occupational changes played a significant role in women's legal and political emancipation. Rudolf Braun, in "The Impact of Cottage Industry on an Agricultural Population," in David Landes, ed., *The Rise of Capitalism* (Macmillan, 1966), describes an economic system in rural Switzerland in which the daughters in a family learned to spin and weave, contributing their earnings to the family economic unit as a matter of course. Olwen Hufton makes a similar point about the Parisian poor in the eighteenth century in "Women in Revolution, 1789-1796," *Past and Present* (vol. 53, 1971) and about a broader segment of the population in "Women and the Family Economy in Eighteenth-Century France," *French Historical Studies* (vol. 9, 1975). Whether or not young working women kept their own wages and had enough money to support an independent lifestyle is a key historiographic question. For more work by this issue's authors, students may wish to read "Women's Work and the Family in Nineteenth Century Europe," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (vol. 17, 1975) and *Women, Work, and Family* (Holz, Rinehart & Winston, 1978) by Joan W. Scott and Louise A. Tilly. Essays by Edward Shorter include "Illegitimacy, Sexual Revolution and Social Change in Modern Europe," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (vol. 2, 1971) and "Sexual Change and Illegitimacy: The European Experience," in Robert J. Bezucha, ed., *Modern European Social History* (D. C. Heath, 1972).